

Parenting and pornography:

findings from Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom

Summary report

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In partnership with:



ONLINE SAFETY
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Introduction

Exposure to pornography is recognised as a real risk for children online, ranking highly, alongside cyberbullying and contact with strangers.

Pornography can negatively impact a young person's mental health and wellbeing and their knowledge, attitudes, beliefs and expectations about sex and gender.¹ Exposure to pornography has also been found to shape sexual practices and strengthen positive attitudes toward sexual violence and aggression.²

While parents tend to underestimate the frequency of their children's exposure to online risks such as pornography³, they are also seen as an important source of support and comfort for them.

Recognising the important role parents play in protecting their children from risks online such as exposure to pornography, the Office of the eSafety Commissioner in Australia, with Netsafe in New Zealand and the Safer Internet Centre with the University of Plymouth in the United Kingdom (UK), collaborated on research that explores how parents think, and engage with this issue. This short report presents the findings of this joint research effort on parental attitudes to pornography. It also furthers the collaboration between the agencies which began with the December 2017 release of the report 'Young people and sexting-attitudes and behaviours.'

In the past, the majority of international research focused on three points: children's access, exposure to, and views of pornography and how this can affect their sexual identity development, sexual health, and mental health. Parents' attitudes and views about their children's experiences around pornography had not been comprehensively reviewed.

This research report summarises results from the first cross-jurisdiction quantitative study focussing on parents in New Zealand, Australia and the United Kingdom.

¹Quadara, A., El-Murr, A., & Latham, J. (2017). *The effects of pornography on children and young people: an evidence scan*. Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies.

²Ibid.

³Byrne, S. Katz S., & Lee, T. (2014). Peers, Predators, and Porn: Predicting parental underestimation of children's risky online experiences. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 215-231.

Organisational overviews

Netsafe

Netsafe is New Zealand's independent, non-profit online safety organisation. Its purpose is to enable all New Zealand internet users to confidently access digital opportunities and prevent online harm. Netsafe achieves this by providing online safety help, support, expertise and education services. Netsafe has a statutory role as the agency to receive, assess and investigate complaints about online bullying, harassment and abuse under the *Harmful Digital Communications Act 2015*.

Netsafe carries out research to provide New Zealand's online safety community with research-based insights about online behaviours and the impact of digital communications. It works with other organisations on projects such as this to extend the reach and depth of its research.

www.netsafe.org.nz

UK Safer Internet Centre

The UK Safer Internet Centre is a partnership of three leading charities—Childnet International, South West Grid for Learning (SWGfL) and the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF)—with a shared mission to make the internet a better place for children and young people.

The partnership was appointed by the European Commission as the Safer Internet Centre for the UK in January 2011 and is one of the 31 Safer Internet Centres of the Insafe network. The centre exists to raise awareness, support children, parents and professionals as well as managing illegal online child sexual abuse images and videos, wherever they are found in the world.

www.saferinternet.org.uk

Office of the eSafety Commissioner

Australia's Office of the eSafety Commissioner was established in 2015 to serve as the country's national leader, regulator and coordinating body for a range of online safety issues. The Office is committed to helping all Australians have safer experiences online through a range of prevention, education and early intervention measures.

The Office develops evidence-based resources and tools to enhance the online safety of Australians. This includes audience-specific content for parents, educators, young people, older Australians, women and other vulnerable citizens who are experiencing technology-facilitated abuse. The Office also acts as a safety net, providing Australians with a place to report serious cyberbullying, image-based abuse and illegal online content, including child sexual abuse material.

www.esafety.gov.au

What we did

Pornography has many different definitions in the academic literature. For each in-country study, the research partners adopted similar definitions, focussing on the online delivery of sexually explicit content, including images and videos.

While each study stands alone, the partners worked closely in research planning and delivery to allow for broad comparisons of parents' experiences across the three jurisdictions. In New Zealand and Australia, this included using common methodologies which then underpinned each nationally representative survey.

This report continues a program of cross-jurisdictional online safety research which began in 2017. The report expands on findings presented by the partners at [The Crossroads Trans-Tasman Online Safety Conference](#) hosted by Netsafe New Zealand in November 2018.

New Zealand

In New Zealand, Netsafe conducted a quantitative survey with parents and caregivers of children aged 9 to 17 years old. The purpose was to gather statistical insights about parents' awareness and attitudes towards children's access and exposure to sexually explicit content, both deliberately and/or accidentally, in the prior year. The questions used were part of Netsafe's Global Kids Online (GKO) parents' survey as a five-question module; and were also informed by other international studies. The online survey was conducted between 20 July 2018 and 30 September 2018. It collected data from a nationally representative sample of New Zealand parents based on gender, age, ethnicity and location. A total of 2,061 parents participated in the study. Netsafe provided parents with information about the study and sought their consent to participate assuring that data will be kept safe and confidential. Netsafe acknowledges that any measure based on self-reported data is a limitation per se.

Australia

In Australia, findings on the attitudes, awareness and responses of parents to their children's exposure to pornography come from a nationally representative survey of 3,520 parents of children aged 2 to 17 about online safety. The survey followed a mixed methodology survey approach using a multi panel online survey (n=3,044) alongside a computer assisted telephone interview (CATI, n=476) of 20 and 15 minutes each. Questions specifically relating to pornography were only asked of survey participants with children aged 6 to 17 representing a sample of 2,799 parents. Fieldwork was also conducted from July to August 2018. Responses were generally about activities that occurred in the 12 months to June 2018.

United Kingdom

UK findings were drawn from a number of sources. While the focus was on parental attitudes, it also drew from an established dataset from young people to provide a juxtaposition with parental attitudes. Sources included:

- Online survey working with Mumsnet, an NGO in the UK providing a strong parental voice online, as well as allowing parents to share advice on parenting issues. Working with Mumsnet allowed the UK Safer Internet Centre to quickly reach a broad cross section of parents, resulting in a sample of 1,033 parents and grandparents. The survey was designed primarily by Mumsnet, with additional input from UK Safer Internet Centre. Self-selecting survey responses were collected during May and June 2018.
- Focus groups with 100 parents across the UK, predominantly in the South West, to explore—in a more discursive environment—the concerns parents have around their children’s online lives, alongside the house rules and technical measures they put in place to manage these. Data from focus groups was collected during May and June 2018.
- A long-established online survey run by SWGfL—a leading online safety charity in the UK and lead partner in the UK Safer Internet Centre. This well-established survey is discussed at length in Phippen (2016).⁴ The survey now has 8,928 responses from young people aged between 7 and 18. Data on this version of the survey has been collected over the last 3 years.

⁴Phippen, A. (2016). *Children’s Online Behaviour and Safety Policy and Rights Challenges*. Palgrave, UK.

International findings

Across the three jurisdictions, exposure of children to pornography and sexually explicit material was seen by parents to be of high, but variable, importance.

In the UK around 78% of parents and grandparents thought exposure of children to pornography and sexually explicit material was their most important concern when considering their child/ grandchild using the internet. Approximately 49% of New Zealand parents thought the same, making it the third greatest concern behind sharing nude images of themselves and being treated in a hurtful and nasty way online by others. In Australia, it was the fourth most important issue with around 33% of parents saying that it was their greatest concern.

When it came to estimating children's exposure to pornography and sexually explicit material, findings from two of the three jurisdictions showed that similar proportions of New Zealand and Australian parents thought that their own children had been exposed—around 19% and 24% of parents respectively. The UK survey did not ask this question, however survey responses indicated that parents were concerned predominantly when children were of primary school age. For those parents of children aged above 13, concern about access to pornography dropped to 67%. This was also noted in focus groups where there was some acceptance that by the age of 14 or 15 it was likely that children would have been exposed to this type of content.

There were further similarities between New Zealand and Australian parents on other issues around children's exposure to pornography. In both countries, the majority of parents thought that their children had come across pornographic content accidentally and preferred to talk together about what had happened, rather than opting for technological fixes or solutions that increased monitoring or limited internet access.

Overall, parents in both countries were also shown to be relatively confident about seeking out information, and talking to their children about, or dealing with, exposure to pornography. For example, around 22% of parents in New Zealand and 25% of parents in Australia reported that they would feel embarrassed about broaching this subject with their children. In the UK, parents were generally confident (72%) in addressing concerns around addressing 'upsetting' (including pornographic) content, with this number increasing to 80% for parents of teenagers. For those parents (8% of sample) who had had to deal with an online safety incident involving their child/ren, the majority sorted it themselves (53%), with a further 38% involving the school.

More detailed research findings can be found in individual country sections following.

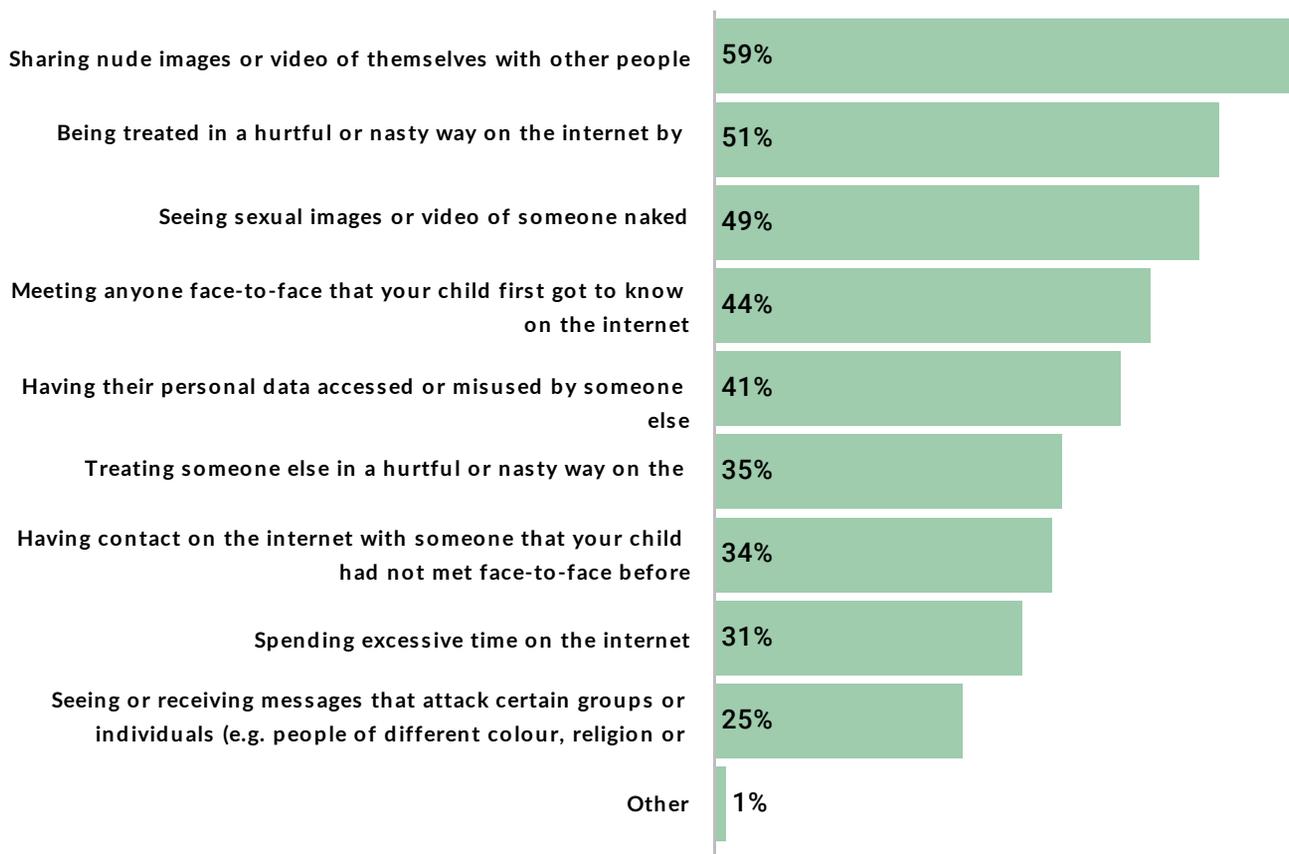
Findings from New Zealand

Parents' concerns

At Netsafe we first, wanted to find out how concerned parents were about their children's access to sexually explicit content compared to other online risks. We told parents that by 'sexually explicit' we meant digital material showing people naked, partially naked in a sexually suggestive situation, and/or people having sex. This a broad definition that can include but it is not limited to mainstream pornography.

As Figure 1 shows, parents indicated that the main online concerns they had were their children sharing nudes of themselves (59%), being treated in a hurtful way (51%) and seeing sexually explicit content (49%)—noting that participants could choose multiple responses. Interestingly, two of the top three concerns were related to sexual themes, with the idea that children sharing images of themselves was of more concern than their access to images of others.

Figure 1: The online situations parents reported being most concerned about their children experiencing

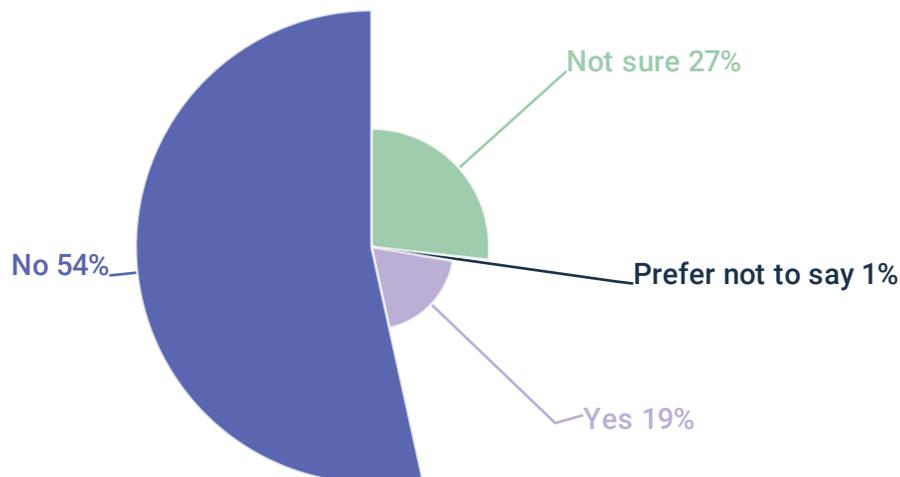


Base: parents of children aged 9-17, n=2,061

Parents' awareness of child's exposure to sexual content

Next, all parents were asked if they were aware of their children being exposed to any sexually explicit content in the prior year. Over half of parents (55%) said 'no' while 19% responded 'yes' to the question. About a quarter of parents were not sure if their children were exposed to sexually explicit content (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Parents' awareness of whether their children had been exposed to any sexually explicit content

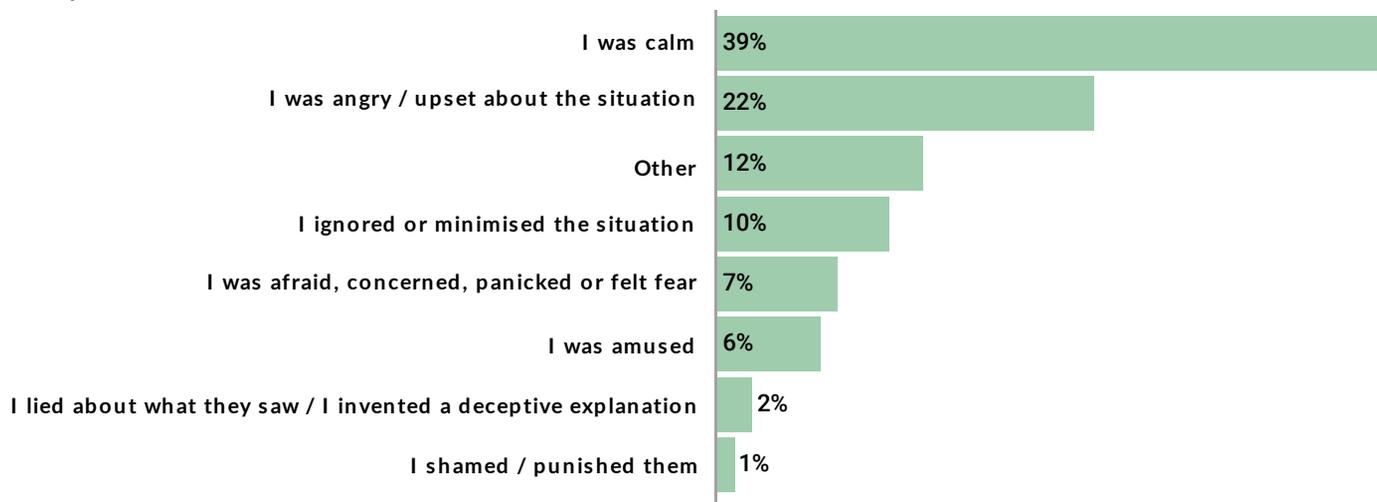


Base: parents of children aged 9-17; n=2,061

Parents' reactions to exposure

We asked just the parents who reported being aware their children had seen sexually explicit content about their first reaction when they found out about the situation. Of those 382 parents, 39% indicated that they stayed calm. A different reaction was described by 22% of respondents who said they were angry or upset about what happened. The third most common reaction was to ignore the situation (10%). It was also interesting to see that blaming the child for this sort of situation was rare among parents. In this sense, only one per cent said they shamed or punished their children.

Figure 3: Parents' awareness of whether their children had been exposed to any sexually explicit content



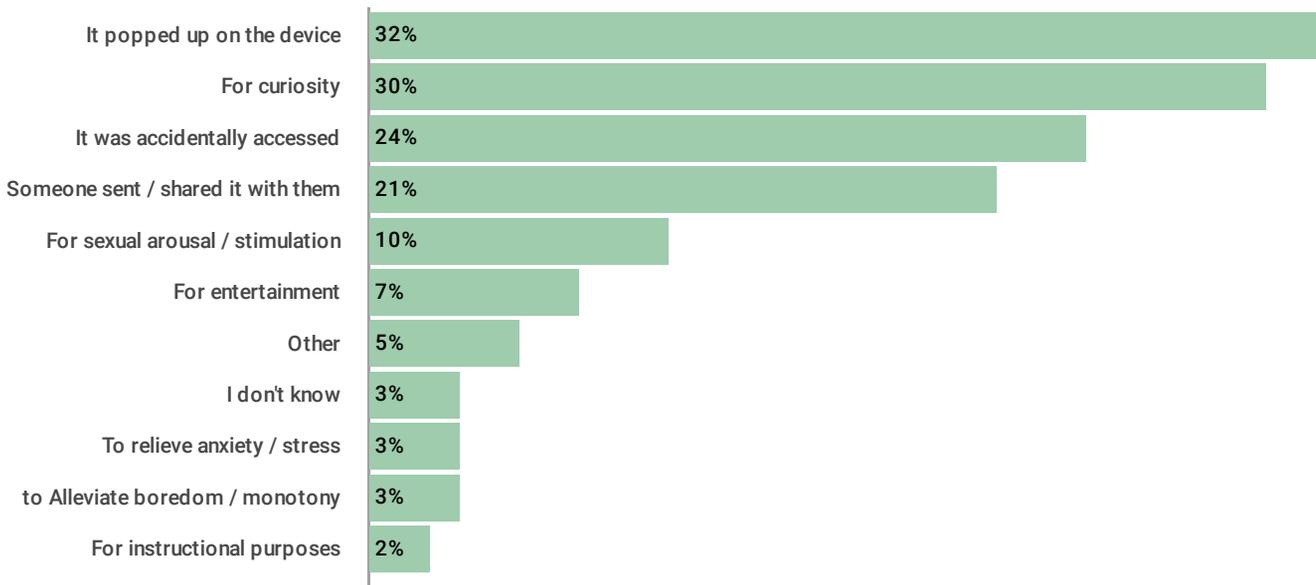
Base: parents of children aged 9-17, n=382

Motivations for children accessing sexual content

The same parents were then asked what they thought the reasons were for their children being exposed to the content. We presented to them a list of potential explanations and allowed them to choose one or more response options.

According to parents the three top reasons explaining their children's exposure to sexually explicit content were: the sexual content popped up on the screen or device (32%), it was for curiosity (30%), the content was accessed by accident (24%). Further details can be found in Figure 4 below.

Figure 4: Parents' opinions on the reasons their children had seen sexually explicit content

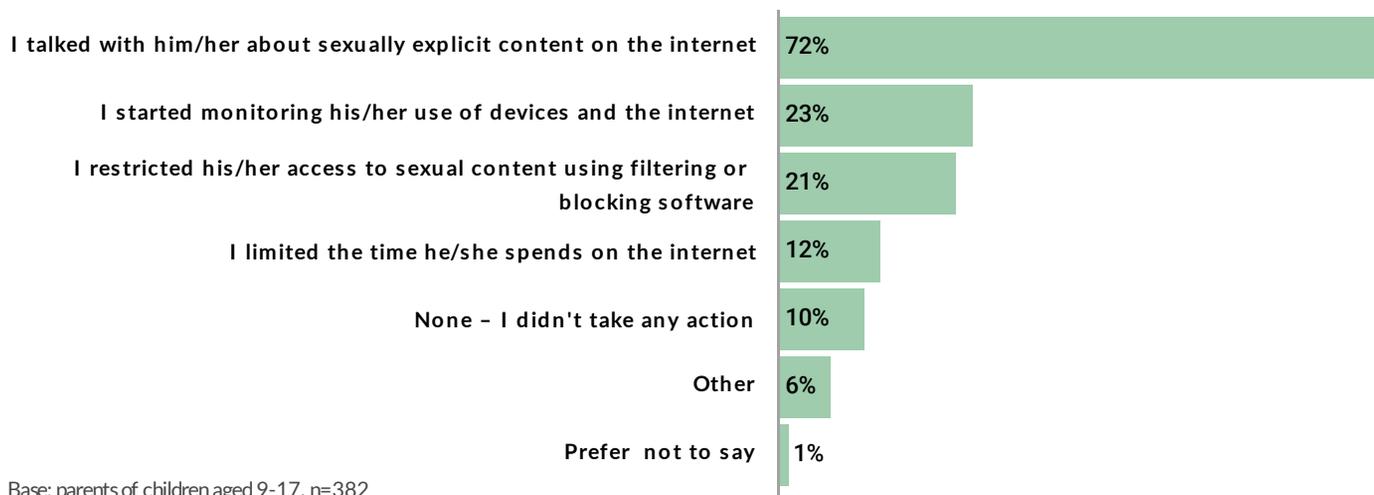


Base: parents of children aged 9-17, n=382

Parents' actions

We then asked parents what they did in response to finding out about the situation by providing them with a list of potential actions to select one or more from. The most common action taken by parents was to talk to their children about the content they saw online (72%). Less frequent, but still significant, was monitoring their children's use of devices and the internet (23%), and restricting access through filtering or blocking software (21%).

Figure 5: Actions taken in response to response to children's exposure to sexually explicit content



Base: parents of children aged 9-17, n=382

Parents' confidence in dealing with exposure

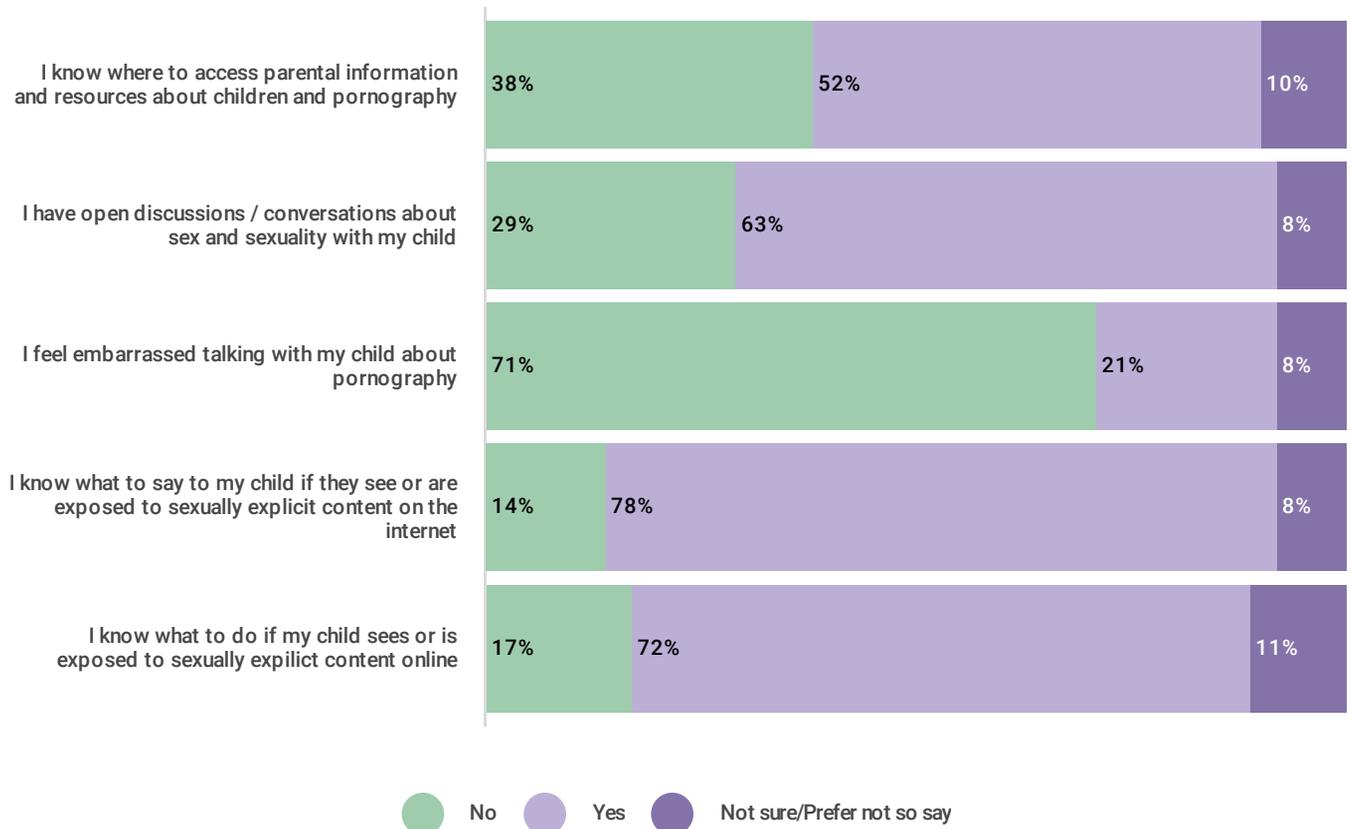
In general, parents expressed high levels of confidence on issues related to their children's exposure to sexually explicit content. For example, nearly 8 in 10 parents indicated that they know what to say and more than 7 in 10 parents said they know what to do, if their children are exposed to sexually explicit content.

Over half of parents said they discuss sex education and sexuality with their children, while 3 in 10 do not.

We also included a couple of statements that included the term 'pornography' as a way to determine if parents respond differently. While most parents (70%) said they are confident talking with their children about pornography, 2 in 10 commented that they feel embarrassed.

While half of parents believed they know where to access parental information and resources about children and pornography, 4 in 10 do not.

Figure 6: Parents' confidence in dealing children's exposure to sexually explicit content



Base: parents of children aged 9-17, n=2,061

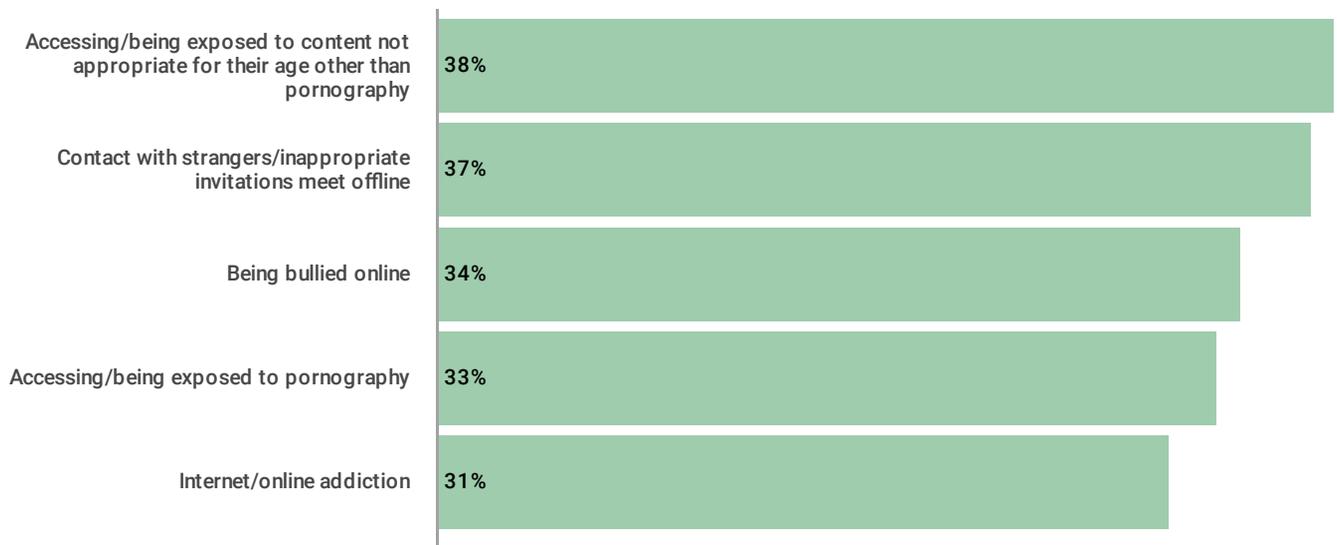
Findings from Australia

Parents' concerns

The Office of the eSafety Commissioner's research shows that when it comes to their children being online, exposure to pornography was the fourth topmost online risk for Australian parents of children aged 2 to 17.

As Figure 7 shows, in the hierarchy of online concerns it was preceded by access to inappropriate content other than pornography, contact with strangers and being bullied online.

Figure 7: Top 5 Parental concerns for children's time spent online

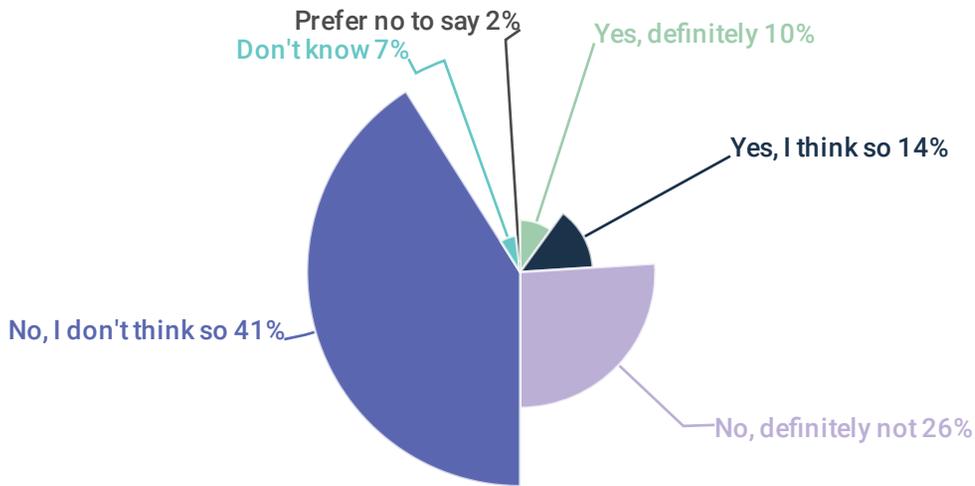


Source: What do you see as the main risks of accessing the internet? Base: parents of children aged 2-17, n=3,520.

Parents' awareness of child's exposure to pornography online

Only a minority of Australian parents thought that their children had ever been exposed to online pornography. As Figure 8 shows, 24% of parents thought that their children had, or were very likely to have, been exposed to online pornography. This figure changed depending on the age and gender of the child. Approximately 27% of parents with boys felt their child had been exposed compared to around 20% of those with girls. Moreover, 39% of parents with children aged 13 to 17 felt this was the case compared to only 10% of those with kids aged 6 to 7 years.

Figure 8: Parental awareness of children’s exposure to pornography

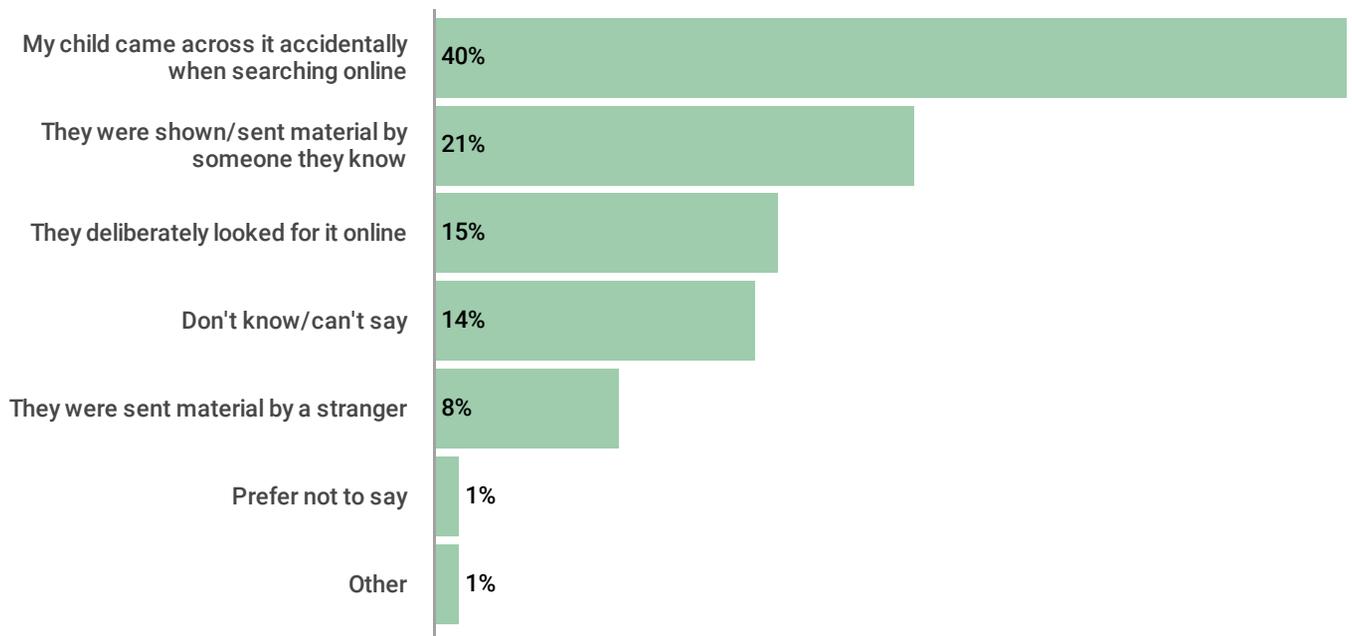


Source: To the best of your knowledge, has your child ever seen or been exposed to any sexually explicit content or pornography online?
 Base: parents of children aged 6-17, n=2,799

Reasons and motivations for accessing pornography

Australian parents’ overarching assessment seems to be that their children were not responsible when it came to being exposed to online pornography. Only 15% of parents who said their child had been exposed to pornography online thought that their child had ‘deliberately looked for it’. The majority of parents either responded that their child had come across it accidentally (40%) or had the material sent to them by someone that they knew (21%). For the children who had deliberately looked for it online, parents most commonly assumed that it was out of curiosity (50%), with just over one in four saying that sexual arousal/stimulation was the reason for seeking it out. Figure 9 shows the reasons for children’s exposure to pornography according to parents.

Figure 9: Reasons for children’s exposure to pornography according to parents

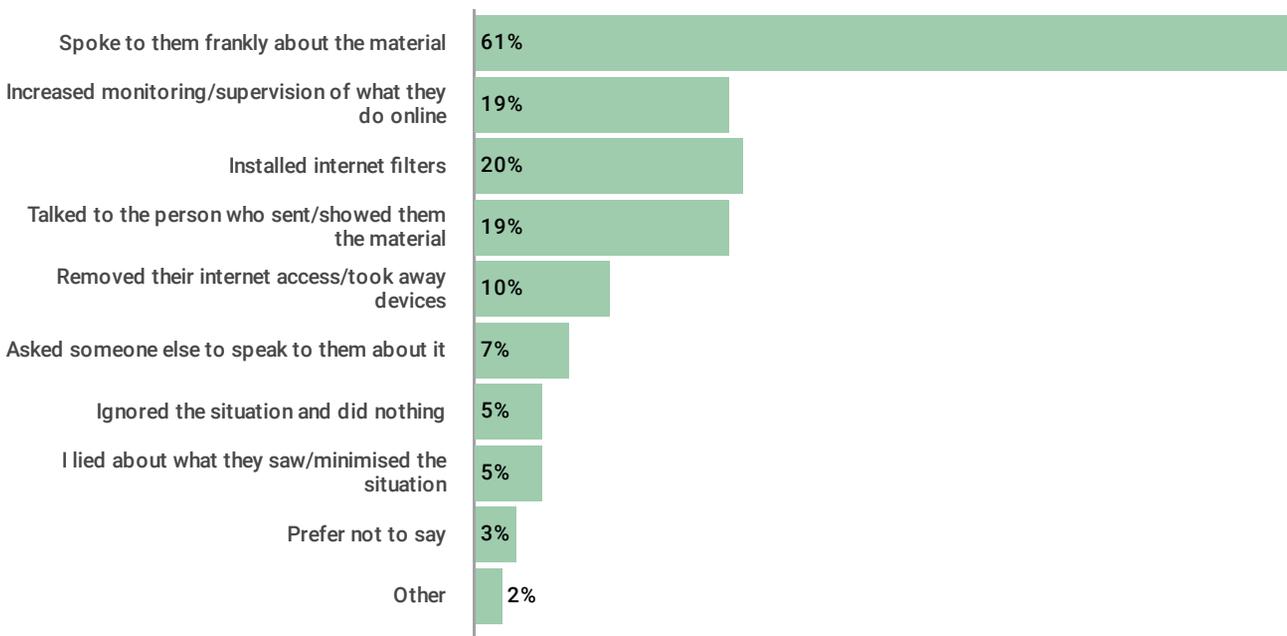


Source: How was your child most recently exposed to this content? Base: parents of children aged 6-17 that had been exposed to online pornography, n= 654.

Parents' reactions and actions

Not surprisingly, Australian parents most commonly reported being concerned (39%), worried (25%), shocked (21%) and surprised (20%) when first becoming aware of their children's exposure to online pornography or sexually explicit content. Aside from these emotional responses, exposure to pornography also led to parents acting to minimise future risks of exposure. The majority, 61%, spoke frankly about the material with their children, and a sizeable minority increased monitoring and supervision of their children's activities online (29%). Figure 10 shows the full list of actions undertaken by parents. Only 5% of them reported ignoring the situation and doing nothing.

Figure 10: Actions undertaken by parents after finding out their children had been exposed to pornography



Source: What did you do when you found out your child had been recently exposed to this content? Base: parents of children aged 6-17 that had been exposed to online pornography, n= 654.

Parents' opinions and sources of information around pornography

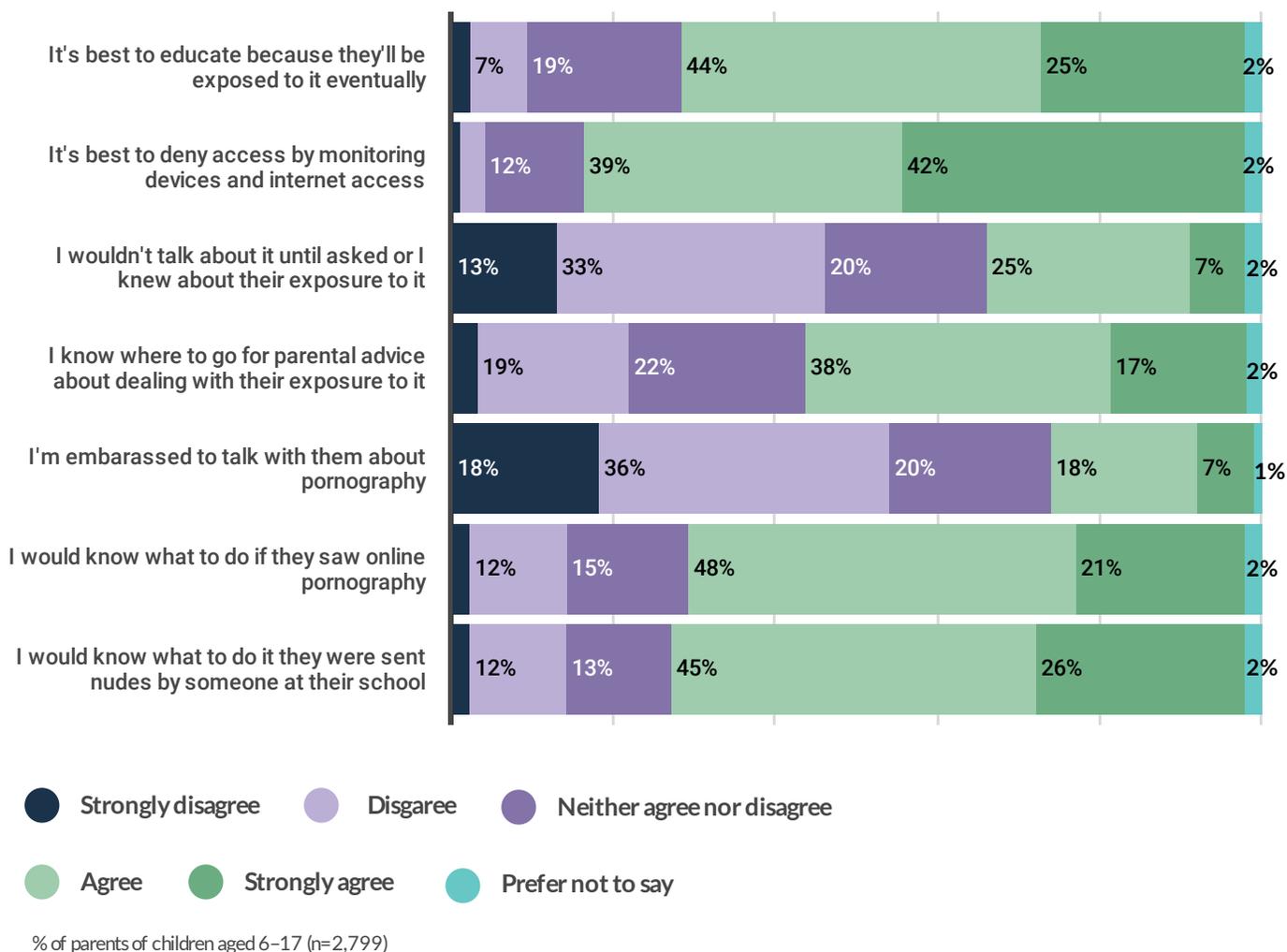
In relation to educating children about pornography the Office's survey posed a specific question to parents:

Who do you think should be responsible for positively educating your child about pornography? e.g. what a healthy sexual relationship is, respect towards women, the importance of consent, the myths about pornography, etc.

Australian parents reported feeling overwhelmingly responsible for educating their children about online pornography with 77% percent of parents of children aged 6-17 stating they have 'full responsibility'. A significantly smaller proportion of parents felt that full responsibility for educating children about pornography rested with schools. Given this, it is important to understand parents' motivations and opinions about pornography.

Figure 11 shows parents' degree of agreement (strongly disagree to strongly agree) to a range of statements about online pornography and sexually explicit material.

Figure 11: Parental confidence and attitudes toward dealing with pornography and sexually explicit material



As Figure 11 shows, most parents with children aged between 6–17 agreed that it's best to both deny children access to pornography by monitoring devices and internet access (81%), and to educate them, because they will eventually be exposed to it (69%).

Reflecting their own awareness of their children's exposure to pornography, parents with children between the ages of 13–17 were more likely to favour education (81% versus 58%) and less likely to favour monitoring (71% versus 89%) than parents of children aged 6–7 years. Figure 11 also shows that parents were similarly confident in their ability to deal with their children's exposure to both online pornography and nude images sent to them at school (69% and 71% respectively). Only a minority of parents—around 25%—were embarrassed to talk to their children about pornography.

When it came to sourcing further information, 22% of parents felt they already knew enough. When looking for advice, a parent's most common source was family and friends (36%), followed by the internet (33%) and their child's school (24%).

Parents' conversations around pornography

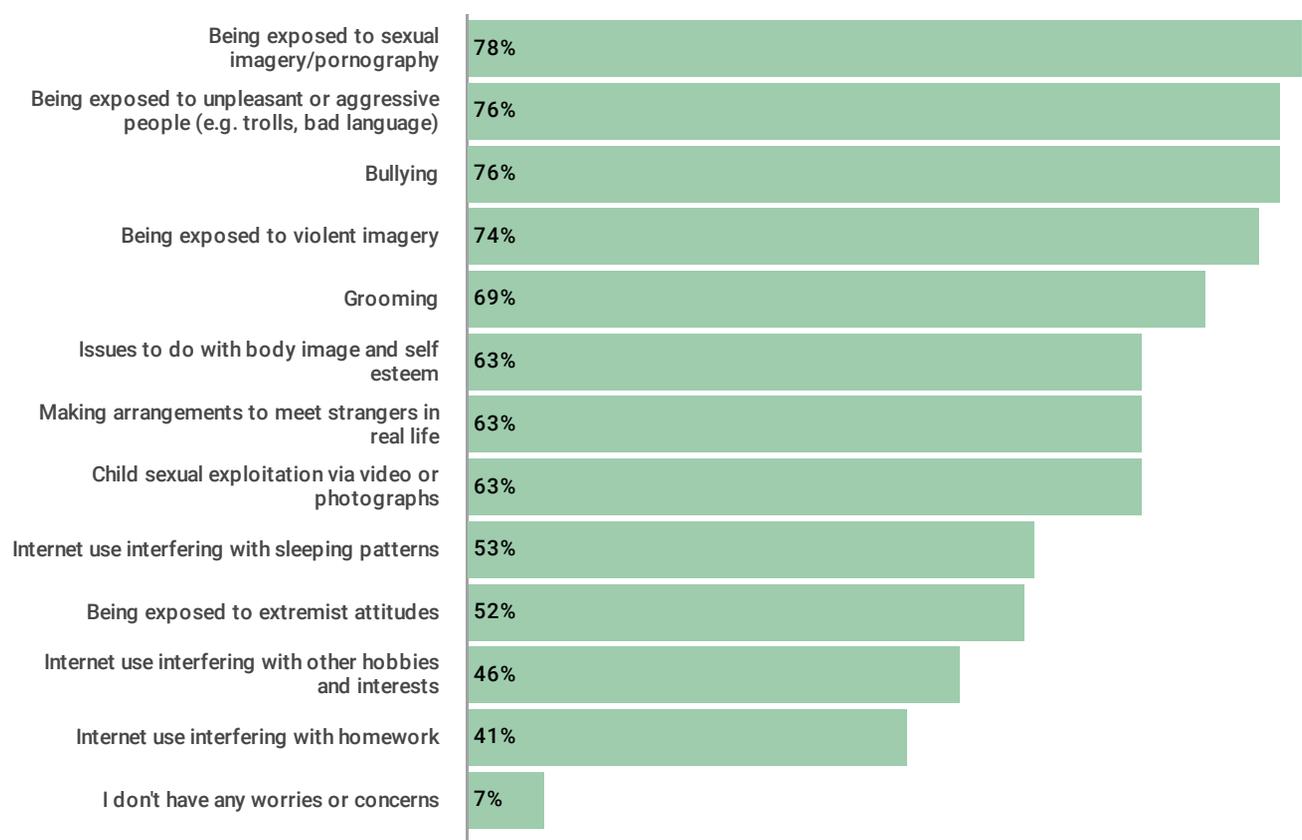
When it came to actually talking about pornography, around 41% of parents reported having done so with their children at June 2018, this increased to 67% of parents of children aged 13–17. Of parents yet to talk to their children, 39% thought that the best time to do so was between the ages of 10–12. Just over a quarter (27%) of parents would instead wait until their child was a teenager or older while 9% felt the best time to talk to their child was 9 years or younger. Approximately 22% felt it was best to wait until the issue came up.

Findings from the UK

Parents' and grandparents' concerns

The UK Safer Internet Centre's report noted that access to sexual imagery or pornography was the most widely acknowledged concern among parents sampled, just above concerns around bullying or upsetting communication.

Figure 12: What are your worries or concerns when it comes to your child/grandchild using the internet?



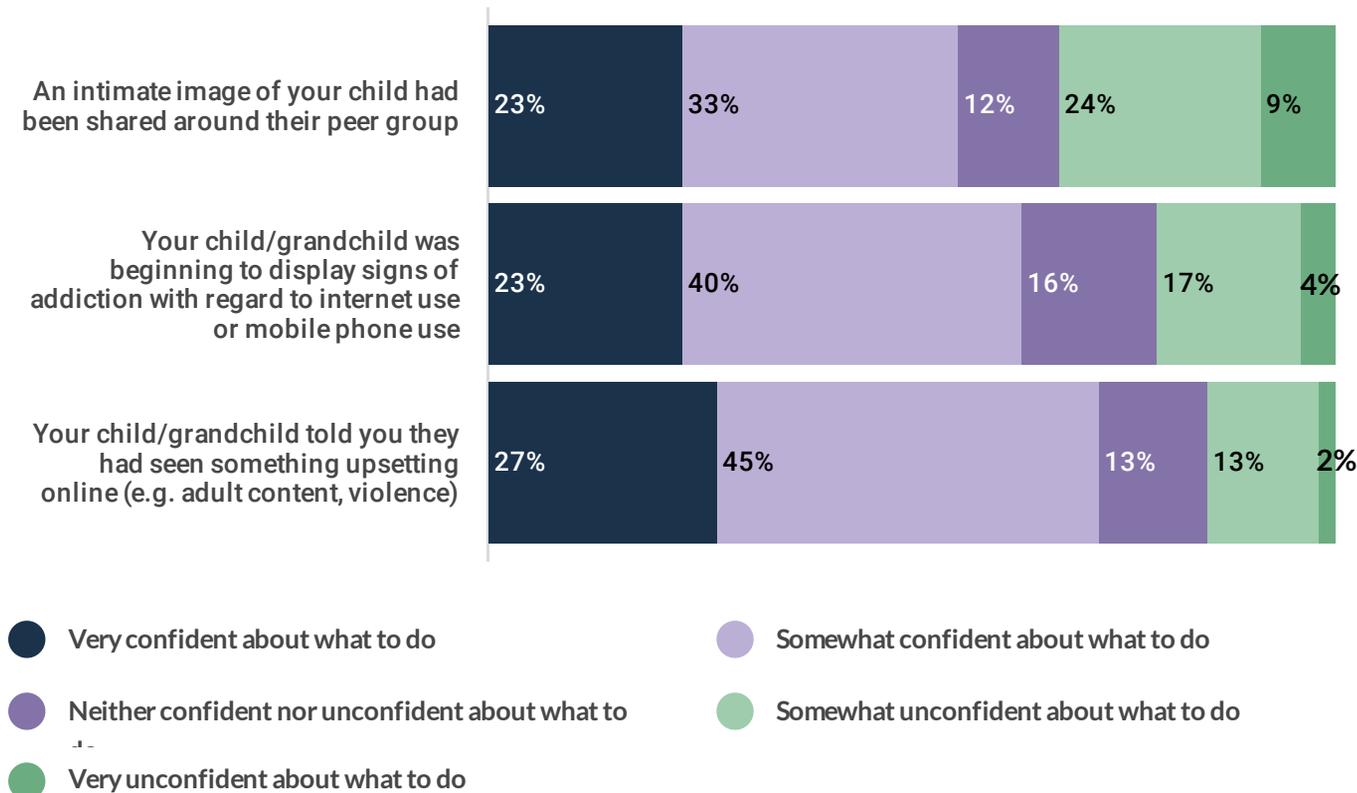
Base: parents/grandparents of children up to 18 years of age, n=967

When asked what their single biggest concern was, exposure to pornography was still one of the top three responses, and certainly well ahead of issues related to mental health and self-esteem. These attitudes were reflected in focus group discussions—while bullying and grooming were clearly the biggest concerns (particularly among parents of primary aged children) there was a great deal of concern for parents around access to ‘inappropriate’ imagery. However, one thing that very clearly came from both focus groups and survey was that parents were, in general, confident that they could deal with an issue related to upsetting content with their children.

Parents' and grandparents' confidence levels

Parents and grandparents reported confidence levels of around 73% about dealing with a situation where children disclose they have seen something upsetting online (Figure 13). This was a similar level of confidence to dealing with other online safety issues such as bullying, grooming or accessing images of child abuse. The only two areas where parents exhibited less confidence were related to addiction and self-generated indecent images.

Figure 13: Do you feel confident you would know what to do if...



% of parent/grandparents of children up to 18 years of age (n=1,035)

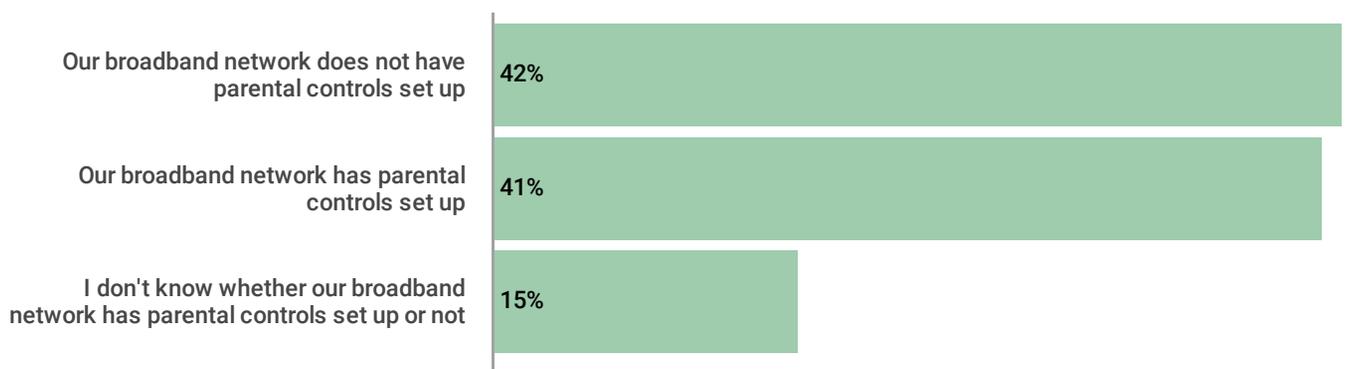
Prior to focus group discussions it was apparent that a lot of parents and grandparents believed that they could address the stated online safety issues by having appropriate technological interventions in place to ensure their children were 'safe.' Over 40% of respondents said that they had parental controls in place and while there were fewer in the focus groups who said the same, many believed that they had sufficient 'house rules' in place to tackle online safety issues.

Parental controls

Clearly parents have a number of technical approaches they have used to tackle online safety in the home (Figure 14). In addition, many also have 'house rules' that impose limits on being online, and physical monitoring which is sometimes used in parallel with technical monitoring (Figure 15). Again, this was backed up in focus group discussions, where those parents displaying a lot of confidence often had a number of technological 'solutions' for ensuring online safety. However, there were other parents who felt that an over-reliance on technology was not always a good thing. This was particularly the case when discussing issues such as intrusive monitoring and tracking technologies. While some parents (generally still in the minority) were convinced this is the right way to approach online safety, many others challenged this view, suggesting that trust is eroded if children are under excessive surveillance.

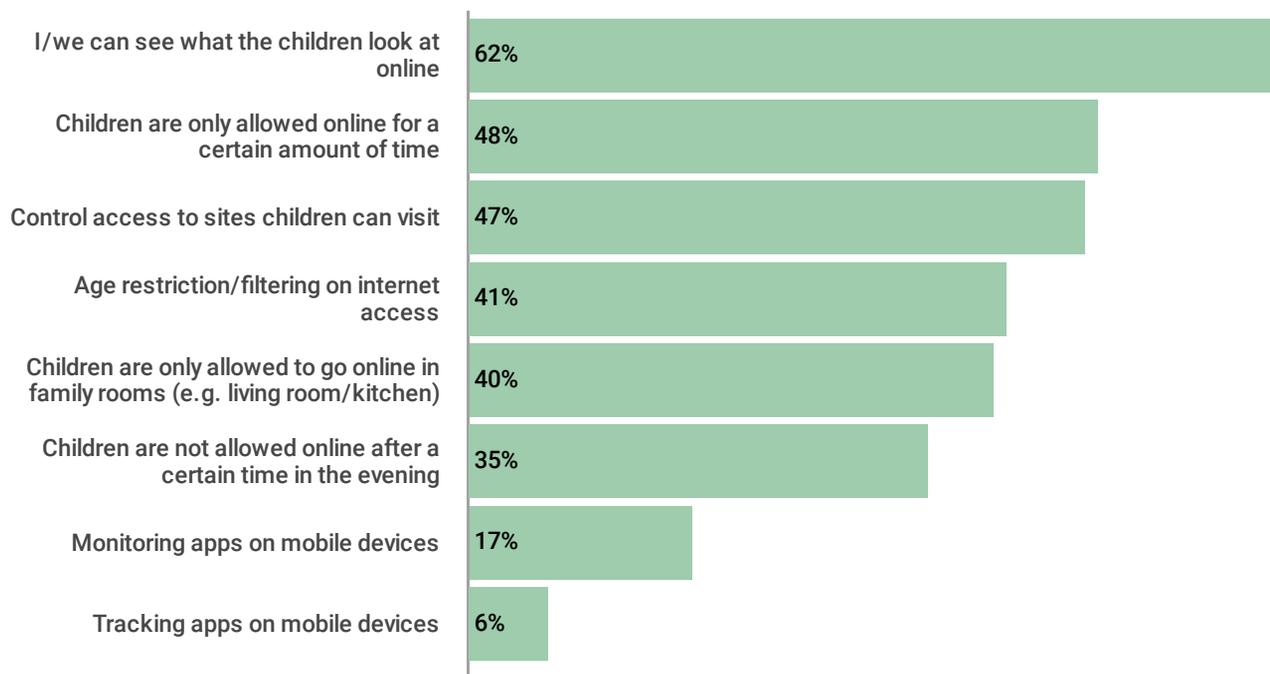
Moreover, we would suggest that these findings can be illustrated further from the young people's survey we draw upon in the next section. In this survey, we can see that from a large sample a similar proportion of respondents have house rules and technological interventions in the home.

Figure 14: Thinking about your own home, or the environment in which you most often look after your child: which of the following statements is true?



Base: parents/grandparents of children up to 18 years of age, n=1,035

Figure 15: Which controls or rules do you have at home related to internet access by your children/ grandchildren?

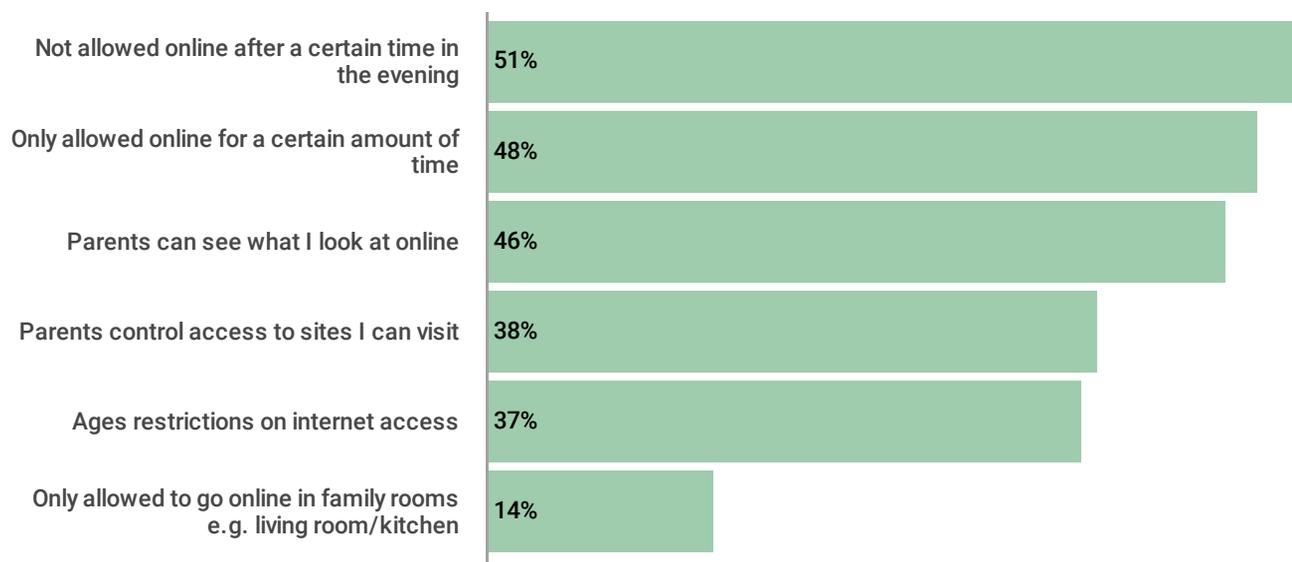


Base: parents/grandparents of children up to 18 years of age, n=1,035

Youth perspective on parental rules

The majority of youth respondents (65%) report that there are rules in their homes for using the internet. Figure 16 shows the type of rules used such as time of day, amount of time and parental visibility. These are typical strategies used by parents to manage their children’s internet use. However, perhaps less palatably for parents, around 60% of youth respondents say that can get around at least some of these house rules.

Figure 16: What sort of rules do you have at home related to internet use?



Base: young people aged 7-18, n=5,497

Conclusion

While this report presents top-level findings and comparisons, each jurisdiction will publish more detailed results from their national parent research programs over the coming months. All three agencies are continuing to consult on future collaborative research opportunities.