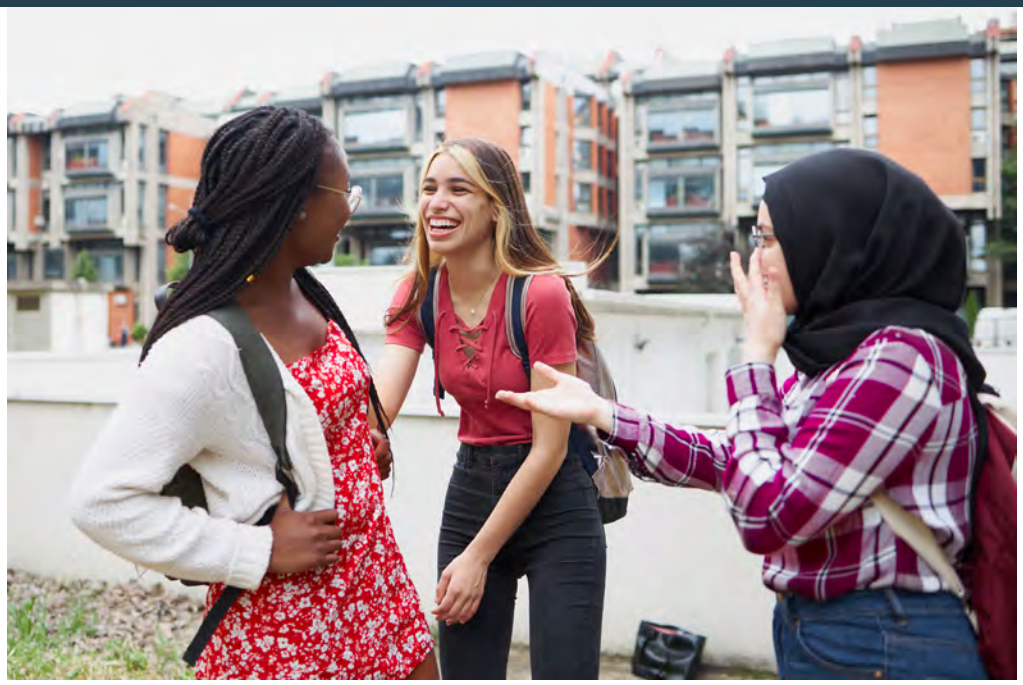
FOSI
Family Online Safety Institute

Beyond Borders: U.S. and Australian Families on Online Safety, Screen Use, and the Digital Lives of Kids

Insights from FOSI's Online Safety Survey



FAMILY ONLINE SAFETY INSTITUTE RESEARCH

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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With support from: Disney's Digital Wellness Grant Program & TikTok

INTRODUCTION

Our increasingly digital world has brought with it an increased focus on kids' digital lives. In the past few years, online safety has become a key issue for parents, policymakers, and educators. Online safety education and decision-making is often viewed as the purview of the family unit, with parents making top-down decisions for young people. However, there is also a general perception that young people know more about navigating the online world than their caregivers do. This creates an interesting tension worthy of investigation.

With this in mind, the Family Online Safety Institute (FOSI) created the Online Safety Survey (OSS), a bi-annual survey that aims to learn more about the digital habits and perceptions of children ages 10-17, and parents of children in that same age range. This white paper covers findings from Wave Four of the OSS, which was fielded in Spring 2026[1]. Importantly, Wave Four and Wave Three (Fall 2025) of the OSS were fielded in both the United States and Australia. This gave FOSI unique insight into Australian children's and parent's perceptions of online life during a time when children's digital well-being was at the forefront of Australian public discussion – before and after the Australian social media ban took effect[2].

This white paper is broken down into two parts. The first, "Findings From Wave Four," details children's and parents' habits and opinions around online safety topics such as parental controls, household rules, screen use, and AI usage. This section includes data from respondents in both the United States and Australia.
The second section, "Comparative Findings Through Waves," provides insights into online safety attitudes and habits through time, from Wave One (Fall 2024) to Wave Four. This second section focuses on United States data only.

[1] Previous survey waves were fielded in: Fall 2024; Spring 2025; Fall 2025.
[2] For a closer look at Australian's views on the social media ban, please read the research brief titled: Australian Children's and Parents' Perceptions of Social Media, Alanna Powers-O'Brien, FOSI. June 8, 2026

Respondents

Part One (Wave Four) respondents are as follows:

United States
Children ages 10-17
(n = 1,000)

United States
Parents of children ages 10-17
(n = 1,000)

Australia
Children ages 10-17
(n = 1,003)

Australia
Parents of children ages 10-17
(n = 1,003)

Please refer to the footnotes under each graph for a full breakdown of respondents per question.

Online Activities: A Clear Divide

The online world is vast, with many different activities competing for attention. Given a list of activities ranging from watching videos to working on creative projects, children were asked to indicate which they had done in the past week. Parents were given the same list, and asked to indicate which activities their children had done in the past week. Strikingly, **children reported doing most online activities listed at a significantly higher rate than parents reported for their children.** This remained true even for schoolwork, an activity that parents might view as a more "acceptable" use of the internet. This points to a gap in understanding between parents and children, and a potential lack of parental understanding about their children's digital lives.

Online activities children have done in the past week

Online Activity	Parents (about their child)	Children
Watched videos (e.g., TikTok, YouTube)	78%	83%*
Played video games	71%	76%*
Streamed TV and movies (e.g., Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, Disney+	68%	71%*
Schoolwork/Used educational content	64%	67%*
Connected with friends/family (e.g., video chatting, direct messaging)	63%	67%*
Streamed music	62%	67%*
Scrolled social media	46%	54%*
Posted on social media	30%	38%*
Used generative AI (e.g., ChatGPT, Gemini, Meta AI)	27%	38%*
Shopped	24%	26%
Kept up with influencers or celebrities	22%	27%*
Worked on creative projects (e.g., creating a video, making music)	20%	20%
Read e-books/articles	18%	18%
Engaged with or read online forums	12%	17%*

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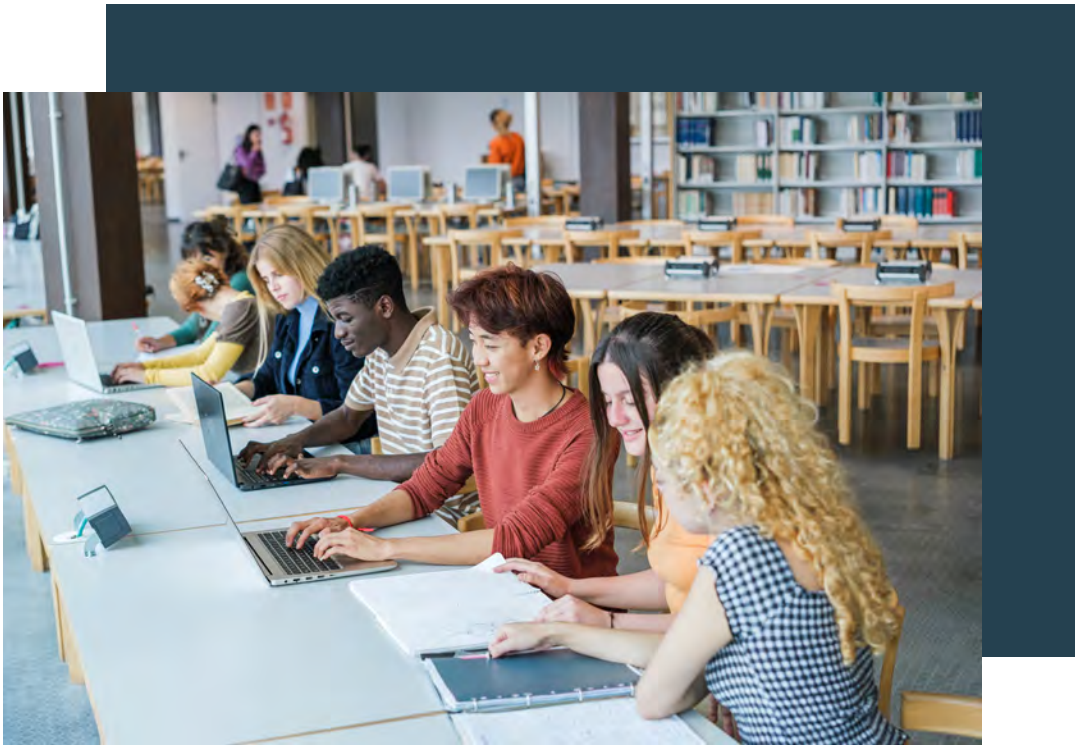
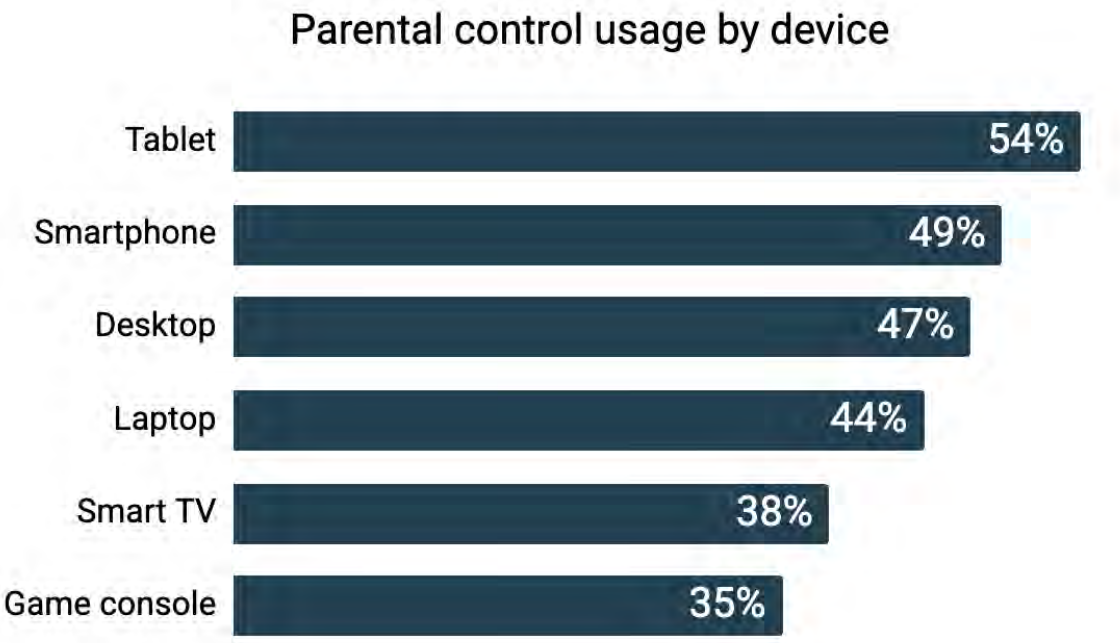
Online Activity	Parents (about their child)	Children
Participated in viral online challenges	5%	8%*
Made money online (e.g., creating content, selling items)	5%	5%
Attended virtual events	5%	5%

Table represents answers to the question: In the last week, which of the following activities has your child/have you done online? Cells with an asterisk differ significantly from corresponding cells ($p < .05$). Respondents are U.S. and Australian parents ($n = 2,003$) and U.S. and Australian children ($n = 2,003$).



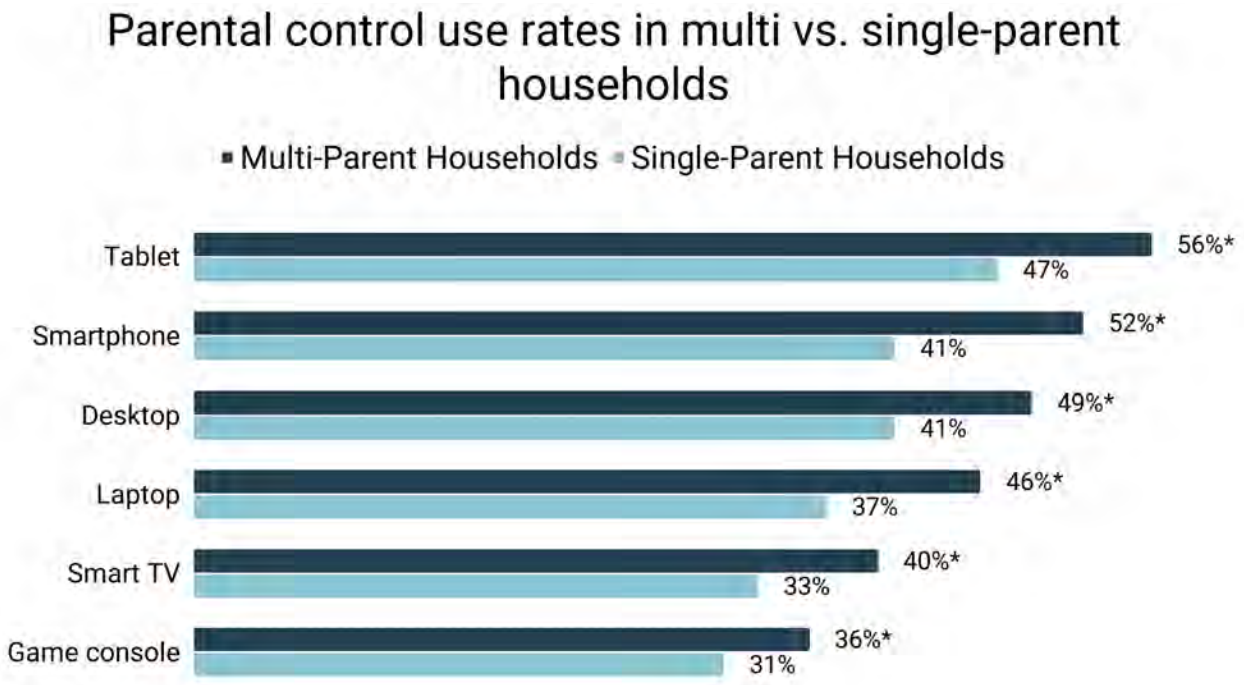
Parental Controls: An Underused Resource

Parental controls are often seen as important tools for parents to help keep their children safe online. However, parents say they can be convoluted and difficult to understand, and children often circumvent them. These factors may be why **parental control use at the device level is relatively low.** Just over half (54%) of parents and children who own tablets report having parental controls on this device. Less than half of owners of other devices use parental controls on those devices, with smartphone owners at 49%, desktop computer owners at 47%, and laptop owners at 44%. At the lower end, 38% of smart TV owners and 35% of game console owners report having parental controls set up on these devices.



Graph represents answers to the question: Which of these devices have you/your parents set parental controls on? Respondents are parents and children in the U.S. and Australia who own the device, and report that the child has access to the device: tablet owners (n = 2,987), smartphone owners (n = 3,443), desktop owners (n = 1,864), laptop owners (n = 2,951), smart TV owners (n = 3,436), game console owners (n = 3,224).

Parental control use is not evenly divided throughout household makeups, either. **Households with two parents are significantly more likely to implement parental controls at the device level than single-parent households across every device type.** This gap is most prominent with smartphones, for which multi-parent households are 11% more likely to implement parental controls than single-parent households.
This may illustrate the complexity of these controls, especially for single parents, who may carry much of the responsibility for raising a child on their own.

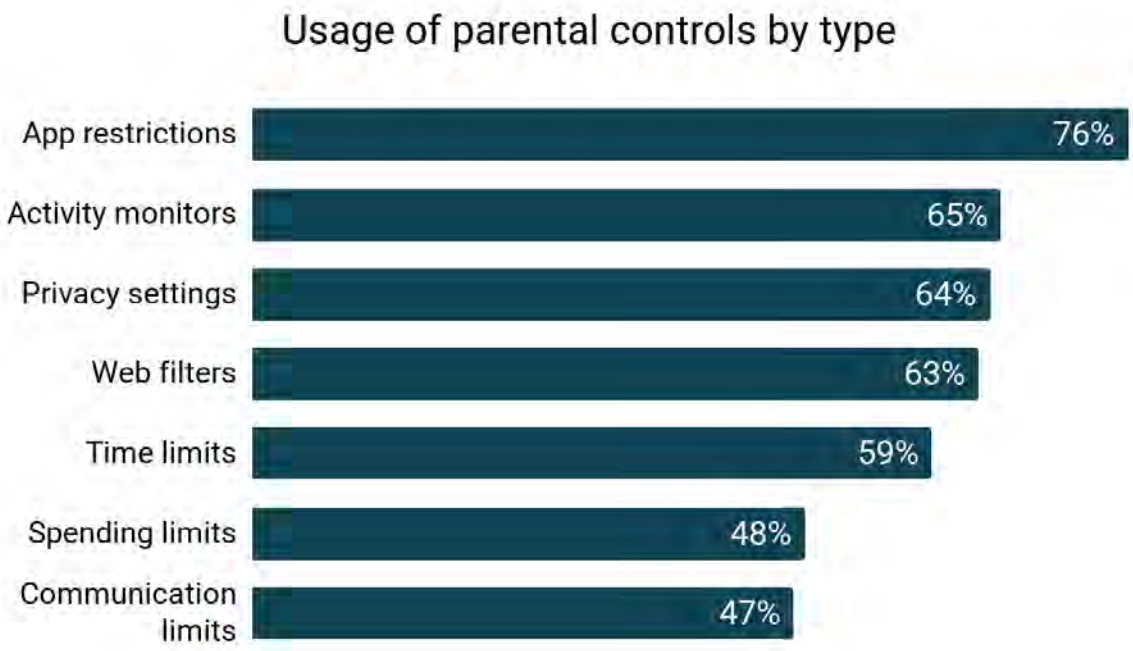


Graph represents answers to the question: Which of these devices have you/your parents set parental controls on? Bars with an asterisk differ significantly from corresponding bars ($p < .05$). Respondents are parents and children in the U.S. and Australia who own the device, and report that the child has access to the device. Multi-parent response counts are as follows: tablet ($n = 1,264$), smartphone ($n = 1,317$), desktop ($n = 713$), laptop ($n = 1,018$), smart TV ($n = 1,009$), game console ($n = 868$). Single-parent response counts are as follows: tablet ($n = 345$), smartphone ($n = 373$), desktop ($n = 165$), laptop ($n = 272$), smart TV ($n = 296$), game console ($n = 251$).

Respondents who reported using parental controls were given a list of different types of controls, along with a definition. Parents answered on behalf of their children, and children answered on behalf of themselves.

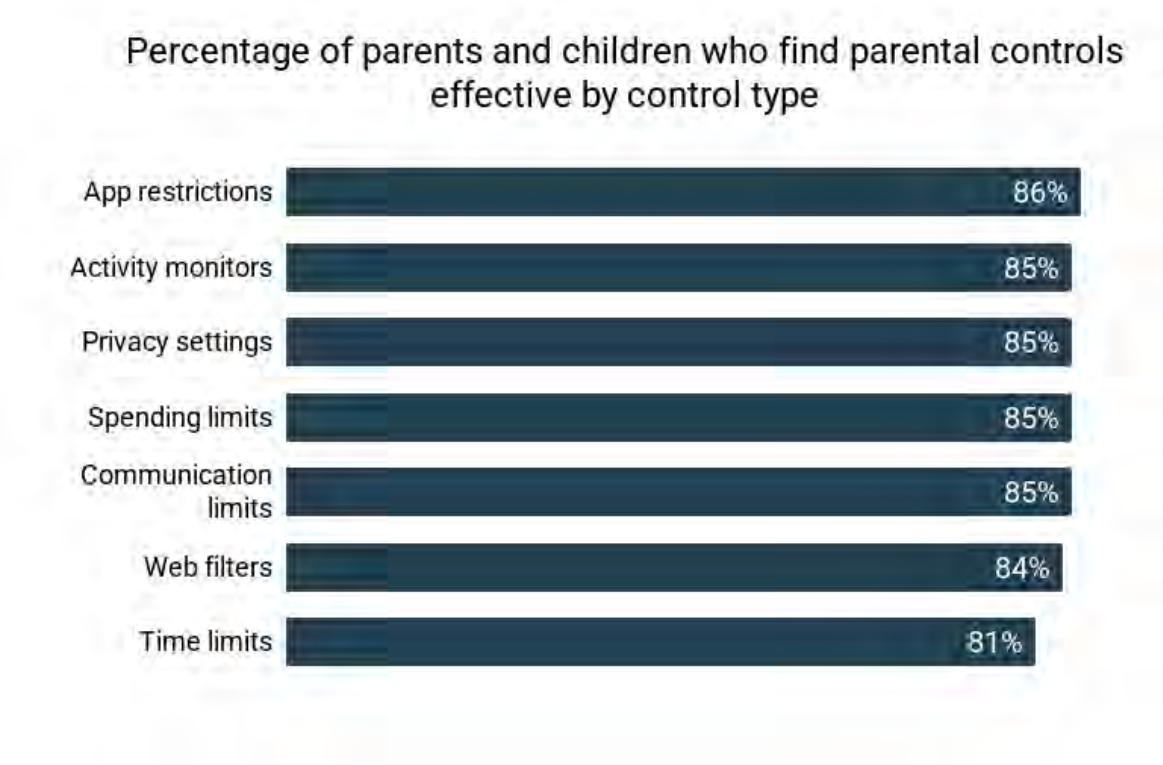
Parental control type	Definition
Web filters	These can block specific websites, words or images from being accessed
App restrictions	These prevent you/your child from accessing specific content on the web and from downloading specific apps without parent permission
Privacy settings	These prevent sharing of personal information via social media or email
Time limits	These set the amount of time spent online or on certain apps
Activity monitors	These allow parents to see which websites children visit and what they do online
Communication limits	These set limits for who you/your child can message/call/FaceTime
Spending limits	These set limits on the amount of money that can be spent in-game or in-app

Among these controls, the most used is app restrictions, with 76% of parents and children who use parental controls saying that parents limit access to certain content and apps. Other popular parental control types were activity monitors (65%), privacy settings (64%) and web filters (63%).



Graph represents answers to the question: What kinds of parental controls do you/does your parent use on each device? Respondents are parents and children in the U.S. and Australia who use parental controls (n = 2,496).

When these parental controls are implemented, large numbers of parents and children say that they work. In fact, between 81% and 86% of parents and children claimed that each parental control was effective, depending on the control.



Graph represents answers to the question: How effective do you feel each of these types of parental controls are at keeping you safe online? Respondents are parents and children in the U.S. and Australia who use parental controls. Response count by control are as follows: privacy settings (n = 1,604), spending limits (n = 1,193), web filters (1,575), activity monitors (n = 1,623), app restrictions (n = 1,887), communication limits (n = 1,185).

Clearly, the parents and children who use parental controls often find them effective. In addition, most children do not find these controls to be restrictive. When parental controls are implemented, 55% of children feel that they can still do what they want online. However, about half (48%) of children wish their parents would take their opinion into account before using parental controls.

Household Rules: Thinking Outside the Box

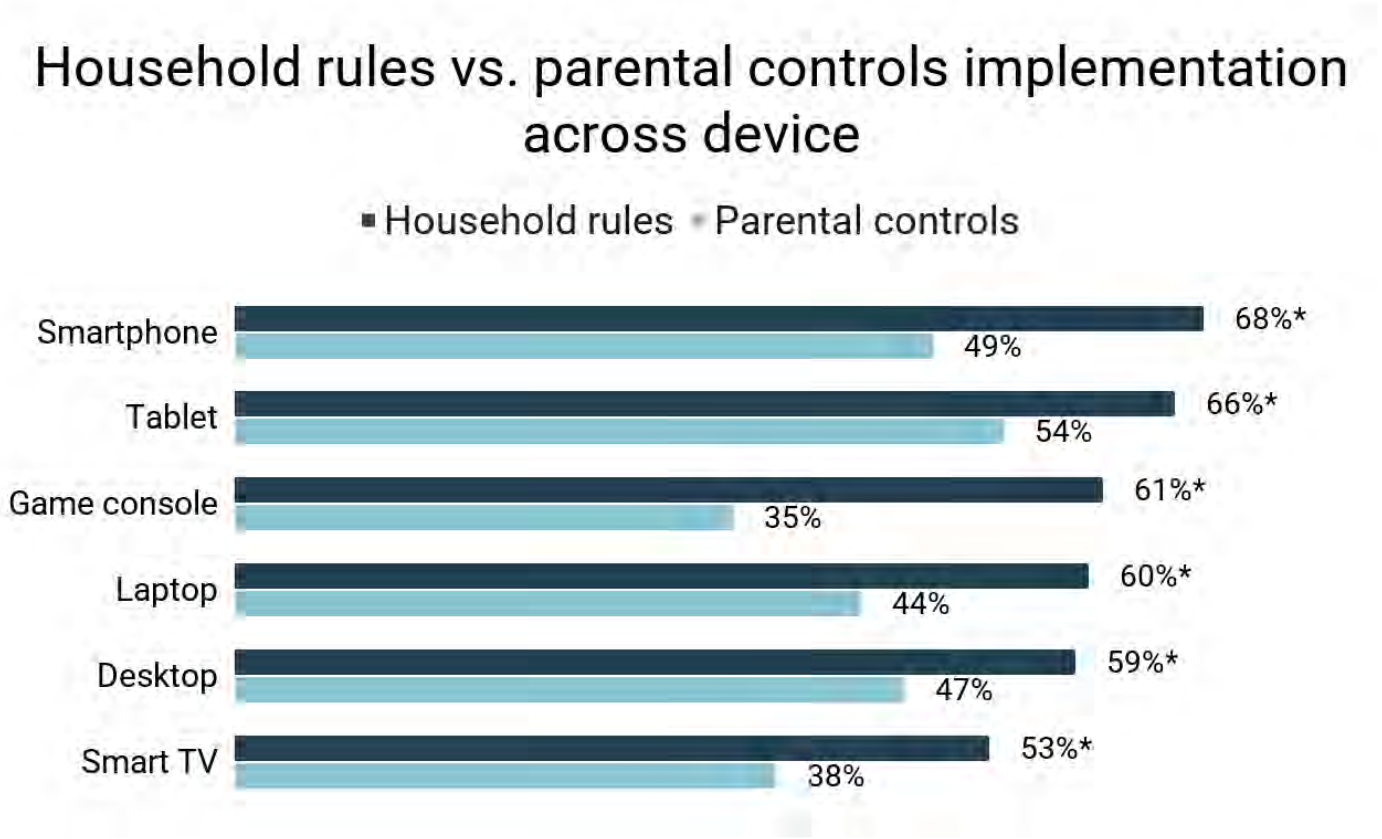
Parental controls are just one facet of many families' online safety toolbox. Many caregivers also implement household rules or guidelines around their child's device use. Respondents were shown a list of potential household rules, and asked to indicate which ones were implemented in their homes across each device they own and the child can access. Generally, the most common household rule was that children must finish all homework/chores before using the device (69%), followed by no spending money on this device without parental permission and the device gets taken away if other household rules are broken (both at 68%). Less common household rules include "no using this device in certain parts of the house" (34%) and "cannot use this device on certain days of the week or weekend" (28%).

Household rule	Percentage of respondents to implement each household rule
Must finish all homework/chores before using this device	69%
No spending money on this device without parental permission	68%
Device is taken away if household rules are broken	68%
Cannot use this device after a certain time of day	66%
Limits on time spent using the device	66%
No downloading apps without parental permission	63%
Must provide parental access to all accounts on this device	54%
Can only access content with a certain maturity rating	49%
No using this device in certain parts of the house	34%
Cannot have this device on certain days (e.g., weekdays, the weekend)	28%

Table represents answers to the question: What additional guidelines have you/your parents set on each of the following devices? Respondents are parents and children in the U.S. and Australia who own one or more devices, and indicated that they have at least one household guideline on their devices (n = 2,989).

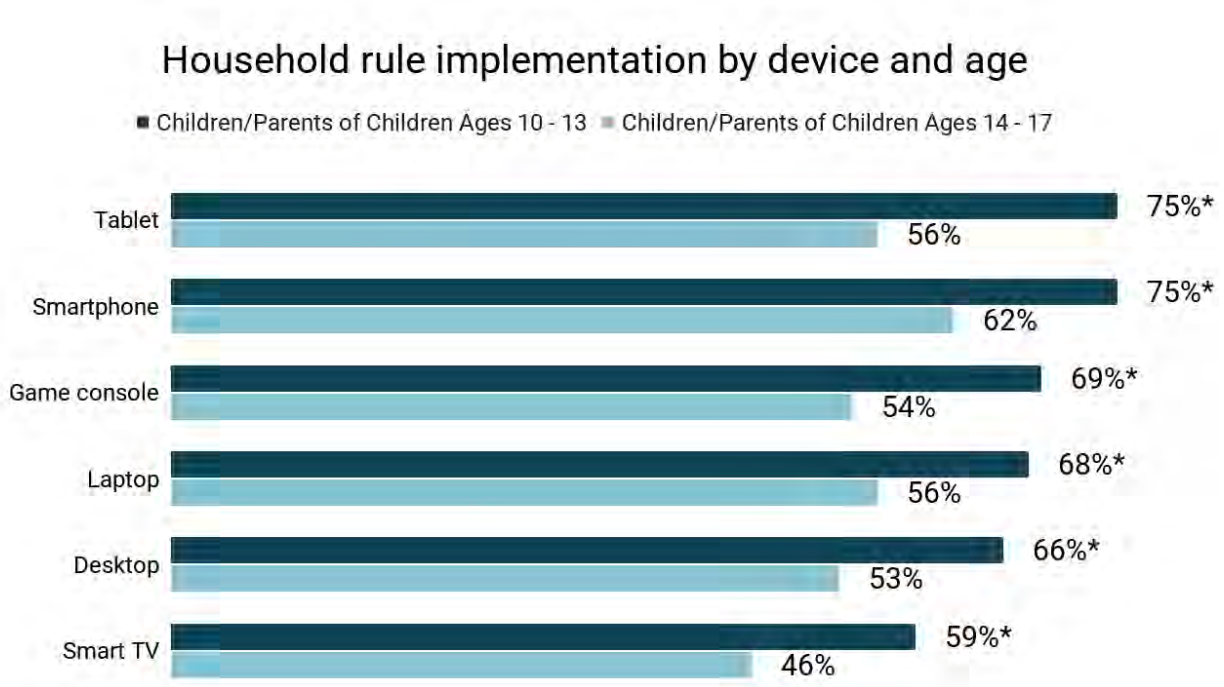
Additionally, for respondents in households in which children have access to a smartphone, just under half of children and parents in this group report that children must share their location (47%). For households in which children have access to a tablet and/or smartphone, 44% of parents and children say the child must share their passcode with their parent.

Household rules are a popular tool for caregivers. In fact, **at the device level, household rules are more popular than parental controls.** For survey respondents in households in which children have access to smartphones, 68% claim to have at least one household rule. More than half of owners of all other devices listed implement at least one household rule, including 66% of tablet owners, 61% of video game console owners, 60% of laptop owners, 59% of desktop owners, and 53% of smart TV owners.



Graph represents answers to the questions: Other than parental controls, do you/your child have any additional guidelines or house rules regarding usage of any of the following devices? And: Which of these devices have you/your parents set parental controls on? Bars with an asterisk differ significantly from corresponding bars ($p < .05$). Respondents are parents and children in the U.S. and Australia who own the device, and report that the child has access to the device: smartphone owners ($n = 3,443$), tablet owners ($n = 2,987$), game console owners ($n = 3,224$), laptop owners ($n = 2,951$), desktop owners ($n = 1,864$), smart TV owners ($n = 3,436$).

Household rules are more common among younger children and parents of younger children, with more parents and children in the 10-13 age bracket claiming to have household rules than parents and children in the 14-17 age bracket. This pattern is consistent across each device listed. For example, among households with children in the 10-13 age range with access to smartphones, 75% claim to have at least one household rule about the device. In comparison, 62% of households in the 14-17 age range have at least one household rule about smartphones. The gap is especially striking with the tablet. In households where children have access to a tablet, 75% of parents and children in the 10-13 age bracket have at least one household rule around tablet use. In households with children ages 14-17, that number drops to 56%.

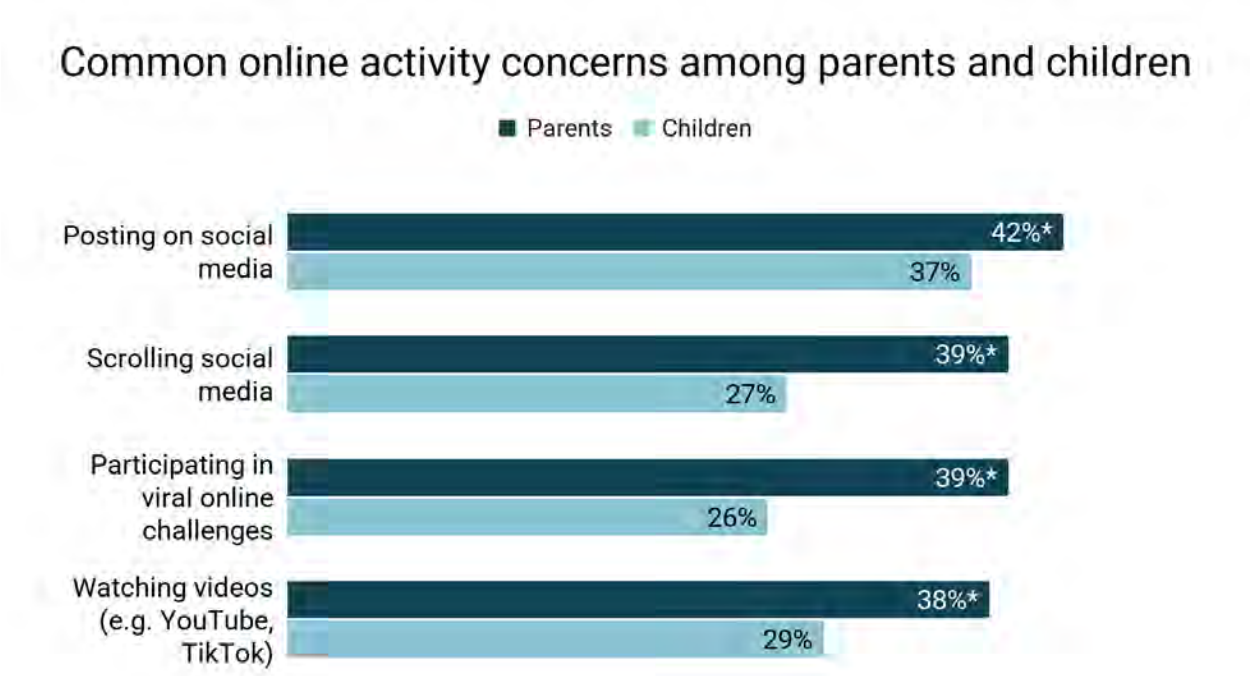


Graph represents answers to the question: Other than parental controls, do you/your child have any additional guidelines or house rules regarding usage of any of the following devices? Bars with an asterisk differ significantly from corresponding bars ($p < .05$). Respondents are parents and children in the U.S. and Australia who own the device, and report that the child has access to the device. In the 10-13 age range, response counts are: smartphone owners ($n = 1,646$), tablet owners ($n = 1,645$), game console owners ($n = 1,656$), laptop owners ($n = 1,393$), desktop owners ($n = 890$), smart TV owners ($n = 1,781$). In the 14-17 age range, response counts are: smartphone owners ($n = 1,797$), tablet owners ($n = 1,342$), game console owners ($n = 1,568$), laptop owners ($n = 1,558$), desktop owners ($n = 974$), smart TV owners ($n = 1,655$).

Common Concerns

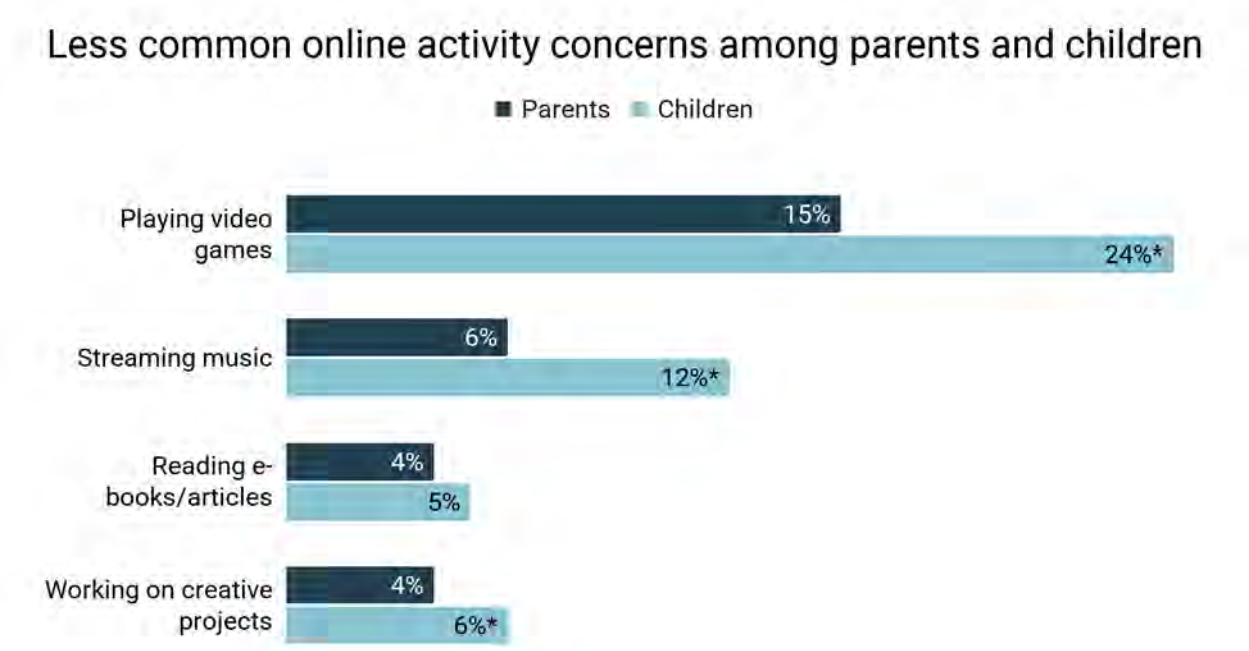
As indicated above, families take various steps to support their children in cultivating a healthy online journey. The reported use of household rules and parental controls suggest that parents and children are aware of potentially concerning behaviors and content online. Respondents were given a list of common online activities (the same list in the *Online Activities: A Clear Divide* section) and asked to choose the five that concern them the most.

Out of all online activities listed, "posting on social media" was ranked in the top five the most often by both parents (42%) and children (37%). Other common concerns for both parents and children include: scrolling social media (parents: 39%, children: 27%), participating in viral online challenges (parents: 39%, children: 27%), and watching videos such as YouTube or TikTok (parents: 38%, children: 29%). Parents were significantly more likely to rank each of these concerns.



Graph represents answers to the question: From a safety standpoint, which type of online activities concern you the most? Percentages indicate those who listed concerns in the top five. Respondents. Bars with an asterisk differ significantly from corresponding bars ($p < .05$). Respondents are U.S. and Australian parents ($n = 2,003$) and U.S. and Australian children ($n = 2,003$).

While children also have concerns surrounding social media and watching videos, they are significantly more likely than parents to rank playing video games as a top worry (parents: 15%, children: 24%). Activities such as streaming music (parents: 6%, children: 12%), reading e-books/articles (parents: 4%, children: 5%), and working on creative projects (parents: 4%, children: 6%) were the least likely to be ranked as concerning activities by both parents and children.



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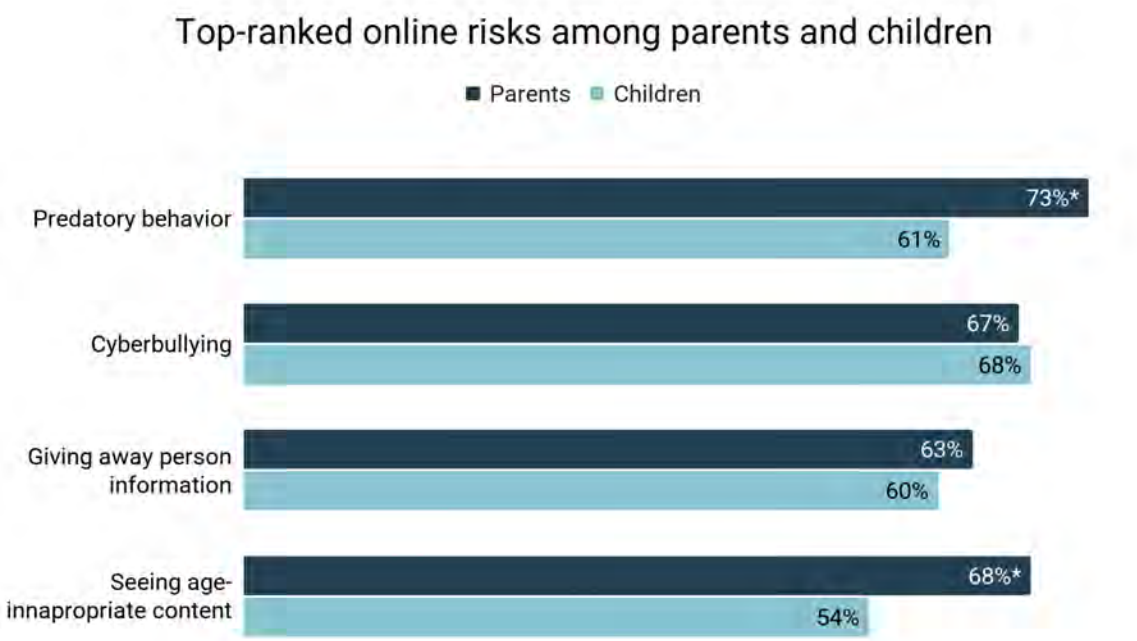
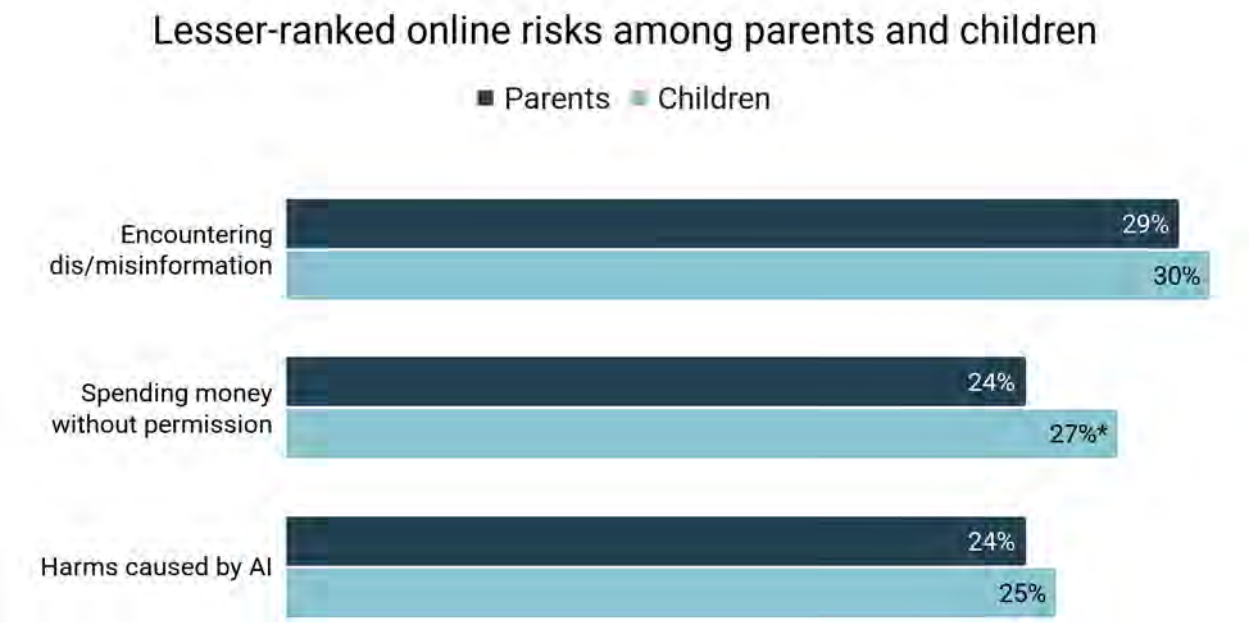
Though it is clear that parents and children have reservations about common screen activities, particularly social media and videos, the above online activities are not inherently problematic. To learn more about parents' and children's concerns, the survey also asked parents and children to indicate their top online risks. Respondents were given a list of concerns about using the internet, and asked to rank their top five.

Among both parents and children, four risks stood out: predatory behavior (parents: 73%, children: 61%), cyberbullying (parents: 67%, children: 68%), giving away personal information (parents: 63%, children, 60%), and seeing age-inappropriate content (parents: 68%, children: 54%).



Graph represents answers to the statement: Please rank your top 5 biggest concerns related to using the internet. Percentages indicate those who listed concerns in the top five. Bars with an asterisk differ significantly from corresponding bars ($p < .05$). Respondents are U.S. and Australian parents ($n = 2,003$) and U.S. and Australian children ($n = 2,003$).

Parents and children were less likely to rank encountering dis/misinformation (parents: 29%, children: 30%), spending money without permission (parents: 24%, children, 27%), and harms caused by AI (parents: 24%, children 25%) as a top five risk.



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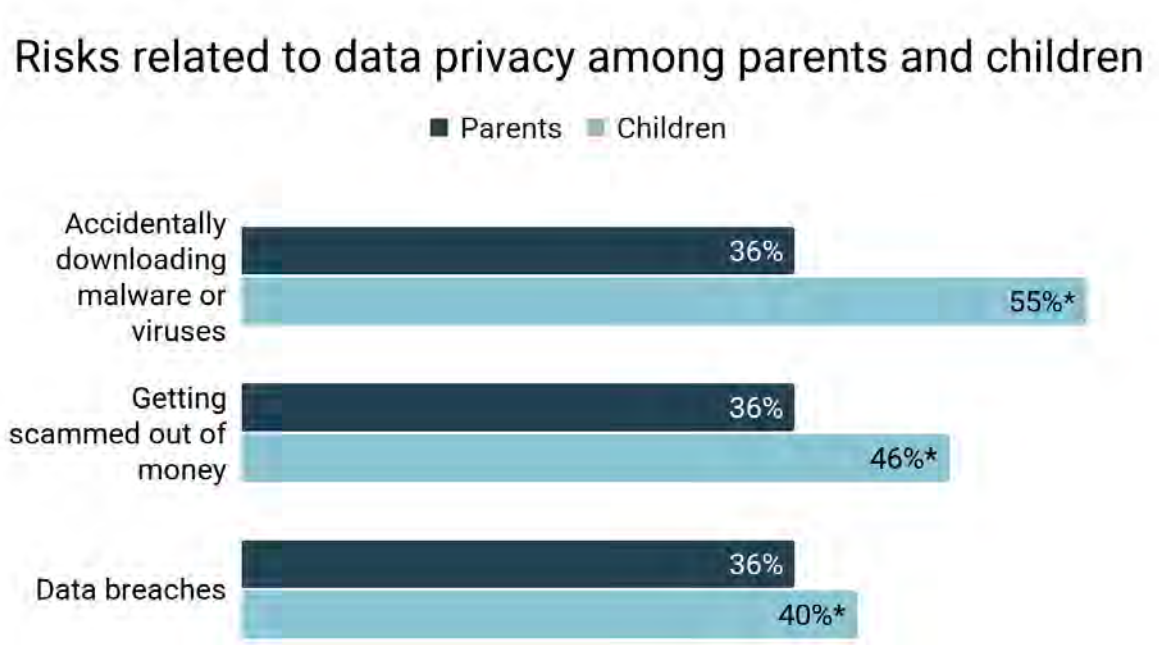
Interestingly, children are significantly more likely than parents to rank risks related to data privacy, such as accidentally downloading malware/viruses (parents: 36%, children, 55%), getting scammed out of money (parents: 36%, children: 46%), and data breaches (parents: 36%, children 40%). However, both children and parents are, understandably, more concerned about risks that may feel more likely to cause direct psychological harm, such as cyberbullying or predatory behavior.



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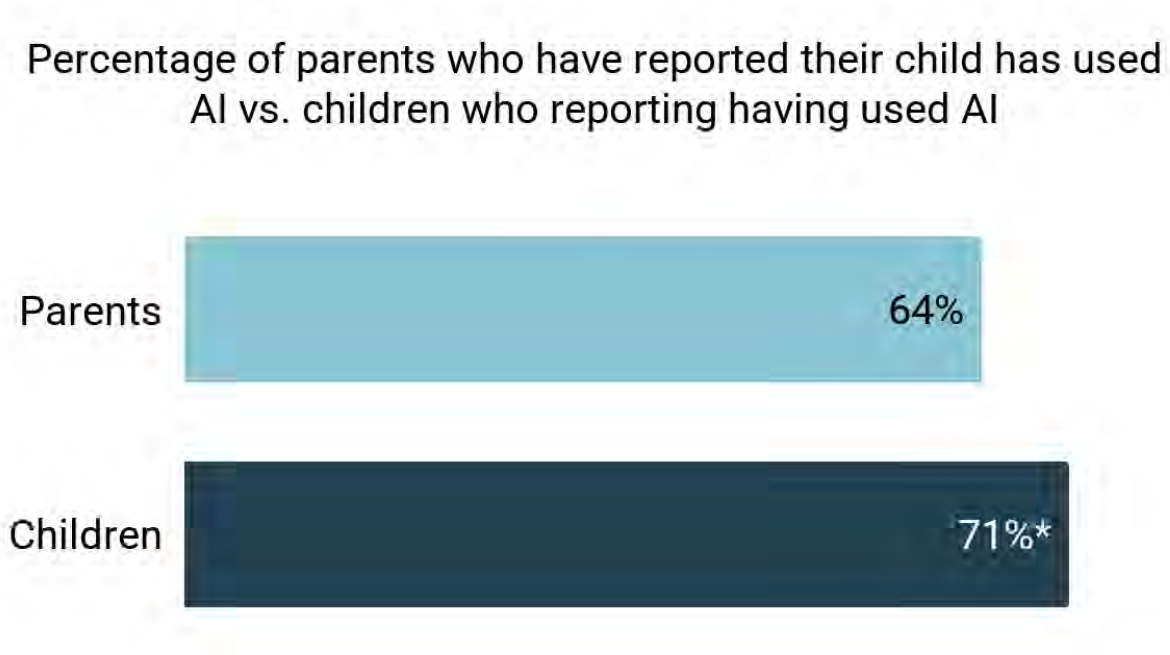
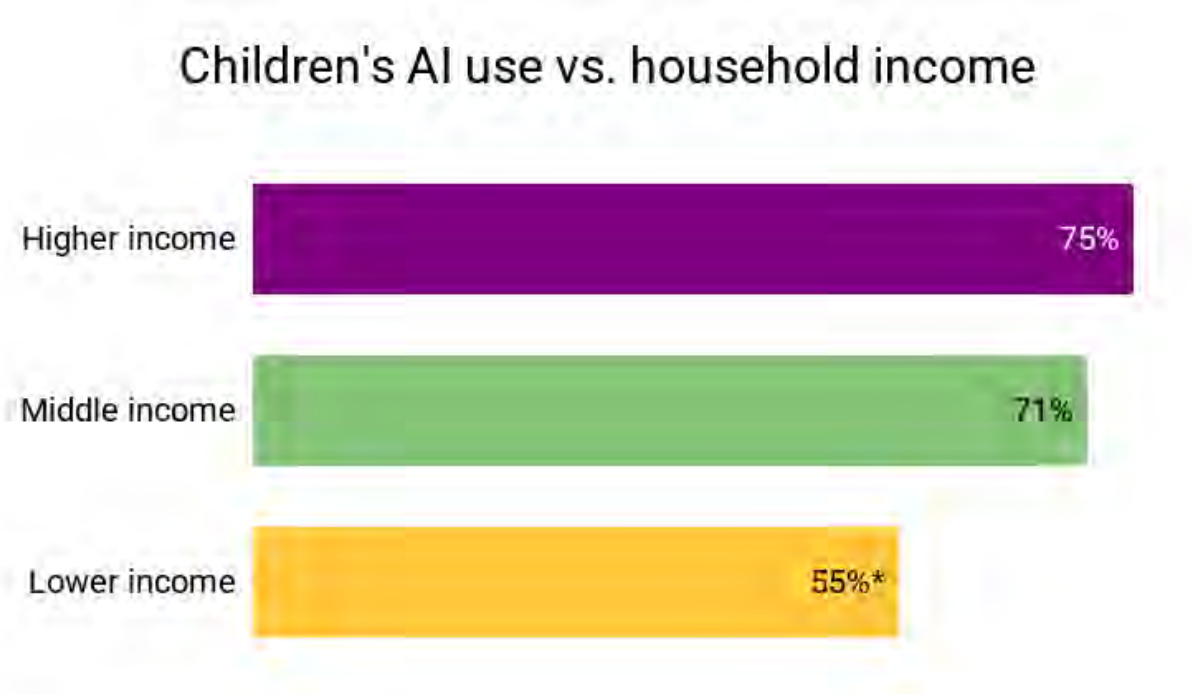
Scenes from a New Frontier: Parents, Children, and AI

A few years after AI burst into the public consciousness, many parents and children have incorporated AI tools into their routines. In fact, when given a list of common AI tasks, **71% of children report that they have used AI for at least one task, and 64% of parents report that their child has used AI for at least one task.**



Graph represents answers to the question: Has your child/you previously used generative AI for any of the following tasks? Bars with an asterisk differ significantly from corresponding bars ($p < .05$). Respondents are U.S. and Australian parents ($n = 2,003$) and U.S. and Australian children ($n = 2,003$).

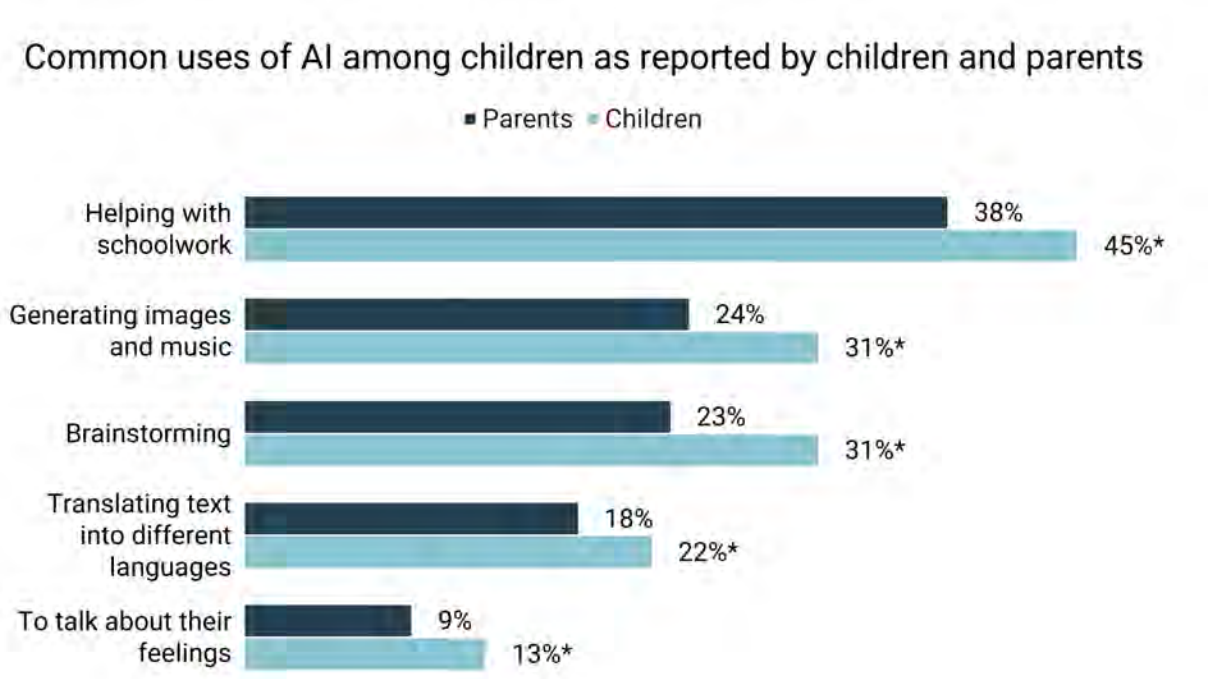
Interestingly, **reported AI use increases as household income increases.** In higher income households, 75% of children have used AI for at least one task. In middle income households, 71% of children have used AI for at least one task. This number drops to 55% among children in lower income households. This supports the Rithm Project's finding that teens and young adults who are members of lower income households are less likely to use AI, many for either moral/ethical reasons, or because they are less interested in these tools[3].



Graph represents answers to the question: Has your child/you previously used generative AI for any of the following tasks? Bars with an asterisk differ significantly from corresponding bars (p < .05). Respondents are U.S. and Australian parents and U.S. and Australian children. Response count by income is as follows: higher income (n = 1,441), middle income (n = 1,325), lower income (n = 1,137). Higher income is defined as: ≥100k USD/AUD a year, middle income is defined as: 51k-99k USD/AUD a year, lower income is defined as: <50k USD/AUD a year.

[3] Youth, AI, and the Relationships That Shape Them, Alison Lee, PhD and Michelle Culver. The Rithm Project. March, 2026.

The most commonly reported AI use for children and parents is helping with school, with 45% of children saying they have used AI for school, and 38% of parents reporting that their child has used AI in this way. Other common uses include generating images and music (parents: 24%, children: 31%), brainstorming (parents: 23%, children: 31%) and translating text into different languages (parents: 18%, children: 22%). A lower but not insignificant number of respondents reported using AI to talk about their feelings, with 13% of children reporting that they have used AI in this way, and 9% of parents reporting that their child has used AI this way.



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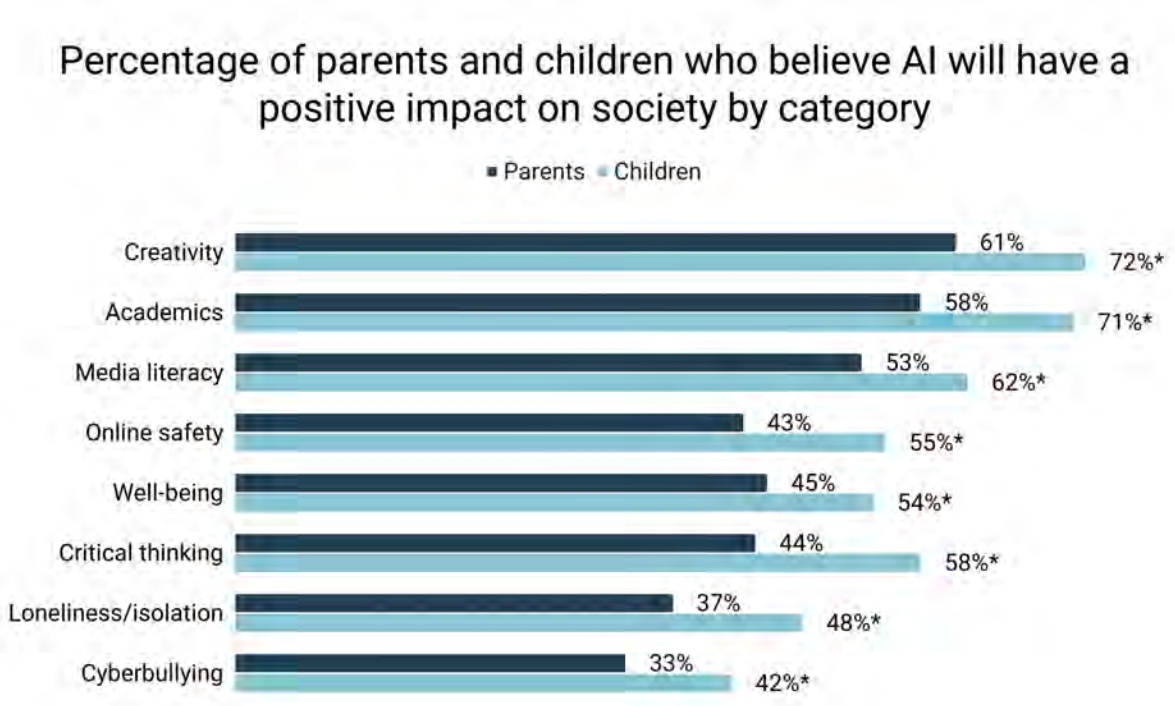
Because AI is broadly used by parents and children, it's interesting to explore parents' and children's opinions about its impact on society. When given a list of AI impact areas, respondents who said that they/their children used AI showed that across every impact area, **children who use AI are much more optimistic about these tools than parents of children who use AI.** When it comes to creativity, 72% of children believe that AI will have a positive impact. Children are similarly excited about AI's impacts on academics, with 71% of children agreeing that AI will have a positive impact. More than half of children who use AI believe that AI will have a positive impact on media literacy (62%), critical thinking (58%), online safety (55%), and well-being (54%). Children's AI positivity drops below half for only two societal impacts: loneliness/isolation (48%) and cyberbullying (42%).

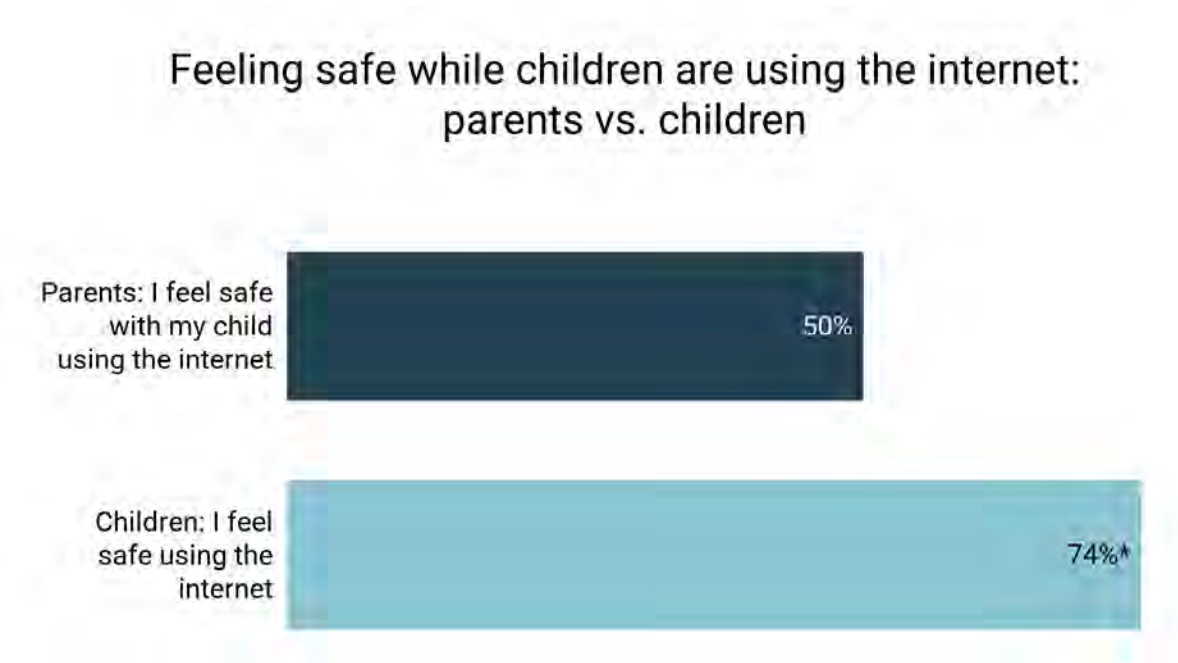
Parents of children who use AI do not feel the same levels of optimism. Though, more than half of parents believe that AI will have a positive impact on creativity (61%), academics (58%), and media literacy (53%). This number drops below half for well-being (45%), critical thinking (44%), online safety (43%), loneliness/isolation (37%), and cyberbullying (33%). Clearly, parents are more skeptical about AI than children, though areas like creativity and academics stand out as areas that are positively received by both groups.



Graph represents answers to the question: Do you think that AI will have a positive or negative impact in each of the following areas? Bars with an asterisk differ significantly from corresponding bars ($p < .05$). Respondents are U.S. and Australian parents whose children use AI ($n = 1,276$) and U.S. and Australian children who use AI ($n = 1,429$).

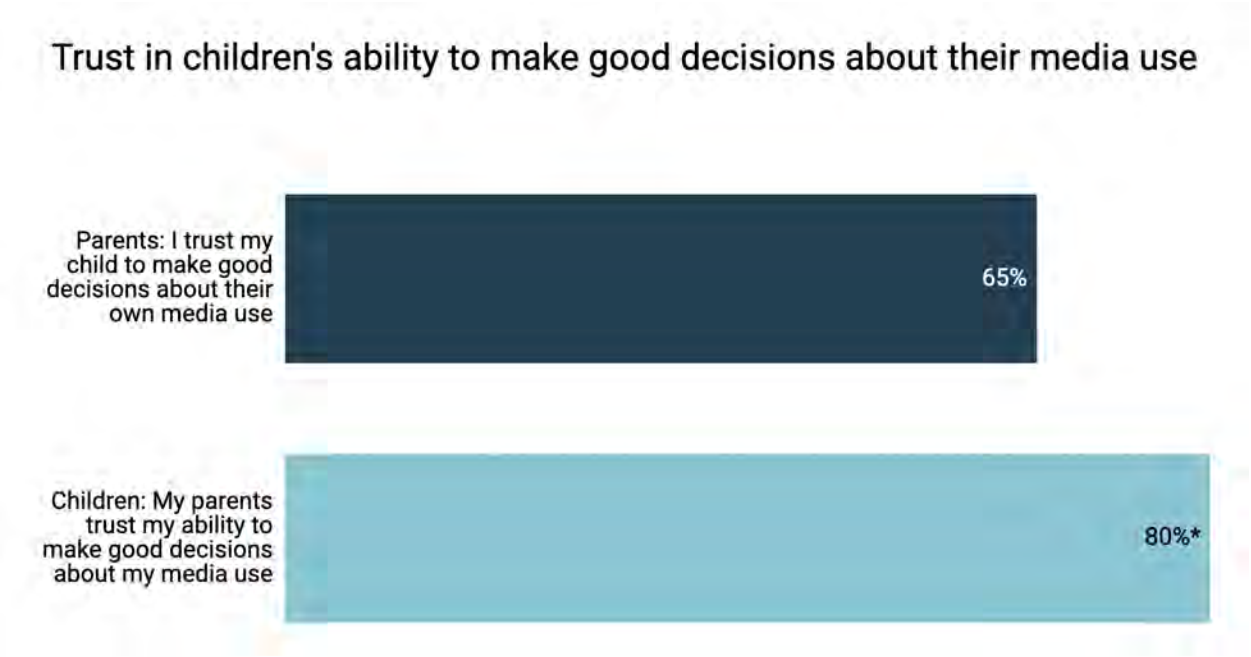
Online Safety, Trust, and Tech

When it comes to online safety, parents and children in the U.S. and Australia are juggling a lot. Despite many employing household rules, and some utilizing parental controls, **just half (50%) of parents feel safe with their child using the internet.** Children feel better about their online safety, with nearly three-quarters (74%) stating that they feel safe using the internet.



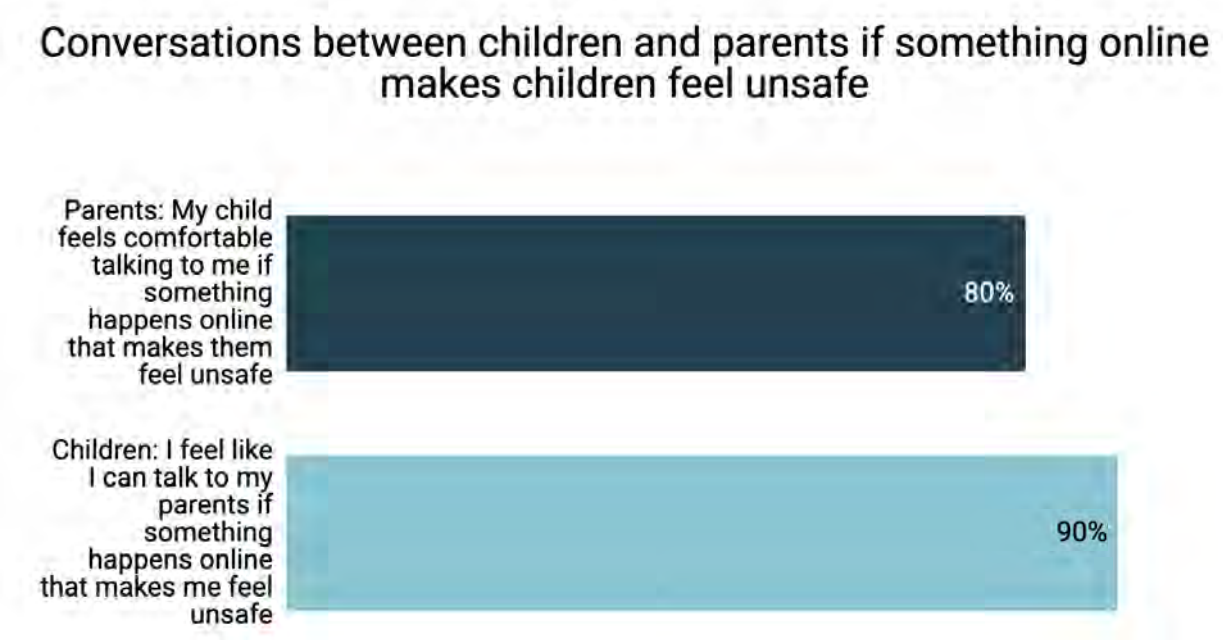
Graph represents answers to the agreement statement: I feel safe with my child using the internet/I feel safe using the internet. Bars with an asterisk differ significantly from corresponding bars ($p < .05$). Respondents are U.S. and Australian parents ($n = 2,003$) and U.S. and Australian children ($n = 2,003$).

A similar divide appears with trust: 65% of parents say they trust their child to make good decisions about their media use, while 80% of children say their parents trust their ability to make good decisions about their media use.



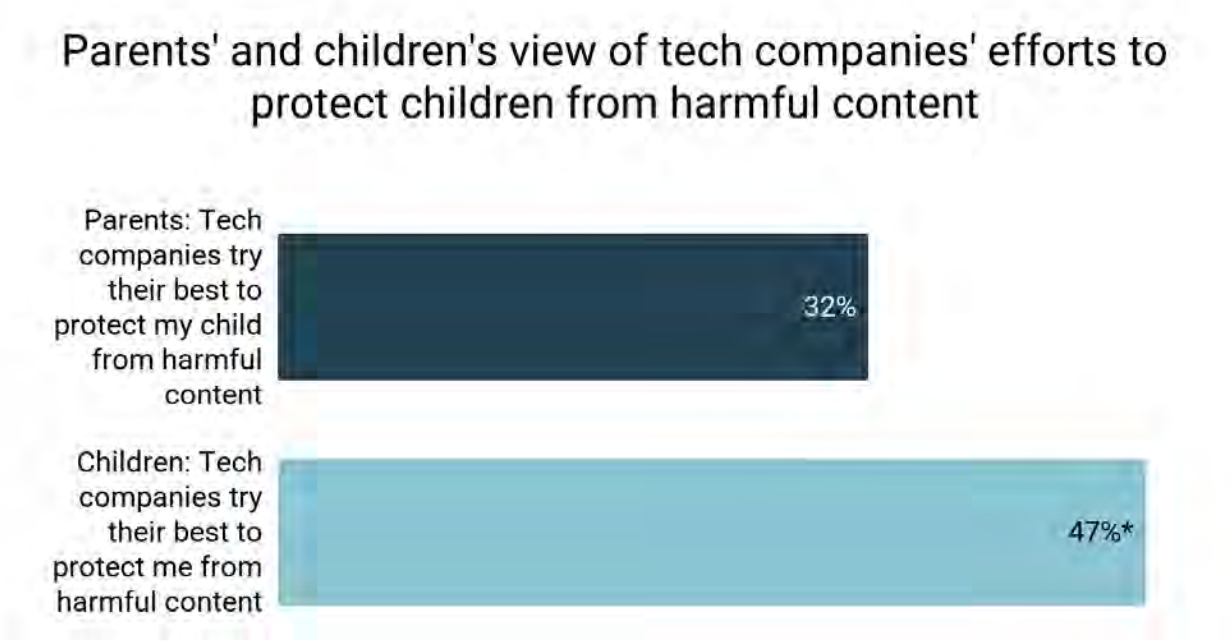
Graph represents answers to the agreement statement: I trust my child to make good decisions about their own media use/My parents trust my ability to make good decisions about my media use. Bars with an asterisk differ significantly from corresponding bars ($p < .05$). Respondents are U.S. and Australian parents ($n = 2,003$) and U.S. and Australian children ($n = 2,003$).

Reassuringly, nine in 10 children say they feel like they can talk to their parents if something online happens that makes them feel unsafe. Eight in 10 parents agree that their child feels comfortable talking to them if something online makes them feel unsafe. Both of these numbers are relatively high, but it is worth interrogating in further research why parents are less likely to report that their children would talk to them in this scenario. Perhaps it is because parents and children have different definitions of safety, and what constitutes an unsafe experience.



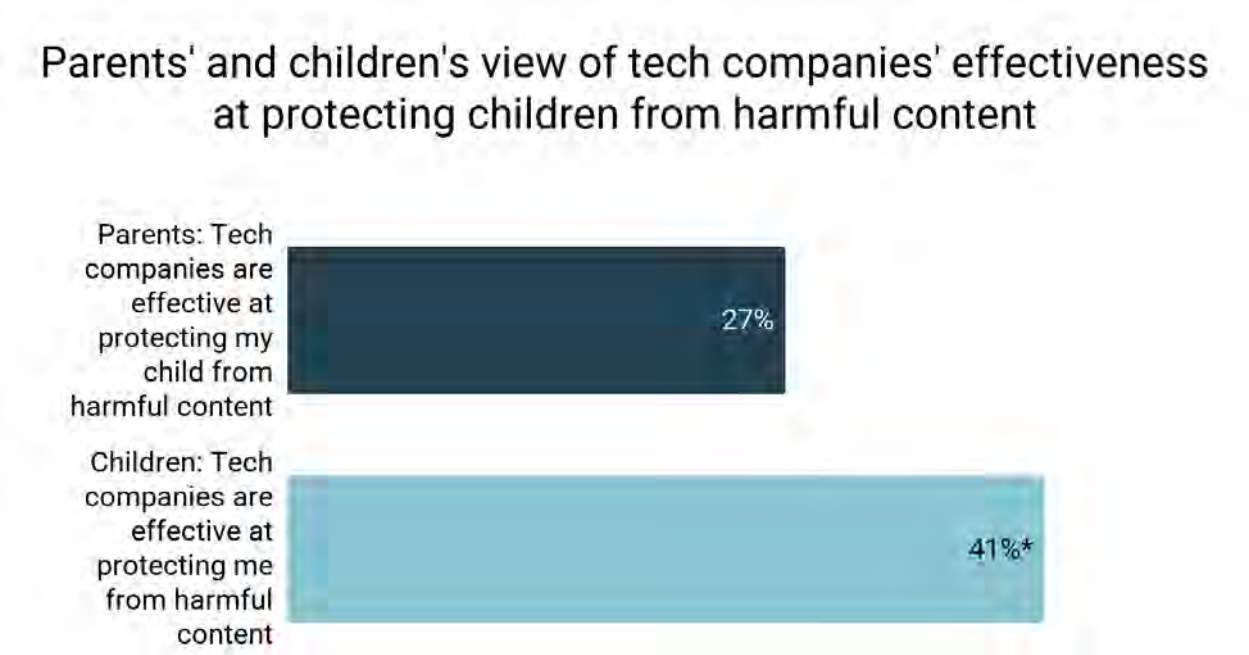
Graph represents answers to the agreement statement: My child feels comfortable talking to me if something happens online that makes them feel unsafe/I feel like I can talk to my parents if something happens online that makes me feel unsafe. Respondents are U.S. and Australian parents (n = 2,003) and U.S. and Australian children (n = 2,003).

A divide between parents and children also exists when it comes to confidence in tech companies. Just under half of children (47%) say that tech companies try their best to protect them from seeing harmful content. Parents have a much lower opinion of tech companies, with about one third (32%) of parents saying that tech companies try their best to protect their children from seeing harmful content.



Graph represents answers to the agreement statement: Tech companies try their best to protect my child from harmful content/Tech companies try their best to protect me from harmful content. Bars with an asterisk differ significantly from corresponding bars ($p < .05$). Respondents are U.S. and Australian parents ($n = 2,003$) and U.S. and Australian children ($n = 2,003$).

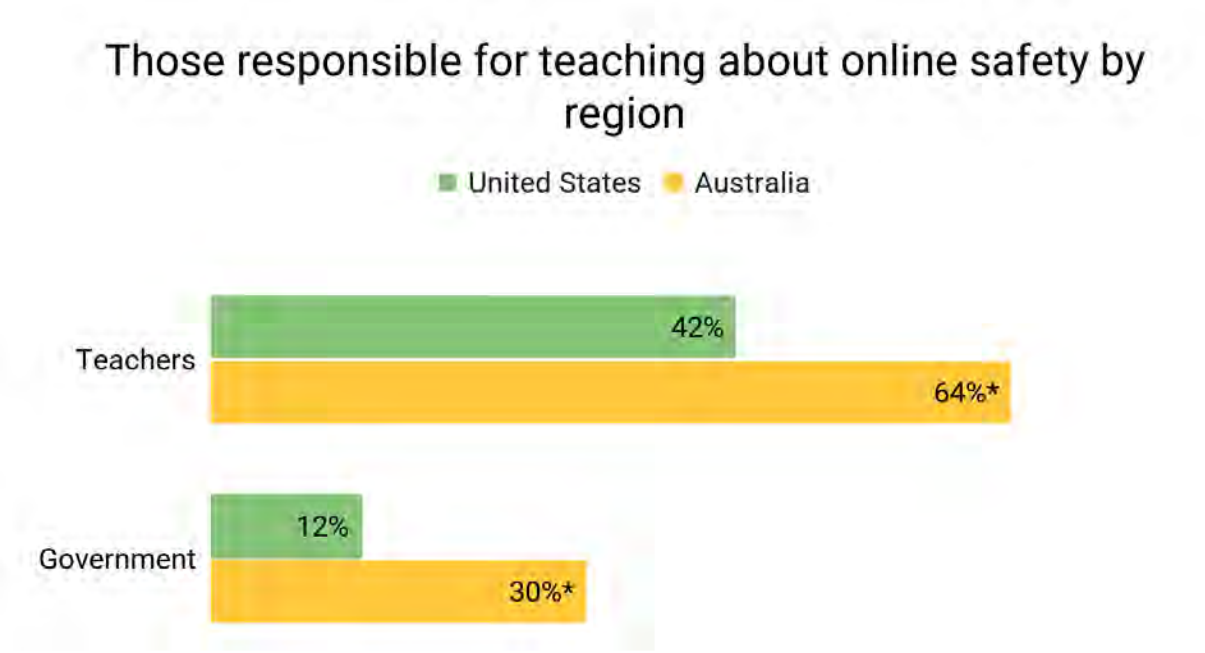
Sentiment is not much better when it comes to effectiveness: **41% of children say tech companies are effective at protecting them from seeing harmful content. Just over one quarter (27%) of parents agree that tech companies are effective at protecting their children from seeing harmful content.**



Graph represents answers to the agreement statement: Tech companies are effective at protecting my child from harmful content/Tech companies are effective at protecting me from harmful content. Bars with an asterisk differ significantly from corresponding bars ($p < .05$). Respondents are U.S. and Australian parents ($n = 2,003$) and U.S. and Australian children ($n = 2,003$).

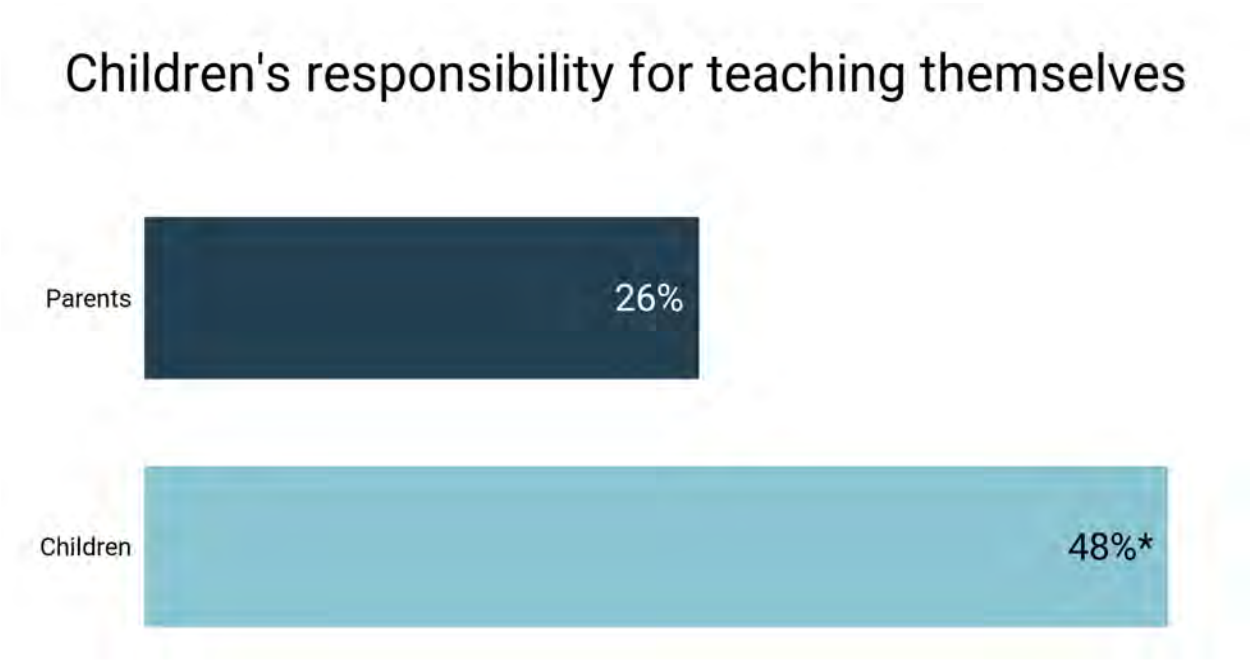
With this lack of trust in tech companies, who do children and parents think has responsibility for teaching about online safety? Overwhelmingly, both groups say that parents hold some responsibility, with **92% of children and 91% of parents stating that parents are responsible for children's online safety education.**

Separate from the general consensus about parents' role in online safety education, the divide when it comes to responsibility is largely regional, rather than generational. In the U.S., 41% of parents and 42% of children (42% of the total U.S. sample) say that teachers have a responsibility to teach online safety education. That number is significantly higher in Australia, with 64% of parents and 65% of children (64% of the total Australia sample) stating that teachers hold some of this responsibility. There is another large divide with the respective countries' governments: About one in ten (11% of parents, 13% of children, 12% of the total) of U.S. respondents say the government has an obligation to teach children about online safety. These numbers are about triple in Australia, with 31% of parents and 30% of children (30% total) saying the government holds some of this responsibility.



Graph represents answers to the question: Who do you feel is responsible for teaching your child/you about online safety? Select all that apply. Bars with an asterisk differ significantly from corresponding cells ($p < .05$). Respondents are U.S. parents and children ($n = 2,000$) and Australian parents and children ($n = 2,006$).

Interestingly, the divide is more generational rather than regional when it comes to *children's* responsibility in online safety education. Just under half (48%) of children say that they are responsible for their own online safety education their online safety education. This number drops to 26% among parents. This 22% gap shows that many children in both the U.S. and Australia believe they should (or are) teaching themselves about online safety, but parents do not agree, or do not realize children feel this way.

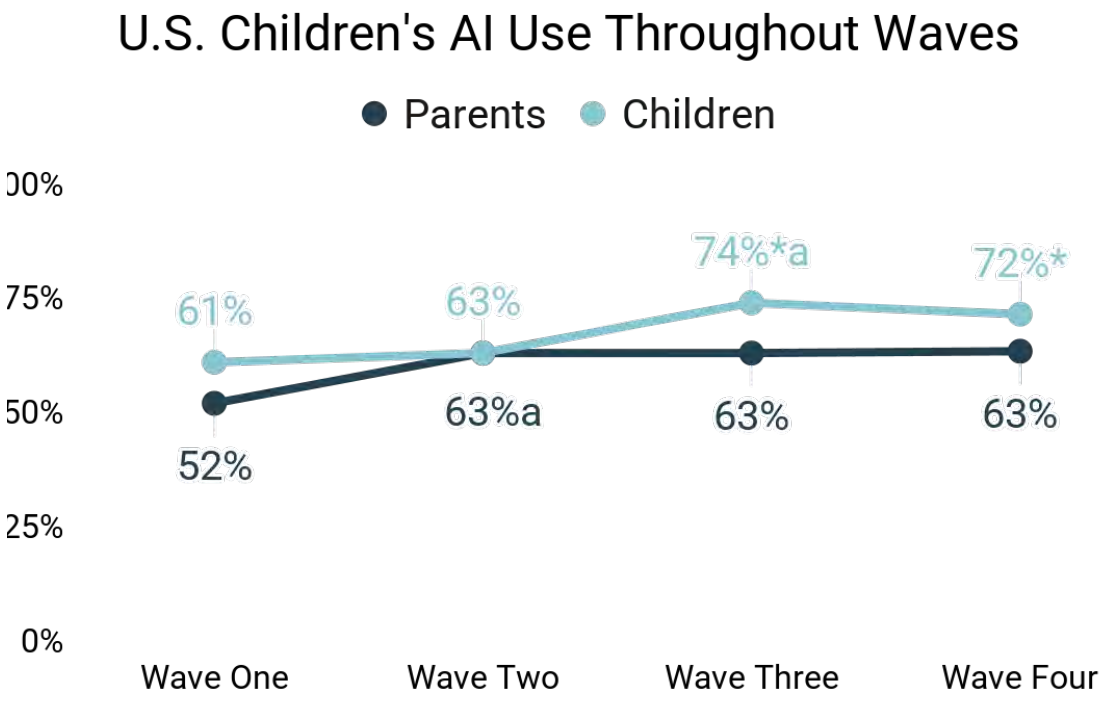


Graph represents answers to the question: Who do you feel is responsible for teaching your child/you about online safety? Select all that apply. Bars with an asterisk differ significantly from corresponding bars ($p < .05$). Respondents are U.S. and Australian parents ($n = 2,003$) and U.S. and Australian children ($n = 2,003$).

AI: A Flattening Frontier?

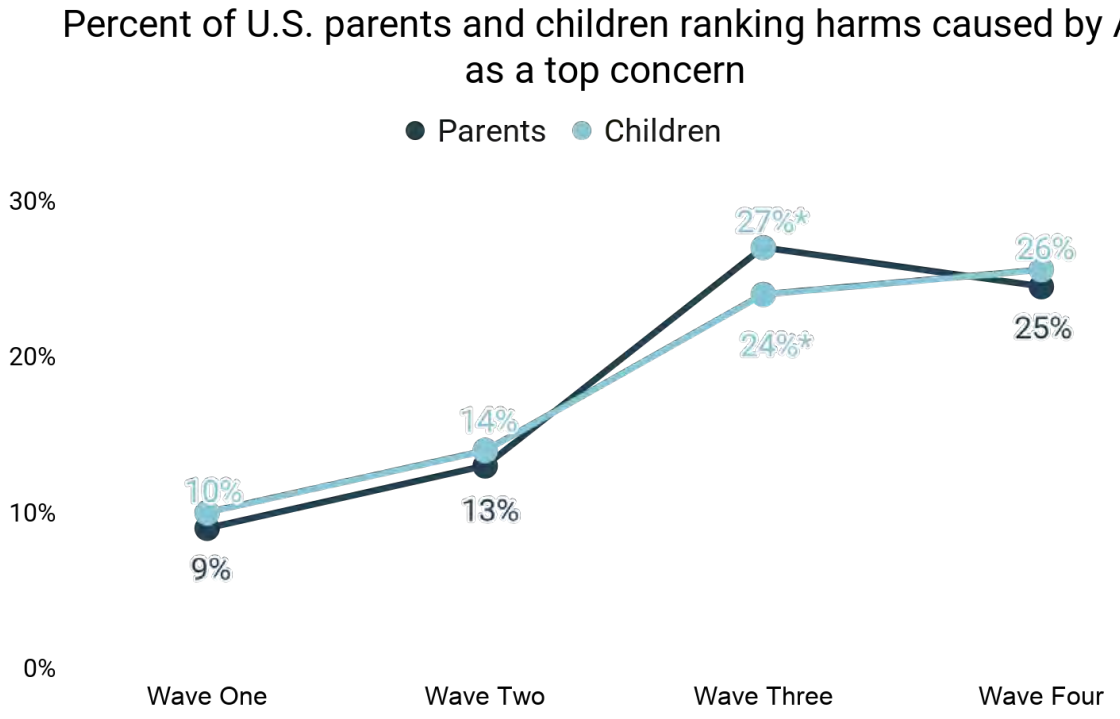
As stated at the beginning of this paper, the past two waves of the Online Safety Survey were fielded in the U.S. and Australia. However, this is the fourth wave of the Online Safety Survey, and each wave has been fielded in the United States. Across these four waves, some interesting U.S.-only trends have emerged. The most notable shifts have occurred around uses and perceptions of AI.

Since Wave One (Fall 2024), the percentage of children who report using AI tools for at least one task has risen 11% (from 61% to 72%). The percentage of parents who report that their child has used AI has also increased by 11% (from 52% to 63%). However, **AI usage has plateaued between Wave Three (Fall 2025) and Wave Four (Spring 2026), with similar amounts of parents (63% for both waves) and children (74% for Wave Three, 72% for Wave Four) reporting that their children/they have used AI.** This plateau could suggest that, following a rapid adoption period, children's embrace of AI is beginning to flatten. However, with just six months of trended data in this direction, it may be too early to tell.



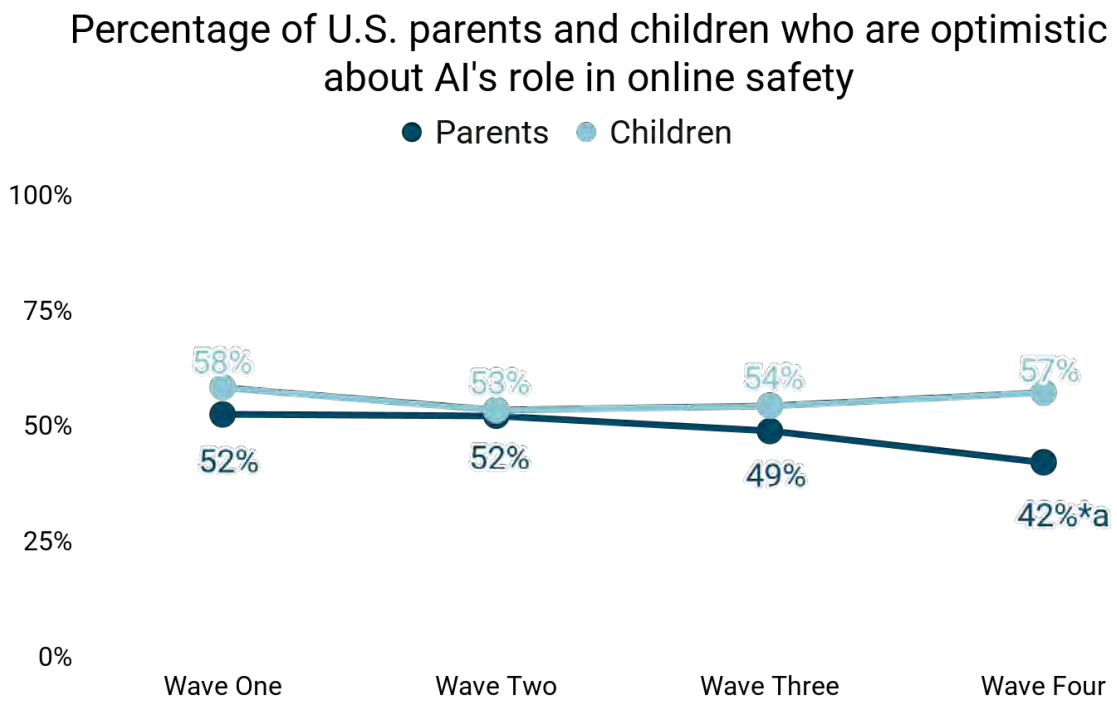
*Graph represents answers to the question: Has your child/have you previously used generative AI for the following tasks? Percentage with an "a" differs significantly from previous percentage in same subgroup ($p < .05$). Percentage with an asterisk (*) differs significantly from percentage in corresponding wave subgroup ($p < .05$). Percentages with a "*a" differ significantly both from percentages in same subgroup ($p < .05$) and from percentages in corresponding wave subgroup ($p < .05$). Respondents are Wave One parents ($n = 1,000$), Wave One children ($n = 1,003$), Wave Two parents ($n = 1,000$), Wave Two children ($n = 1,000$), Wave Three parents ($n = 1,000$), Wave Three children ($n = 1,000$), Wave Four parents ($n = 1,000$), Wave Four children ($n = 1,000$).*

Along with the initial upward trend of AI use came an increase in parents and children ranking harms caused by AI as a top concern. **When given a list of potential online concerns, 26% of children and 25% of parents ranked "harms caused by AI" as a top concern in Wave Four (Spring 2026). This is up by 16% for both parents and children** – in Wave One (Fall 2024) 10% of children and 9% of parents ranked AI harms as a top five concern. It is worth noting that although this number has risen significantly in the past year, it is still quite low compared to concerns about risks such as predatory behavior (top five concern for 78% of parents and 65% of children) and cyberbullying (top five concern for 62% of parents and 65% of children).



Graph represents answers to the agreement statement: Please rank your top 5 biggest concerns related to using the internet. Percentages with an asterisk (*) differ significantly from percentages in corresponding wave subgroup ($p < .05$). Respondents are Wave One parents ($n = 1,000$), Wave One children ($n = 1,003$), Wave Two parents ($n = 1,000$), Wave Two children ($n = 1,000$), Wave Three parents ($n = 1,000$), Wave Three children ($n = 1,000$), Wave Four parents ($n = 1,000$), Wave Four children ($n = 1,000$).

As concern has risen, **parents' optimism about AI's role in online safety has fallen**. Among parents who say their children use AI, in Wave Four 42% of parents said it will have a positive impact on online safety. This is less than in Wave One, when more than half (52%) of parents said that AI would have a positive impact on online safety. This Wave Four number is also less than Wave Three (Fall 2025) when 49% of parents were optimistic about AI's role in online safety. This deteriorating optimism, paired with rising concerns and a plateauing adoption rate, could signal a shift in families' attitudes about AI.



*Graph represents answers to the question: Do you think that AI will have a positive or negative impact in each of the following areas? Percentage with a "*a" differ significantly both from percentages in same subgroup ($p < .05$) and from percentages in corresponding wave subgroup ($p < .05$). Respondents are parents of children use AI and children who use AI. Wave One parents ($n = 522$), Wave One children ($n = 615$), Wave Two parents ($n = 630$), Wave Two children ($n = 634$), Wave Three parents ($n = 626$), Wave Three children ($n = 741$), Wave Four parents ($n = 634$), Wave Four children ($n = 715$).*

The More Things Change, the More They Stay the Same: Screen Use

It is also interesting to see what has remained consistent throughout the past four waves. For example, families' approaches to screen use limitations have stayed relatively consistent. When asked how their/their child's screen use is limited, about one third of respondents say they/their child limits screen use by setting one overall time limit, no matter how children may be using the device. About another third state that they limit screen use by type of activity, meaning they place different limits on different activities (i.e., different limits for playing video games versus texting with friends). The final group place no screen use limits at all. This division-by-thirds has remained consistent from Fall 2024 (Wave One) through Spring 2026 (Wave Four), meaning that around seven in 10 (69%) of parents and children consistently report having some type of screen use limit.

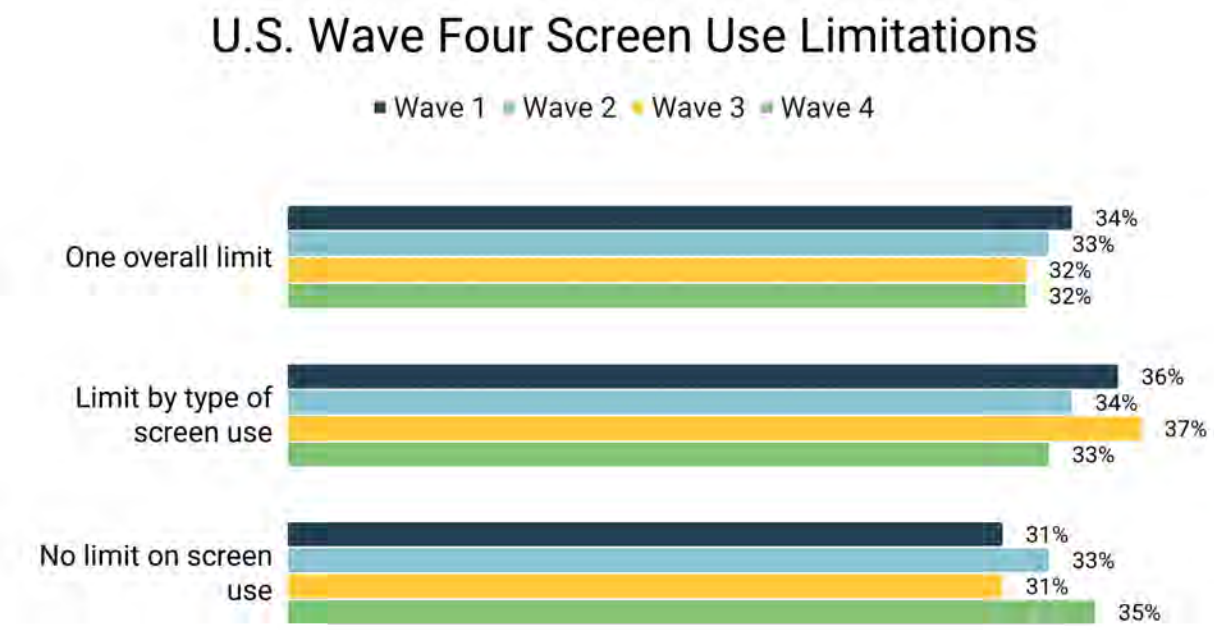


Chart represents answers to the question: Do you/your parents place limits on screen use overall or by type? Respondents are Wave One U.S. parents (n = 1,000) and Wave One U.S. children (n = 1,000), Wave Two U.S. parents (n = 1,000) and Wave Two U.S. children (n = 1,000), Wave Three U.S. parents (n = 1,000) and Wave Three U.S. children ((n = 1,000), Wave Four U.S. parents (n = 1,000) and Wave Four U.S. children (n = 1,000).

The online safety field is evolving rapidly, with new technologies, regulations, and public perceptions constantly forming and shifting. Throughout all of these changes, it is imperative that families stay at the center of this conversation. The goal of the Online Safety Survey is to ensure that parents' and children's voices are present in these ever-flowing digital safety discussions. We cannot create a safer digital world for families without families at the table.

This report demonstrates the many ways that parents and children navigate the digital world, through parental controls, household rules, and concerns. It also points to shifting attitudes about AI, as adoption begins to plateau. Both groups also made it clear that their trust in tech companies is relatively low, but their trust in and reliance on one another is actually quite high, indicating that family units often bear much of the responsibility for children's online safety. With this in mind, the below paragraphs outline implications of this research for parents, industry, and policymakers.

Implications for Parents

Digital parenting looks different for every family, and this research reflects that reality. Parents are balancing a constantly changing online environment while trying to make decisions that are appropriate for their child's age, maturity level, and daily habits. The findings from this study suggest that many parents are actively engaged in their children's digital lives, often relying more heavily on conversations and household expectations than on platform or device-level tools. At the same time, the data suggests there is an opportunity for more families to explore the parental controls available on the devices, apps, and platforms their children use most. While parental control adoption remains relatively low, parents and children who use these tools generally report that they are effective. Rather than replacing family conversations, these tools can complement ongoing discussions about online safety to help reinforce expectations.

Families are creating their own systems to manage life online, whether that means limiting screen time, requiring homework to be complete before device use, restricting downloads, or setting expectations around spending and communication. This suggests that many parents view digital safety not just as a technical concept, but as an ongoing parenting practice rooted in communication, trust, and daily routine. The data also point to a persistent gap between how parents and children perceive online activity. Across many activity measures, children report spending more time online than parents report their child spending online. This highlights the importance of regular, non-judgmental conversations about digital life. Open-ended discussions about what children enjoy, who they interact with, and how certain experiences make them feel (both good and bad) may provide parents with a clearer understanding of their child's online world than screen time data alone.

Importantly, this research also suggests that many young people want to be part of conversations about their online safety. Nearly half of teens said they wanted their opinions considered before parental controls are implemented. This finding reinforces the value of collaborative digital parenting approaches that involve youth in setting expectations and boundaries, particularly as children grow older and seek greater independence online.

The findings around AI also present an important opportunity for families. Many children are already using AI tools regularly for schoolwork, brainstorming, and creative projects, while some children are beginning to use this technology in more personal ways, such as talking about their feelings. As AI systems become conversational and responsive, parents will need to think beyond traditional screen time discussions and begin talking with children about privacy, emotional reliance, and how AI systems actually work.

Encouragingly, nearly all children reported feeling comfortable talking to their parents if something online makes them feel unsafe. This trust is one of the most important safety tools families have. While platforms, policies, and parental controls all play a role in supporting young people online, this research suggests that open, ongoing family communication remains one of the strongest foundations for digital safety.

Implications for Policymakers

Policies based on, or at least informed by, evidence are the most effective because they represent how people actually behave online. Instead of solely relying on personal anecdotes or assumptions, research grounded in data should be considered because it can limit biases and unintended consequences. All policymakers should be aware of online safety research, and we will do our best to shout it from the proverbial rooftops.

In 2026, Australia is at the center of major international online safety research and policy discussions. As noted in our recent report[4], Australia's social media ban, which prevents children under 16 from accessing accounts on 10 major social media platforms, went into effect in December 2025. What the ban misses is that it overly focuses on access: preventing under 16s from holding accounts on these specific platforms. It does not promote online safety, and it does not apply to a wide variety of online platforms and experiences. As shown in the table on page five, some of the top reported online activities that kids did weekly were: watched videos, played video games, streamed TV and movies, schoolwork, connected with friends/families, streamed music, and scrolled social media. This shows the breadth of online activities a majority of kids engage in every week, and also the shortcomings of only targeting specific companies.

Representing an alternative approach, Australia's eSafety Commissioner is also focusing on safety by design[5]. This effort is more sweeping, more comprehensive, and emphasizes safety, in contrast with the ban approach. In an effort to reconcile the ban and safety by design, the eSafety Commissioner is working on its own research about the implementation of the law. Policymakers and advocates around the world should pay close attention to the data coming out of Australia and learn from the results of this major regulatory attempt, especially before rushing to copy the ban, since its efficacy is still being assessed.

A notable finding from this survey is that household rules are used more than parental controls. There is an opportunity for national guidance or online safety strategy to inform and improve these family rules, giving the best information directly to families. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) has issued very helpful guidance for parents and caregivers around screen time[6]. The work of the interagency Kids Online Health and Safety (KOHS) Task Force was valuable and its 2024 report[7] provided direct, tangible advice that families could use to improve their screen time and online safety generally, including sample conversation starters.
There is an opportunity to restart this Task Force and share these findings and recommendations with the widest audience of American families possible. An impressive nine in 10 children feel comfortable talking with their parent about a negative online experience. These are exactly the conversations the government should support and encourage through digital media literacy campaigns and resources like the AAP's screen time guidance and the KOHS Task Force's recommendations.

[4] Australian Children's and Parents' Perceptions of the Recent Social Media Ban, Alanna Powers-O'Brien, FOSI. June 8, 2026.
[5] eSafety Commissioner's Safety by Design foundations, Australian eSafety Commissioner. January 2026.
[6] AAP's Center of Excellence for Social Media and Youth Mental Health, https://www.aap.org/en/patient-care/media-and-children/center-of-excellence-on-social-media-and-youth-mental-health/qa-portal/qa-portal-library/qa-portal-library-questions/screen-time-guidelines/
[7] KOHS task force report, https://www.ntia.gov/sites/default/files/reports/kids-online-health-safety/2024-kohs-report.pdf

The best question a policymaker can ask themselves is: what harm do I want to address? That is the starting inquiry, and the course of action depends on the answer to the question. Is this bill supposed to address posting on social media, the top online concern for both kids and parents? Or the top online risks: predatory behavior, cyberbullying, giving away personal information, and seeing age-inappropriate content? Or newer risks around the use of AI, where parents are pessimistic about the impact on cyberbullying, loneliness/isolation, critical thinking, online safety generally, and well-being? Or video games, streaming platforms, or something else? By starting with the harm to address, policymakers can directly target priority risks and reduce unintended consequences of sweeping restrictions.

Unsurprisingly, AI use has increased over the past eighteen months, and our data reflects that. Policymakers need to understand why people use AI in order to better regulate it. They should be careful of sweeping bans because the results of AI use are not all negative. The most common use of AI was assisting with schoolwork, as 45% of children who use AI reported that they have deployed it this way. Brainstorming is also part of this positive list. Any proposed AI policies should carefully target these types of uses to ensure children benefit from the positives, such as learning something new, while avoiding the negatives, such as cheating or receiving misinformation.

But there is room for regulating the new technology, as parents' optimism of AI's impacts on online safety has dropped among parents (from 52% in Wave One to 42% in Wave Four) and concerns over potential AI-specific harms are more likely to be ranked as a top five concern by both children and parents (Wave One children: 10% vs. Wave Four children: 26%; Wave One parents: 9% vs. Wave Four parents: 25%). AI could be worthy of its own dedicated legislation to target AI-specific risks. Or, it could be considered and included from the beginning of sweeping legislation. What policymakers should be careful of is forcing AI into a previously written bill aimed at social media platforms or data privacy practices. The scope of and definitions in bills to regulate certain technologies and platforms should be carefully considered to avoid unintended consequences.

Implications for Industry

This research presents an excellent opportunity for industry to respond to how real people - particularly young people - are using their platforms, products, and services. If you need a sign to convince your company to invest in youth online safety and digital well-being, this is it.

Parental controls and family accounts are helpful, but cannot be the only solution to improve platform safety. Parents consistently underestimate the amount of time their kids spend online per week across multiple different activities, including watching videos (78% vs. 83%), playing video games (71% vs. 76%), and using generative AI (27% vs. 38%)[8]. When used, however, caregivers and children say parental controls work. Depending on the control, between 81% and 86% of parents and children said that parental controls were effective.

Industry should take note that family rules are used more than parental controls. Is there an opportunity to make your parental controls work alongside popular family rules? To supplement, not supplant, the role of family conversations and rulemaking? We recommend that the government lean into digital media literacy campaigns based on AAP screen time guidance and the KOHS task force report recommendations. That recommendation applies to industry as well.

[8] Percentages correspond with the question: "In the last week, which of the following activities has your child/have you done online?"

Companies should aspire to design products and platforms that address the top concerns of both children and parents: cyberbullying, predatory behavior, giving away personal information, and seeing age-inappropriate content. These are the top online concerns for families, and mitigating them should be prioritized in building and designing products. Even if it is difficult to build in protections against all of those concerns, being aware of and working to mitigate families' top concerns is worth the effort.

Earn back the trust. Parents and teens report having low trust in companies and online experiences generally: only 50% of parents feel safe with their child using the internet, 32% of parents believe that tech companies try their best to protect their children from seeing harmful content, and just 27% of parents believe that tech companies are actually effective at it. Establishing and improving meaningful safety settings and features present opportunities to rebuild that trust. This goes beyond a new ad campaign. Agreeing upon and abiding by your own minimum standards for safety and accuracy are helpful steps.

METHODS

Part One of this report, *Findings from Wave Four*, focuses on findings from this most recent wave of the Online Safety Survey, which ran from Tuesday, March 17, 2026 to Monday, April 6, 2026. Respondents were 2,003 children ages 10-17 (1,000 U.S. children, 1,003 Australian children) and 2,003 parents of children ages 10-17 (1,000 U.S. children, 1,003 Australian children). U.S. data is representative by child age, child gender, parent/child race, multi/single-parent household composition, and household income. Australian data is representative by child age and gender.

Part Two of this report, *Comparative Findings Through Waves* focuses on comparative trends across waves. Wave One data was collected in October 2024; Wave Two data was collected in March/April 2025; Wave Three data was collected in October 2025; and Wave Four data was collected in March/April 2026. Part Two is exclusively U.S. data. Each wave (One through Four) includes 1,000 U.S. children ages 10-17 and 1,000 U.S. parents of children ages 10-17. Wave One and Wave Two data is representative by child age and gender. As part of continual efforts to strengthen the inclusivity of this tracking survey, Wave Three and Four data is representative by child age, child gender, parent/child race, multi/single-parent household composition, and household income.

All data was collected by Ipsos, a leading market research firm. Data was analyzed via SPSS. No post-hoc weights were applied to this study, and the findings reflect the opinion of survey respondents only.

ABOUT FOSI: The FAMILY ONLINE SAFETY INSTITUTE is an international, non-profit organization that works to make the online world safer for kids and their families. FOSI convenes leaders in industry, government and the non-profit sectors to collaborate and innovate new solutions and policies in the field of online safety. Through research, resources, events and special projects, FOSI promotes a culture of responsibility online and encourages a sense of digital citizenship for all. FOSI's membership includes many of the leading internet and telecommunications companies around the world.

This research is supported by Disney's Digital Wellness Grant Program & TikTok