Children's COMMISSIONER

Life in 'likes'

Children's Commissioner report into social media use among 8-12 year olds

Contents

Executive summary 4

Introduction 5

Context 6
Research objectives 6
Methodology 6

How I use social media 7

My social media use 7

Social media makes me feel happy 10

How I stay safe online 12

What can I post? 12
What counts as safety? 13
How I use social media: positives & negatives 14

My friends and family 15

'Following' my family 15

Going on my mum's phone 15
Sharenting 16
My sister showed me Snapstreaks 17

My online friends 20

Keeping in touch 20
Falling out online 21
I need to reply now 23

Growing up on social media 25

Who should I be? 25

Do I look okay? 25
Can we all look like celebrities? 27
Will my picture get any likes? 28
Is this shareable? 30
Who should I be?: positives & negatives 32

The world & my future 33

When I grow up I want to be a Youtuber 33
An Instagram post from a Year 5 girl who enjoyed watching baking videos on YouTube and Instagram 35
Learning about the world 35
The world and my future: positives & negatives 36

Conclusion 37
The two sides of social media 37
Recommendations 38
Government 38
Digital literacy 38
Guidance to parents 38
Schools 39
Social media companies 39
Appendix 1 40
Methodology 41
Sample and recruitment 41
Fieldwork 41

Executive summary

Most social media platforms have a minimum age limit of 13, but research shows a growing number of children aged under 13 are using social media, with 3 in 4 children aged 10-12 having their own accounts.

While much is known about how teenagers use social media, this research provides the missing piece to the story, exploring the social media lives of children before they reach the teenage years. In October and November 2017, we conducted 8 focus groups with 32 children aged 8-12 to understand the impact of social media on the wellbeing of this age group. The findings of this research are summarised below.

How I use social media

My social media:

Across all ages, the most popular social media were Snapchat, Instagram, Musical.ly and WhatsApp. Younger children had less routine around when they accessed social media, while older children started to get into the habit of using all their social media apps multiple times a day, and for some, it had come to dominate their day.

Social media makes me feel happy

Children knew how to cheer themselves up or calm themselves down using social media, from getting funny Snapchats from a friend to watching slime videos on Instagram. It allowed children to be creative and play games, two things that appealed to children from a very young age.

How I stay safe online:

Parents and schools had successfully ingrained messages in children about online safety from known risks such as predators and strangers. Yet children were less aware of how to protect themselves from other online situations that could affect their mood and emotions.

My friends and family

'Following' my family:

Younger children were particularly influenced by their family's views and usage of social media, and parents may be unaware of how their use of social media affects their child.

Going on my mum's phone

Parents sometimes gave children contradictory safety messages when they let children use their social media accounts, and unknowingly exposed them to unsuitable content.

Sharenting

Many children felt uncomfortable and bothered by their parents posting pictures of them on social media, yet felt they could do little to stop it.

My sister showed me Snapstreaks

Children learned how to do new things on social media from their older siblings, but were also put off by things that their siblings had experienced. In some cases, children worried about their siblings' behaviour online, such as excessive use and ignoring safety messages.

My online friends:

Social media was important for maintaining relationships, but this got trickier to manage at secondary school, where friendships could break down online.

Keeping in touch

Children used social media as a tool to maintain friendships, and they recognised the value of face-to-face interactions for more serious conversations, like discussing worries and resolving arguments.

Falling out online

Younger children were more likely to see mean comments from strangers on apps like Roblox, whereas older children, who were communicating with a greater number of people on group chats, faced issues and confusion around the blurring of 'jokes' that were posted publicly.

I need to reply now

Maintaining online friendships could be stressful for some and a source of distraction from other offline activities.

Growing up on social media

Who should I be?

Children are conscious of keeping up appearances on social media, particularly when they start secondary school, and identity and seeking peer approval become more important.

Do I look okay?

Despite talking about the importance of 'staying true to yourself' and being authentic on social media, girls were worried about looking 'pretty' and boys were more concerned with looking 'cool' and having the right clothing.

Can we all look like celebrities?

When children started to follow celebrities and people outside their close family and friends, many became aware of how they looked compared to other people on social media, and felt that comparisons were unattainable.

Will my picture get any likes?

Children felt good when they got 'likes' and 'comments' from friends, and some Year 7 children were starting to become dependent on them, using techniques to guarantee they would get a high number of 'likes'.

Is this shareable?

Children started to see offline activities through a 'shareable lens' based on what would look the best on social media.

The world and my future:

Social media could inspire children and help them learn about new things.

I want to be a YouTuber when I am older

Some children developed new aspirations about what they wanted their future to be like and copied things they saw on social media.

Learning about the world

Some children actively gathered information on social media platforms like YouTube and Instagram, and were exposed to 'news' via celebrities and 'explore/discover' pages.

Conclusion & recommendations

Based on these findings, we have developed a series of recommendations, which are outlined on page 38.

Government:

Digital literacy in schools: Broaden digital literacy education beyond safety messages, to develop children's critical awareness and resilience and understanding of algorithms, focusing on the transition stage from primary to secondary school.

Guidance for parents: Inform parents about the ways in which children's social media use changes with age, particularly on entry to secondary school, and help them support children to use social media in a positive way, and to disengage from it.

Schools:

Improve teachers' knowledge about the impacts of social media on children's wellbeing and encourage peer-to-peer learning

Social media companies:

Recognise the needs of children under 13 who are using their platforms and incorporate them in service design or do more to address underage use.

Introduction

Context

One third of current internet users are under the age of 18 – and whilst most social media sites have an official age limit of 13 years, research is increasingly reporting the accessing and use of these sites by children under 13[1].

The Commissioner's Growing Up Digital (2017) report, published last year, made considered recommendations towards fostering a more supportive digital environment for children and young people to grow up in.

Recent progress has also been made by the Government to address young people's safety online (e.g. the Internet Safety Strategy launched in summer 2017, and the 2017 Digital Economy Act) which have made important changes concerning social media regulation for children. The Education Act 2011 has also given teachers stronger power to tackle cyber-bullying by searching for and deleting inappropriate images (or files) on electronic devices, including mobile phones.

There has also been much debate surrounding the relationship between social media and mental health and wellbeing – with the overarching message being that while social media can be a very positive tool for young people, there can also be negative impacts on mental wellbeing[2].

However, there is yet to be any considered Government research on the impact of social media on mental health and wellbeing for children at the younger end of the spectrum of users. With half of 11 and 12 year olds having their own social media profiles, this represents a significant gap in our understanding.

Research objectives

The objective for this study was to qualitatively explore the impact of social media use on the lives of children aged 8-12 years old, particularly in relation to their wellbeing and self-esteem.

Specific research objectives were to understand:

- The use and awareness of social media amongst this age group
- The relationship between family social media use and children's use
- The perceived and actual role it plays in friendships and family relationships
- How their use of social media, or other's use, influences their day
- How social media improves or distorts children's understanding of the wider world

Methodology

This research involved engaging with and interviewing 32 children aged 8-12 across the country. Children were recruited in 'friendship pairs' to enable them to open up with more confidence during the research, and to allow for insight around peer dynamics and other social factors to emerge more naturally.

All children and their parents completed a range of 'digital pre-tasks' which involved them reporting to us on their lifestyles, behaviours and attitudes towards social media, and also submitting examples of their social media activities through screenshots and photos.

Researchers then interviewed children through eight discussion groups, each including two friendship pairs, grouped by age and gender (full details on sample and approach is provided in Appendix 1).

This research was conducted for the Children's Commissioner by Revealing Reality.

[1] https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/media-literacy-research/childrens/children-parents-2017

[2] https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Social-Media_Mental-Health_EPI-Report.pdf

How I use social media

My social media use

Across all ages, the most popular social media were Snapchat, Instagram, Musical.ly and WhatsApp. Younger children had less routine around when they accessed social media, while older children started to get into the habit of using all their social media apps multiple times a day.

Year 4 & 5 (age 8-10):

From the age of eight, children were experimenting with a variety of different social media platforms. Children had not yet developed habits of checking all their social media on a regular basis, using some platforms more often than others. This may reflect the fact that many children, particularly those in Year 4, were accessing social media on their parents' devices, and therefore had a limited time to use social media.

Some of the children were using Facebook and Twitter, two platforms that are not often associated with younger users and were generally not used by the Year 6 and 7 children. They spoke about using their parents' devices to access social media, and it transpired that they were using their parents' accounts to access Facebook and Twitter, rather than creating their own.

Table 1. The social media used by Year 4 and Year 5 groups, and how often children used them

	A few times a month	Once a week	Most days of the week	Daily	Multiple times a day
Year 4 Boys 8-9 year olds					
Year 4 Girls 8-9 year olds					
Year 5 Boys 9-10 year olds					
Year 5 Girls 9-10 year olds					

Roblox is a gaming website and app that enables users to play millions of user-generated games. It is advertised as a 'social platform for play' as users can create groups and message other players

Musical.ly is an app that allows you to create and share 15 second videos. Users can choose a song to accompany the video and use photo filters.

Year 6 & 7 (age 10-12):

Most of the children in these age groups had their own phones, and could access their social media accounts when they wanted. Once children got to secondary school, it was seen as more important to be on social media throughout the day, as opposed to just after school or when they had some free time. When asked how long they spent on social media, these were some of the responses:

"Most of the time, when I am not on my Xbox"

Harry, 11, Year 7

"At break time, we go into the loo that has Wi-Fi and use our phones there because there is nothing else to do"

Merran, 12, Year 7

Table 2. The social media used by Year 6 and Year 7 groups, and how often children used them

	A few times a month	Once a week	Most days of the week	Daily	Multiple times a day
Year 6 Boys 10-11 year olds					
Year 6 Girls 10-11 year olds					
Year 7 Boys 11-12 year olds					
Year 7 Girls 11-12 year olds					

While for some children, such as Bridie, social media had become their main hobby, others, like Joe, did not necessarily see it in this way.

"Hmm, 24 hours in a day, so I probably use it 18 hours a day"

Bridie, 11, Year 7

"Some people take it too seriously but it's not like it's going to get you anywhere. I feel privileged that I can do things and be active"

Joe, 11, Year 7

It seemed that children who were more engaged in other activities had less time to spend on social media and realised other hobbies, such as sport, would help them out more in life.

Older children had developed a more sophisticated understanding of the different social media apps, and thought more about which apps to use and when to use them. Their experiences on different apps had led them to develop preferences in their usage habits:

"When you chat on Instagram it doesn't go away so people can't be mean"

Aaron, 11, Year 7

Year 7 (age 11-12):

Similarly, once children reached secondary school, they felt like they had grown out of certain apps, such as Musical.ly, because they got boring or were too 'embarrassing'.

"I haven't used it in like ages. Videos turn out more cringey than pictures, more awkward and weird"

Alina, 11, Year 7

"Musical.ly got boring because it didn't change, but apps need to change to keep you interested"

Joe, 11, Year 7

The Year 4 boys putting stickers next to the social media that they use

Social media makes me feel happy

Social media allowed children to do the things they want to do. It kept them entertained and certain things they do on social media make them feel happy.

Children tended to associate social media with positive moods and happy emotions. From Year 4 to Year 7, children described actively using social media to boost their mood and make them laugh, by watching funny videos and sending funny things to their friends.

"If you're in a bad mood at home you go on social media and you laugh and then you feel better"

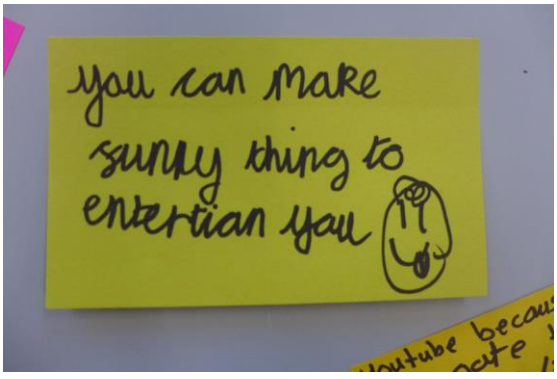
Kam, 10, Year 6

"There's lots of things to make you laugh on social media"

Billy, 9, Year 4

"You can just scroll to a funny video and forget about sad posts"

Connor, 11, Year 6



'You can make funny thing to entertain you' Year 4 Girl

Children were also using social media as a distraction, when they felt they needed to calm down or relax. Many children were watching slime videos for this reason.

Slime videos show people stretching, poking and reshaping colourful 'slime', which can be made from materials such as glue, shaving foam and salt.

"If you're like really stressed or something and you watch a really satisfying slime video it makes you like calmer"

Alina, 11, Year 7

"It takes your mind off things"

Merran, 12, Year 7

As well as helping children to change their mood to feel happy or relaxed, social media enabled them to do the things they wanted to do. While all children felt that being able to talk to their family and friends was a key reason to use social media, there were other specific benefits to using social media that were mentioned by different age groups.

Although, some of the reasons (below) were expressed by children across multiple year groups, some were mentioned more by children of certain ages than others.

Year 4 Age 8-9	Year 5 Age 9-10	Year 6 Age 10-11	Year 7 Age 11-12

Playing games with my friends

Younger children were particularly attracted to the games element in certain social media, such as Roblox, and being able to play with friends online.

"Roblox got more popular in my class, so I got it back"

Oliver, 8,

Oliver's Roblox game

Fun surprises

New features and constant updates were exciting for children, who wanted to try out the latest filters on Snapchat.

"Every day there is a new surprise on Snapchat's filters"

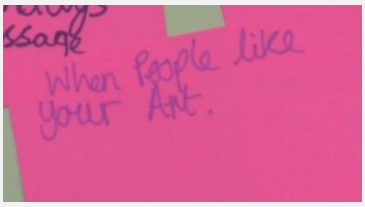
Elsa, 8

Space to be myself

Children started to enjoy expressing themselves away from parents and teachers. Social media gave them a platform to be creative and experiment.

"You can do anything you want, no one is there to stop or control you"

Zoe, 10



'When people like your art'

Finding things to do

Children had fun copying the things they saw on social media, such as following baking or slime tutorials.

"I just want to make slime, like the girl on the Ingham family who is my age does"

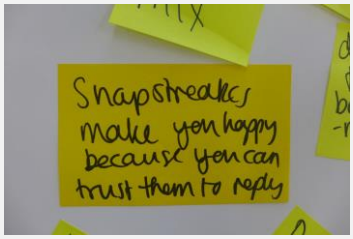
Molly, 10

Cementing friendships

Turning social interactions into a game with Snapstreaks meant that children had a way to judge the strength of their friendships were. Two friends have to send each other a Snapchat every day to maintain a 'streak' which is shown as a number next to that friend's name. Having a streak with someone meant that you could rely on them to reply to you, and the longer the streak the better friends you were.

"I reached 96. I carried them on to be nice and it was just a good way of talking to them"

Kam, 10



'Snapstreaks make you happy because you can trust them to reply'

Looking good

Children started to realise that they could change how they looked online, and could work out how good other people thought they looked.

"You can use Snapchat to make you look pretty"

Becky, 10

Fitting in

Children didn't want to miss out on anything socially, and social media allowed them to stay in the loop, regardless of whether they liked it or not.

"I thought if I had it [Instagram] we would be friends, but there is not actually that much to do on it"

Annie, 11

"Most of my friends use Snapchat, so I have to try and use it as well, but I prefer Instagram"

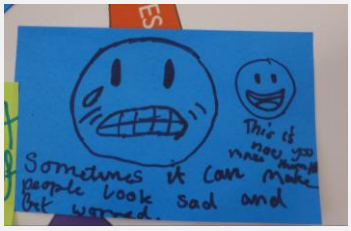
Aaron, 12

Getting emotional support

Older children were using social media to get emotional support from their online friends.

"When I posted that my great nan had died, on Instagram, people messaged me and I felt better about it"

Joe, 11



'Sometimes it can make people look sad and a bit worried. This is how you can make them feel'

How I stay safe online

Parents and schools had successfully ingrained messages in children about online safety from known risks such as predators and strangers. Yet children were less aware of how to protect themselves from other online situations that could affect their mood and emotions.

What can I post?

Year 4, 5 & 6 (age 8-11):

Staying safe online was a priority for many of the younger children, particularly those in Year 4. Most of the children had strict rules about what they can and cannot share online, which seemed to be a strong reflection of the safety messages they receive from their parents and schools. In this context, 'safety' was understood as protecting oneself from strangers, online predators, cyber-bullying and 'bad' things people share, such as swearing or violence.

Of central importance was the need to ensure they do not reveal any personal identifiable information, such as where they live or where they go to school, through the images or content they share. Many talked about specific strategies they use to protect themselves, such as never revealing their school uniform or never showing their house number in photos. Some also said they are always careful to make sure the background in their photos doesn't easily give away what their home looks like.

"I check all the backgrounds first and see if anything is there, and then if I'm in my school uniform I wouldn't post it"

Elsa, 8, Year 4

"I think to make sure there's no one I know in the background. My mum told me it's a safety thing because people could look at it and get information. So, you just take a photo on a plain wall. I don't want people seeing my house number. I could still do it at my house but just the bricks. If you're at a friend's house you definitely wouldn't take a photo of their house, not showing the number of the house"

Freya, 8, Year 4

It seemed that these safety messages tended to be learned as 'rules', rather than general principles they could apply to new or different contexts. For example, while many children were highly conscious of not displaying their school uniform or house number in images they shared, they did not seem to apply the same logic of safety in any other ways, such as ensuring they don't interact with strangers, who may also be adults, on Roblox.

"It's safe because no adult will play Roblox"

Hassan, 8, Year 4

Some of the eight-year-old boys said that they feel safe on apps like Roblox because they 'know' that no adults use the app, but it also became clear that some repeat safety messages that 'no adults are on there' and 'don't

play with people you don't know' just to satisfy their parents.

In some instances, children reported feeling worried about using social media because of these safety considerations, with some saying they wished they could enjoy social media without needing to worry about the dangers they may face. This was especially true for the younger children, who appeared to be more concerned about protection strategies than the older children.

"Sometimes it makes me upset that you have to be careful, because I just think you should be able to make a video and not be worried"

Freya, 8, Year 4

"When it's talked about at school it makes me feel scared, like during Safety Week. Because why else would they be talking about it with us? It's intense to find out what they're going to say, because if it's bad then parents might ask us questions, so I kind of get the scared feeling when someone talks about it at school"

Kieren, 10, Year 5

Year 7 (age 11-12):

While the emphasis on safety rules was equal across the genders, it was seen to weaken slightly as children got older. Children in Year 7 were also conscious of how to stay safe online, but they appeared to be more concerned about ensuring they 'look good' in the photos and videos they share than they were about hiding identifiable information.

What counts as safety?

Children were very confident to talk about how to stay safe online from a physical perspective, but there was less discussion about what to do when things affect them on a more emotional level. Cyber-bullying was the most talked about issue in this regard, with many children saying that, when faced with cyber-bullies, they knew to ignore the comments and remind themselves that the bully must be 'jealous' or 'insecure'.

However, many children also talked about other things that happen on social media that can affect their moods or emotions, such as feeling confused if a mean comment someone writes to them is real or a joke, or feeling uncomfortable when they see content that is racist or violent. While these experiences can impact on children's moods or worries, few children talked about techniques they use to feel better in these situations.

"When someone sent a racist video about me to a group Snapchat the sad feeling lasted for months, and I had to keep it in but I was angry. One day I lashed out and then it felt a lot better when I told them [my parents]"

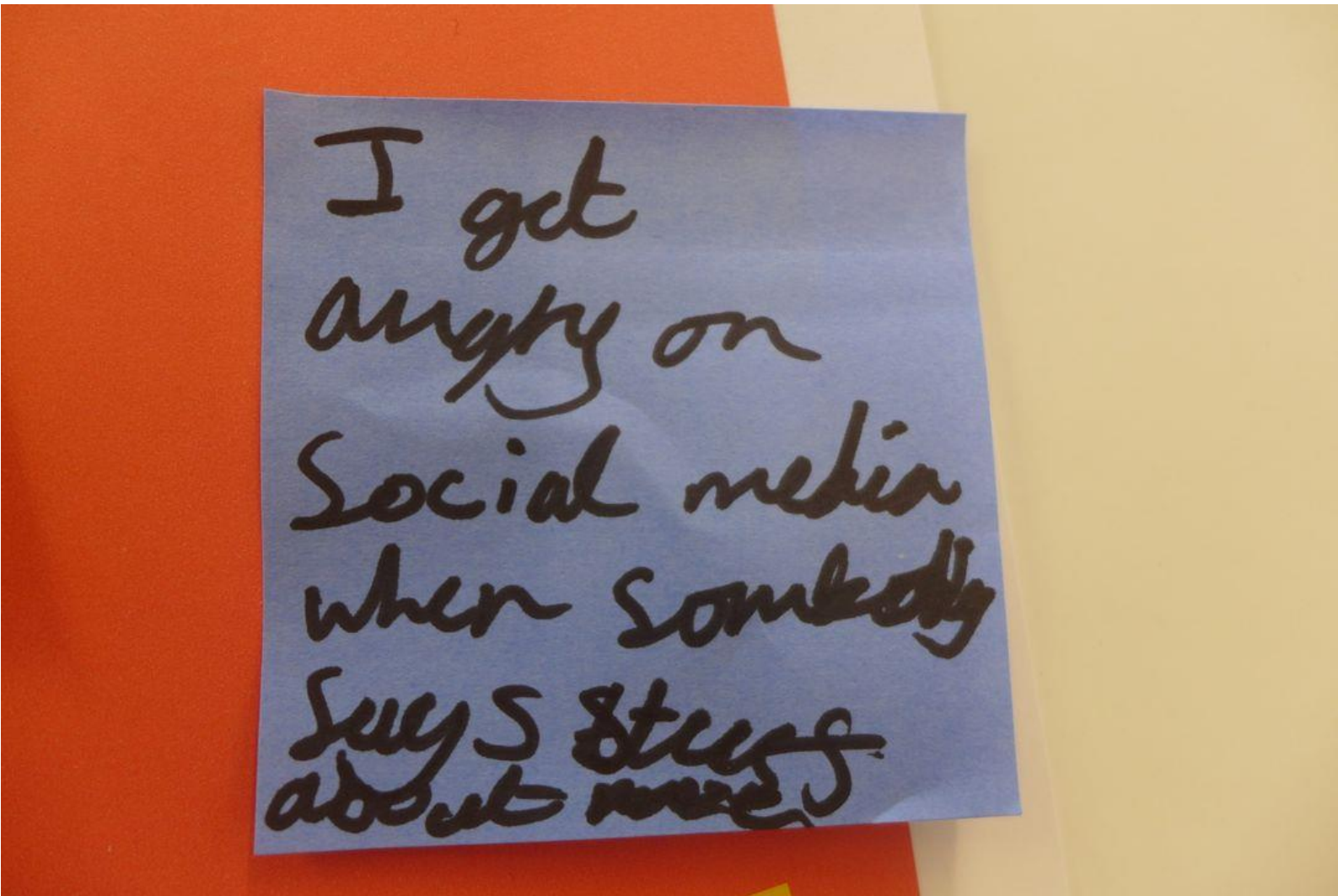
Aaron, 11, Year 7

In general, the fact that children have taken in messages about online safety at a young age shows the influence of parents and schools, and the potential for parents to have a positive impact at this age. Such efforts to promote safety practices appear to have been successful in instilling protection strategies and behaviours into children, however these findings also point to the need to think about 'safety' in broader terms, to incorporate both the physical and the subtler impacts to children's moods and emotions.

How I use social media: positives & negatives

Positives	Negatives
▪ It makes me laugh and I can make other people laugh ▪ It lets me be creative ▪ I know how to stay safe online	▪ I am confused by how old you have to be to use social media ▪ It can be scary to think about what can happen if you are not safe on social media ▪ I sometimes don't know what to do when bad things happen on social media

'I get angry on social media when somebody says stuff about me' Year 5 Boy



My friends and family

'Following' my family

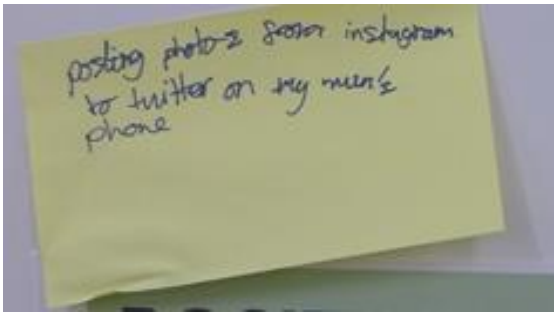
Younger children were particularly influenced by their family's views and usage of social media. Parents and siblings could affect children in ways they were not always aware.

Going on my mum's phone

Social media was often a space children shared with their parents, which occurred when children accessed their parents' social media accounts, and vice versa, when parents 'checked in' on their children's accounts.

Year 4 & 5 (age 8-10):

With fewer accounts in their own name, Year 4 and 5 children often complemented their social media use by using their parents' devices to access their parents' Facebook or Twitter accounts. Some reasons for doing so were to 'follow' their favourite sports teams on Twitter, see a hobby/community group on Facebook, or see their family's posted photos. This occurred far less for the older children who had various social media accounts in their own name, used only by themselves – and as such they spent most of their time in their own online spaces.



'Posting photos from Instagram to Twitter on my mum's phone' Year 4 Boy

"I like looking at pictures on my Mum's Facebook like my cousins when they go on holiday"

Ibrahim, 8, Year 4

When children accessed their parents' social media accounts, adult and child social worlds were blurred, and younger children were exposed to content and imagery from their parent's social circles. While children did not explicitly say they were worried about this, they did express concern about seeing content that was more for adults and 'not suitable for children their age', such as seeing or hearing swear words.

"Sometimes I see stuff when my mum is trying to show me things on Facebook and a rude and horrible thing will pop up, and it makes you feel really shocked"

Zoe, 10, Year 5

This suggested that children had a good sense of what is appropriate for their age group, but that their parents were occasionally exposing them to less age-appropriate things by letting them use their phones and accounts. Indeed, when children were deciding which platforms to use on their own, many considered whether it was suitable for them and tried to make sure they only saw things that were relevant for children. This was reflected in some children's decisions to use YouTube Kids, or to include the word 'clean' on YouTube searches to avoid seeing swearing or bad language. Similarly, they perceived Facebook to be for 'adults' and thought you had to be a lot older to have an account. Despite this, many were happy to go on it via their parent's accounts.

Although some parents chose to let children go on social media via their own accounts so they can monitor usage and make sure they know what children are seeing, it seemed to contradict the safety messages children had absorbed about what was appropriate for them to do and which platforms they were allowed to use.

The way parents were using social media also affected children's own use and perceptions. Children whose parents used social media a lot tended to feel that it was more essential than children whose parents tended to use it less. These children seemed to take cues from their parents' actions and learn what is 'normal' social media use from those around them.

"My mum would forget about everything if she didn't have social media... without social media we wouldn't know anything that is going on now everyone relies on social media they actually don't know anything that was going on without it"

Beth, 9, Year 5

Sharenting

Many children spoke about how their parents would post pictures and videos of them on their own social media accounts. Children talked about feeling uncomfortable and bothered when their parents shared some photos. For some children, this was because they did not want a big group of people to see them, or did not like the way they looked, while others simply did not like being pestered and pressured by parents to share photos when they didn't want to.

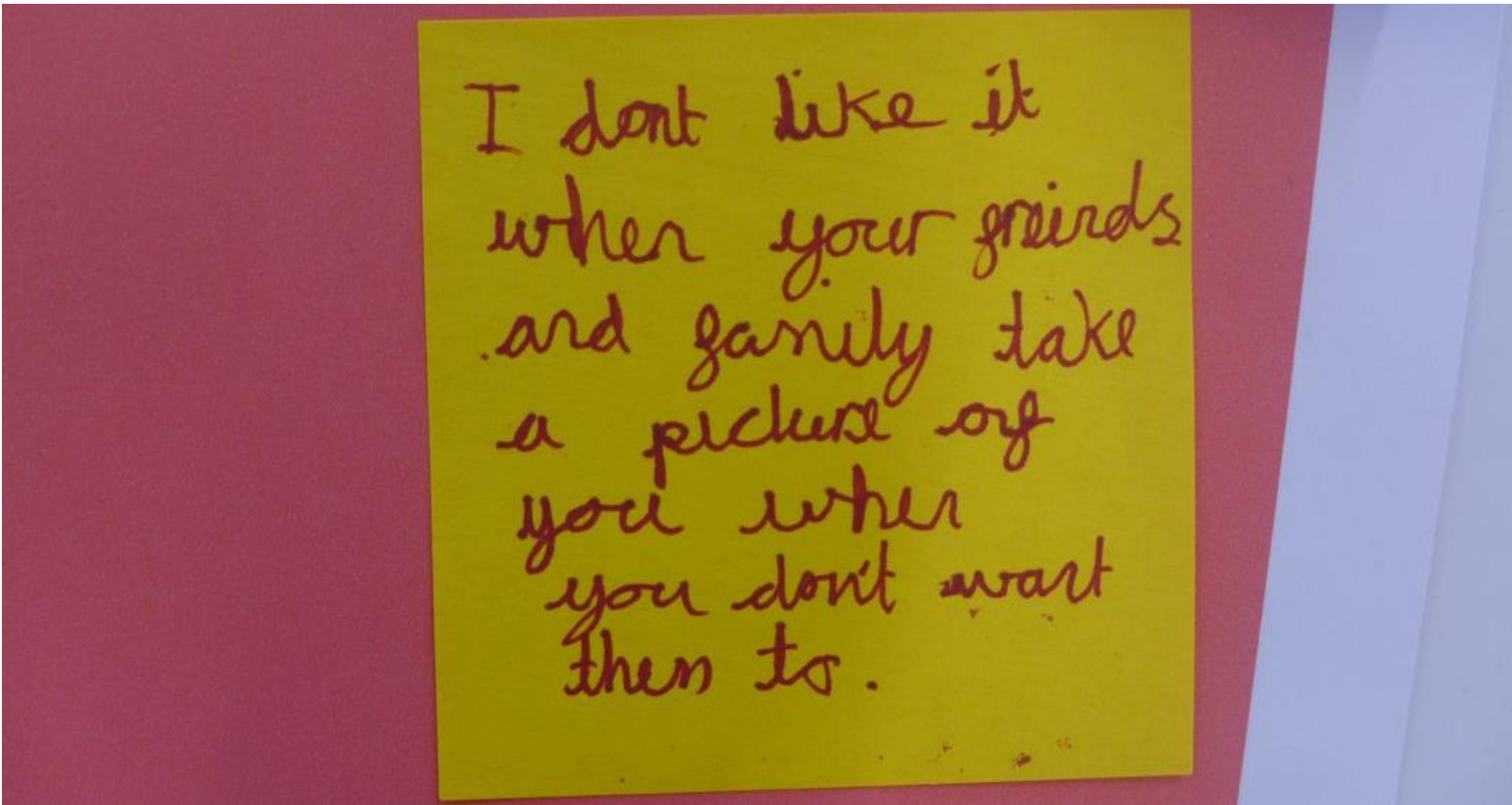
"My mum looks through my pictures and then posts stuff to her Instagram story"

Zoe, 10, Year 5

"I don't like when my mum posts pictures of me, she just says 'give me a picture' "

Lucy, 10, Year 6

'I don't like it when your friends and family take a picture of you when you don't want them to' Year 5 Boy



"My mum takes pictures of me on Snapchat, to send on WhatsApp"

Hassan, 8, Year 4

This was especially the case when parents posted 'embarrassing' photos of their children on social media. Many children said it was common for their parents to post a 'bad' photo or video of them, for example when they're in their underwear or in the middle of eating. They said that although they knew their parents would share it only to people they knew, they disliked this because they were worried about people laughing at them.

When asked what they would normally do in this situation, some children said they did not feel they could ask their parents to remove the photos, although some said they had also previously tried to take their parents' smartphone away when they shared a bad picture.

"My mum took a picture of me with my hamster on my head and I was so embarrassed. Because I was nearly naked! At least I had a towel around me"

Helen, 8, Year 4

"Once I was singing in the shower and Mum hid the camera and pretended she needed the bathroom and then pressed the record button and started recording me!"

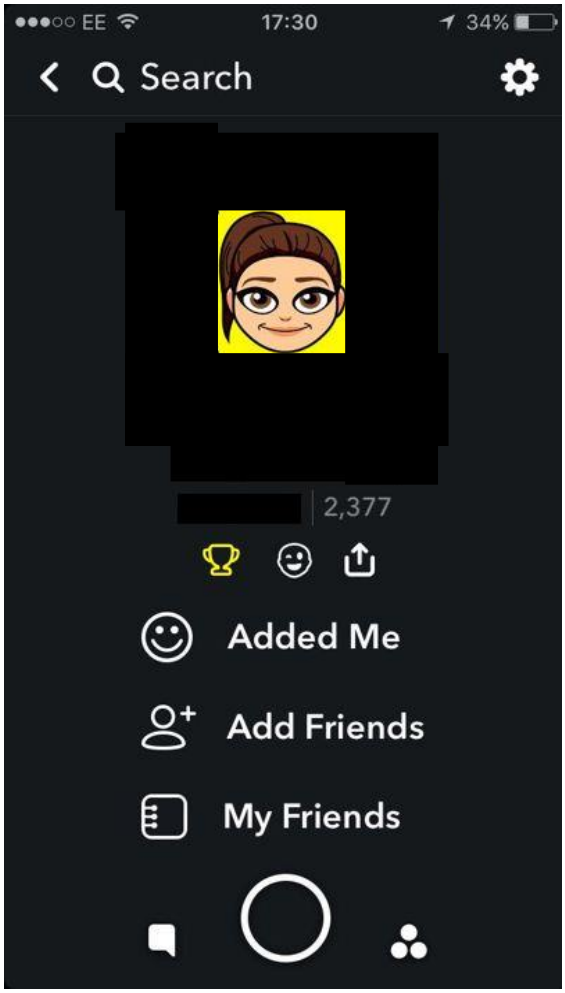
Elsa, 8, Year 4

While children also said that friends sometimes shared 'bad' photos of each other on social media, it seemed that children felt more able to ask their friends to remove bad pictures of themselves than they could to their parents, who they felt they have relatively less influence over.

It seemed that some parents were not fully aware of how their own social media use could make their children feel, and also shows that parents sometimes undermined their own messages about sensible social media use when they allowed children to use their accounts.

My sister showed me Snapstreaks

Older siblings, at secondary school, often showed younger children how to use social media, but could also act as a warning where they had had bad experiences.



Year 4 & 5 (age 8-10):

Many of the younger children who had older siblings already at secondary school were learning how to use social media from them. For example, older siblings advised children on what to post and showed them how to use new features on social media, such as Snapstreaks (when two people send snapchats to each other for several consecutive days and the number of days is recorded next to a fire emoji by their name).

An example of a 5 day 'Snapstreak'

"My sister [in Year 8] showed me how to do streaks on Snapchat. I was upset when my friend went on holiday and lost it because I was just trying to get to how she is and I was just about to hit 100, so I was disappointed"

Hannah, 10, Year 5

All years (age 8-12):

Some children felt concerned that social media could lead to 'addiction', where they had witnessed this behaviour in older siblings at secondary school. As a result, they were aware of how not to use social media themselves. For example, Aaron's 19-year old brother and Yvonne's 13-year old sister:

"My sister got too addicted to Snapchat and Instagram, she was on them at the same time so my mum deleted it… I think there are other things to do in life now and I don't have time to do that stuff"

Yvonne, 10, Year 6

"He had loads of PlayStation friends and they were on it 24/7, but at secondary school they all sold [got rid of] their PlayStations and he had no friends. This had a lot of impact on me, he has taught me lots about social media"

Aaron, 11 Year 7

While older siblings could help to advise younger children about the things to do, and things to avoid, on social media, their behaviour online was also a cause for concern for certain children. Girls were more likely to talk about their sibling's behaviour on social media being something to worry about.

"I worry about my sister posting too much. She does 10 posts a day and it causes arguments because she gets stressed and starts arguing with my mum because my mum wants her to stop"

Lucy, 10, Year 6

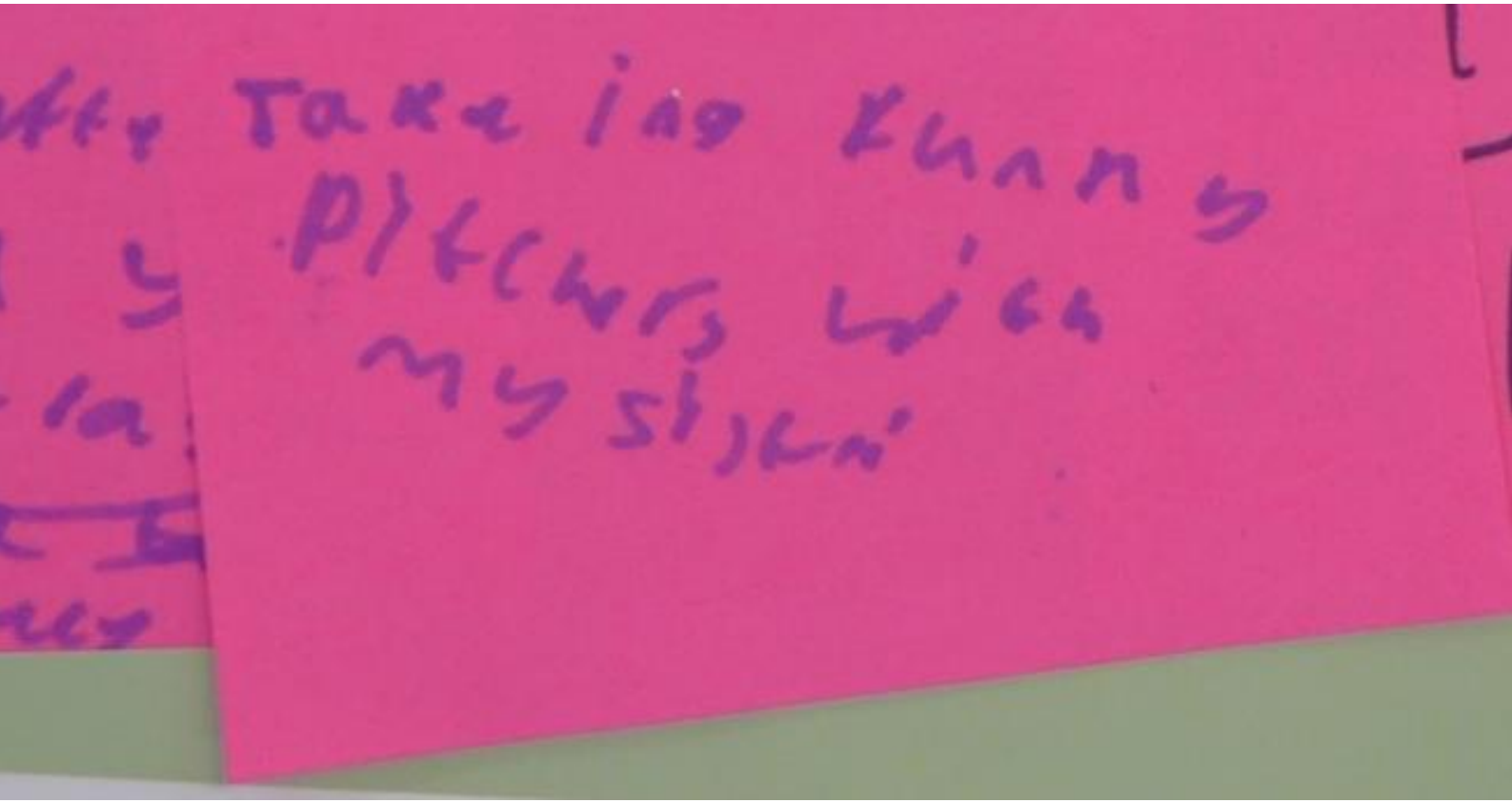
"I got scared my sister didn't turn off her location on Snapmaps and that people would track her and when she didn't come home one day I was worried"

Beth, 9, Year 5

Following' my Family: positives & negatives

Positives	Negatives
▪ I learn what to do and what not to do on social media from my older siblings ▪ I can see what my family are doing on my parent's social media	▪ I see things that weren't meant for me to see ▪ I don't understand why my parents need to take pictures of me ▪ I don't feel I have any control over photos when my parents post them/ I can't ask my parents to take them down ▪ I worry about how my siblings use social media

'Taking funny pictures with my sister' Year 5 Girl



My online friends

Social media was important for maintaining relationships, but this got trickier to manage at secondary school.

Keeping in touch

Year 4, 5 & 6 (age 8-11):

Children enjoyed how social media enabled them to be 'in touch' with everyone in their lives, and this was often the first thing children mentioned when asked about the positives of social media. Most children valued being able to stay in contact with family and friends **– especially** if they couldn't do so in person.

Specifically, younger children mentioned times when they were ill and having to spend the day in bed, or to communicate with people living far away – such as family living abroad, older siblings studying at university, or friends who had moved school. In these instances, children felt that social media was helping them to maintain a relationship they wouldn't be able to keep up otherwise.

Year 7 (age 11-12):

As they moved on to secondary school, children saw social media as a valuable tool for staying in touch with primary school friends, as well as to broaden their social circles and make new friends at secondary school. In general, this was through relatively light-hearted forms of contact, such as sharing photos, swapping 'likes' or joking with each other.

All years (age 8-12):

While children enjoyed using social media for chatting and joking with friends, many still valued face-to-face contact for more serious conversations, and explained that there were some things that were best dealt with offline. Most could think of examples of times where they had needed or preferred to talk to someone in person rather than online.

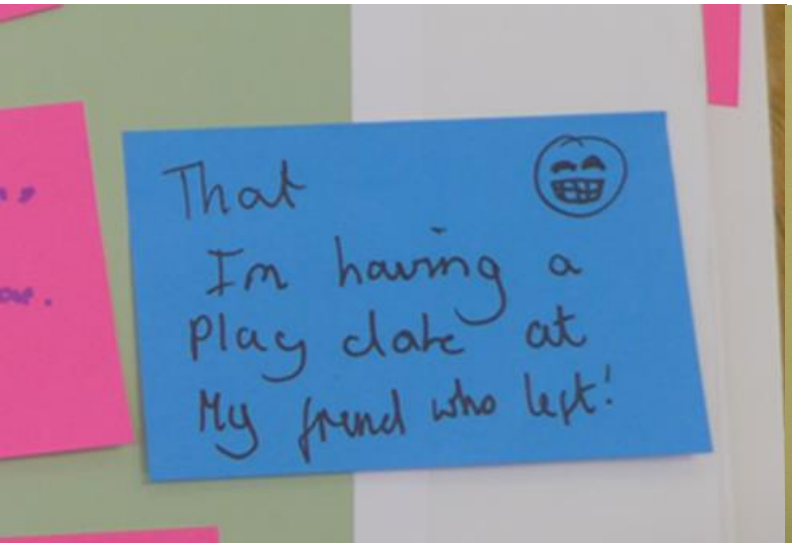
"It's easier to resolve problems in person because you can't see their face otherwise"

Elsa, 8, Year 4

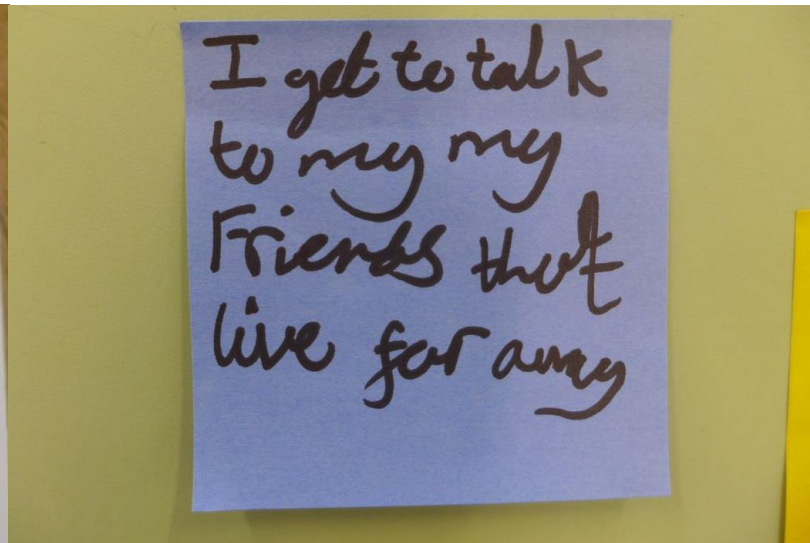
"Sometimes I go and speak to them in person cos you might understand them better. When I had an argument on social media I talked to the boy all of break time and then we realised it wasn't him who said the mean comments"

Joe, 11, Year 7

'That I'm having a play date with my friend who left' Year 5 Girl



'I get to talk to my friends that live far away' Year 5 Boy



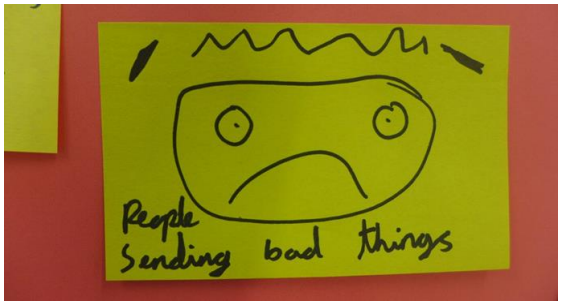
Falling out online

Year 4 & 5 (age 8-10):

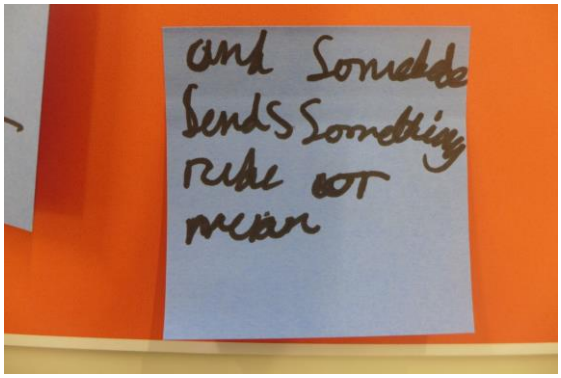
Younger children were more likely to get mean comments from strangers on gaming platforms like Roblox – than from people they knew on social media. Children often interacted with strangers in the context of the game which meant that receiving a mean comment often came out of the blue and without an obvious way to resolve the issue. Some said this could impact them strongly and some children avoided the game as a result.

"When people say mean comments on Roblox it makes me sad and makes me want to quit the game"

Freddie, 9, Year 4



'People sending bad things' Year 5 Boy



'And somebody sends something rude or mean' Year 5 Boy

"They call me mean names and sometimes I don't want to go on it for months and months"

Luna, 8, Year 4

"I don't really play that often because there's people on it I don't know and they might make a mean comment"

Freya, 8, Year 4

Year 6 & 7 (age 10-12):

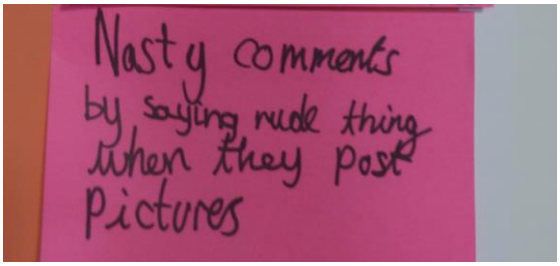
In some cases, older children said that they faced confusion with drawing the line between jokes and mean behaviour online. Children noted that it was often hard to interpret the motivation behind comments online, and several cited examples of where they felt something meant as a flippant comment had been misinterpreted. For example, a friend commented on Lucy's (10) Instagram photo of herself on Christmas morning when she had just woken up and was wearing a tracksuit, saying 'Omg, look at your hair', which had a lasting effect on her mood.

"It made me feel kind of sad for a whole week, but I didn't tell anyone because I was embarrassed"

Lucy, 10, Year 6

"It is hard to properly understand someone on social media, you could word something in a way that is taken wrong"

Annie, 11, Year 7



'Nasty comments by saying rude things when they post pictures' Year 6 Girl

Year 7 (age 11-12):

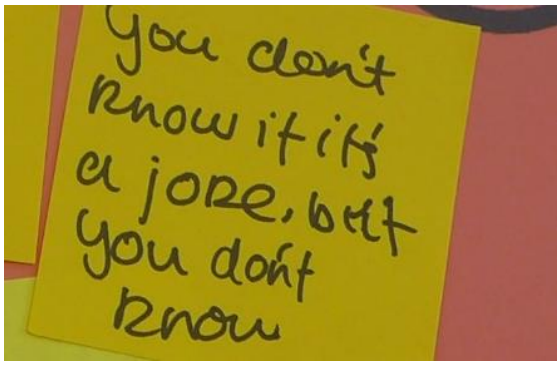
This was exacerbated when children moved from interacting with close friends online to wider peer groups – such as group chats containing a whole class, at secondary school. For example, children described instances where group chats on WhatsApp or Snapchat were used to make a 'joke' that singled out one person. However, the intention behind these could easily be lost, and 'jokes' could be seen to be serious:

"It was a joke but it can be seen as bullying"

Alina, 11, Year 7

"Social media tears friendships apart more than it makes them."

Merran, 12, Year 7



'You don't know if it's a joke, but you don't know' Year 7 Boy

Year 4 & 5 (age 8-10):

From a young age, children talked about difficulties in establishing trust on social media. Children were wary of messages they sent online ending up in the wrong hands via re-sending or screenshots, and their secrets or private information being revealed. Some younger children chose to avoid the risk in the first place:

"It can make you sad when someone lets out one of your biggest secrets like where you actually live or who you love"

Freddie, 9, Year 4

"I would be careful even in sending photos to your friends because you could accidentally send it to other people or they can send it to other people"

Freya, 8, Year 4

Year 7 (age 11-12):

However, as children got to secondary school, the pressures to join social media seemed to overcome the fear of danger, which meant that children were more likely to ignore what they knew about how to avoid their photos or messages ending up in the wrong hands.

Stories of editing or screenshot-ing, and sharing fake photos, were common amongst these children. For example, Aaron (11) explained how a message he had sent to a friend was edited and then posted on a Snapchat story so that it made him look like he had written a message saying 'I love you' to a girl. For Aaron, this incident had a big impact, and meant that he could not remain friends with the boy.

"I felt angry and disgusted and we haven't spoken since. I blocked him"

Aaron, 11, Year 7

For this reason, older children were aware of which platforms were 'safer' to use, and tended to choose social media wisely to avoid negative outcomes.

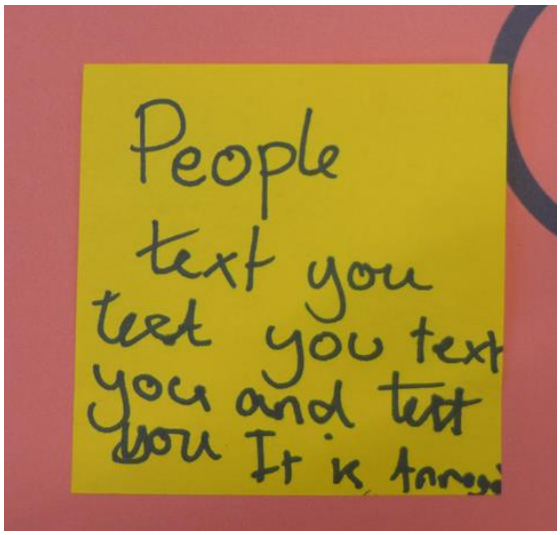
"The problem with WhatsApp is that people can start making fun of you because pictures get saved onto camera roll and are harder to delete. At least on Instagram DM it gets deleted so that is good"

Harry, 11, Year 7

I need to reply <u>now</u>

All years (age 8-12):

Children were constantly contactable and connected, and described this as an important expectation of their friendships – increasingly as they grew older. Being 'offline' or not being contactable was in some cases considered socially damaging. Some reported feeling social pressure as a result: people could fall out if their friends felt they weren't responsive enough online, even to relatively superficial interactions, for example not responding quickly enough to 'Snapstreak' messages, so that the 'streak' between two friends was lost.



'People text you text you text you and text you. It is annoying' Year 5 girl

"I send Bridie lots of messages saying 'respond' until she does [reply to the Snapstreak]"

Merran, 12, Year 7

"When you get a buzz, and then you go to get it but you don't. And then you get another buzz, and another buzz, and another buzz. And then you've just got to go get it, and then you just go off course with your homework."

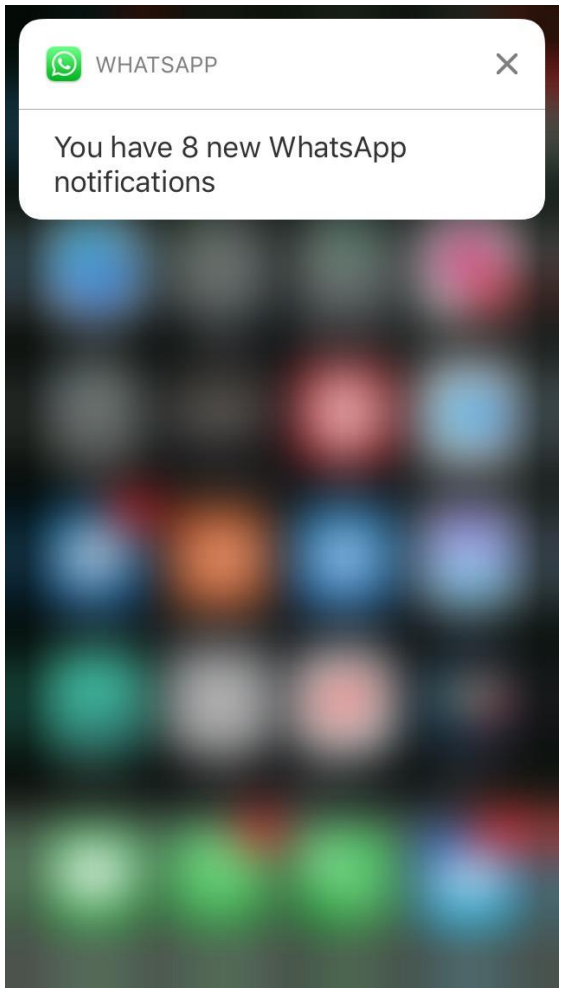
Billy, 9, Year 5

Year 7 (age 11-12):

"Social media can be a massive distraction."

Joe , 11, Year 7

By secondary school, where children felt 'the whole class' was on social media, this pressure sometimes became impossible to ignore. This was coupled with the fact that many had their own smartphone by this point, and therefore it was seen had less excuse for not replying to friends. Some described this as distracting, time consuming and stressful to manage - especially if they received multiple notifications from different platforms. They explained how they had been unable to concentrate on offline activities as a result of the distracting notification reminders, and a sense that they were missing out or letting their friends down. This was especially likely for those involved in group chats, where online activity was more constant and with a potentially wide group of people.



My online friends: positives & negatives

Positives	Negatives
▪ I can talk to my family and friends who I don't get to see often ▪ I can have fun conversations online, and know that I can speak face to face when I need to	▪ I get lots of messages which can be distracting and annoying ▪ I feel like I have to be online even when I don't want to be ▪ I see, and sometimes receive, mean comments ▪ It is hard to tell what is a joke ▪ I don't know who to trust

Growing up on social media

Who should I be?

Children were conscious of keeping up appearances on social media, particularly when they started secondary school and identity & peer affirmations became more important.

Do I look okay?

All years (age 8-12):

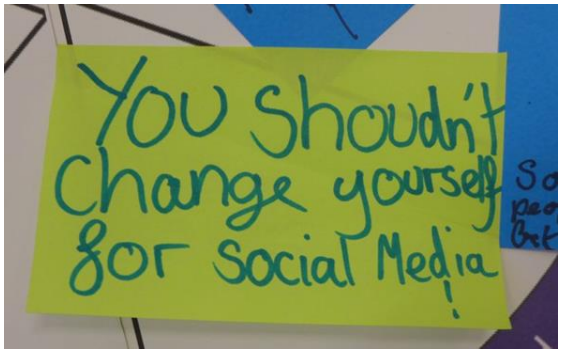
Children were quick to emphasise the importance of being authentic and 'staying true to yourself' on social media.

"I don't get the point of trying to impress everyone with the way you look. I don't think you're being yourself if you're trying to be someone else"

Annie, 11, Year 7

"I don't think people should worry about their appearances at this age. You are who you are. You shouldn't worry or change anything just for social media"

Hannah, 10, Year 6



'You shouldn't change yourself for social media' Year 5 Girl

However, while children demonstrated a strong understanding of the importance of 'being yourself', these attitudes did not always seem to translate to their actual behaviour, particularly for older children. For example, children spoke about wanting to look like the people they see online, worrying about whether people would like their posts, and thinking about how to present their offline life so it looked good on social media.

Year 4 & 5 (age 8-10):

Younger children tended to be less concerned with their appearances, and more focused on having fun than looking good. This may be due to some of the platforms they were using the most, e.g. Musical.ly and Roblox, which are more focused on what you do in videos and games than how you look, compared to primarily photo-based apps such as Instagram.

"[on Musical.ly] I don't really mind how I look. It's just for fun. I don't have to post it if I don't like it"

Freya, 8, Year 4,

Year 6 & 7 (age 10-12):

Older girls worried about being 'pretty', with a particular focus on having clear skin and nice hair, but with little mention of how their bodies looked. This could possibly be due to the fact that most of the photos they shared of themselves on Instagram and Snapchat (and saw of other people) were selfies from the shoulders up.

"I worry about spots"

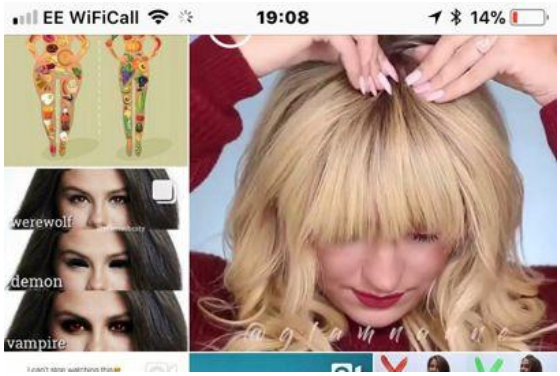
Yvonne, 10, Year 6

"If my skin is clear and my hair is nice it is a good photo"

Bridie, 11, Year 7

"I just edit my photos to make sure I look nice"

Annie, 11, Year 7



The Instagram 'explore' page of a Year 7 Girl, where she finds new accounts to follow and watches out for beauty tips

Girls also worried about getting their poses right in photos, again focusing on what they do with their face rather than their body. There were trends in poses that girls copied from celebrities or, at secondary school, 'popular' girls in their school. Many girls reported that they went through a phase of covering their faces in photos, by holding their hand in front of their face when they posed for a picture and then editing the picture on Snapchat by drawing over it. Now, girls spoke about sticking your tongue out as a 'cool' pose to do in posts.

"The coolest person at school will start a trend and then everyone copies her"

Merran, 12, Year 7

Meanwhile, boys also worried about physical appearances, but were more concerned with having the right branded clothing or material possessions, and looking 'cool'. Some of the younger boys noted that you would only care about wanting to look 'hot' if you wanted a girlfriend.

An Instagram post from one of the Year 6 Boys

"If you don't have designer and expensive things people will make fun of you"

Harry, 11, Year 6

"If I got a new pair of football boots I would wait and admire them for 30 minutes then post [on Instagram]"

Rowan, 10, Year 6

"I would never post anything cringe which is where you are trying to act hard in front of people, it's not cool to try that hard"

Connor, 11, Year 6

"Some boys want a girlfriend quicker than the others do so they think being hot is a good quality. They get new hairstyles and buy new clothes to be hot"

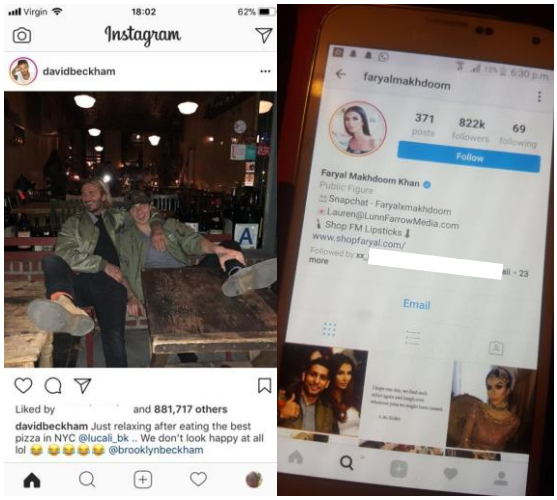
Oliver, 8, Year 4

Can we all look like celebrities?

Year 6 & 7 (age 10-12):

Many children in Year 6 & 7 were regularly using Instagram and Snapchat, where they were often following celebrities' accounts, and people from the world outside their close family and friends. Therefore, their social media feeds were often a blend of content posted by their own peers and adults.

As these social media platforms are very image heavy, it was easy for children to compare themselves to the people they were following on social media. Some of the older children described feeling inferior to those on social media, indicating that they were sometimes making comparisons with people who they perceived to be better off than them in various ways.



David Beckham and Faryal Makhdoom's Instagram accounts, as sent in by a Year 7 Boy and Year 7 Girl respectively

"You might compare yourself cos you're not very pretty compared to them"

Aimee, 11, Year 7

"They make you want to change in a way that you want different things. Someone might have some stuff that you don't and the way they look"

Bridie, 11, Year 7

"I want that hair and those boots for football"

Joe, 11, Year 7

All years (age 8-12):

Both boys and girls felt that many of the things they saw on social media were unattainable to them. For example, some children felt that it was impossible to look like the people they see on social media, and others found it hard to keep up with the trends.

"Sometimes I think like they look really pretty, they look so much different to me"

Hannah, 10, Year 5

"But by the time you get that kit, and your football boots and your hair, there's a new trend and everyone says oh that's so old. Trends go so fast and people say why are you still doing that"

Joe, 11, Year 7

Will my picture get any likes?

Receiving 'likes' from friends and peers was important to the children spoken to in this study. 'Likes' were seen as an affirmation and validation from peers that made children feel good about themselves and their lives.

Year 4 & 5 (age 8-10):

For younger children, peer affirmations were comparatively less important than for the older children. Although they were starting to feel 'happy' when others liked their posts, receiving positive peer approval through 'likes' and 'comments' was not a priority. Instead, they were focussed on making sure what they shared was 'funny' and that their friends would enjoy seeing it.

"[on Musical.ly] nice comments make me feel happy because it's not only me who likes my videos but there's other people who like my videos"

Freya, 8, Year 4

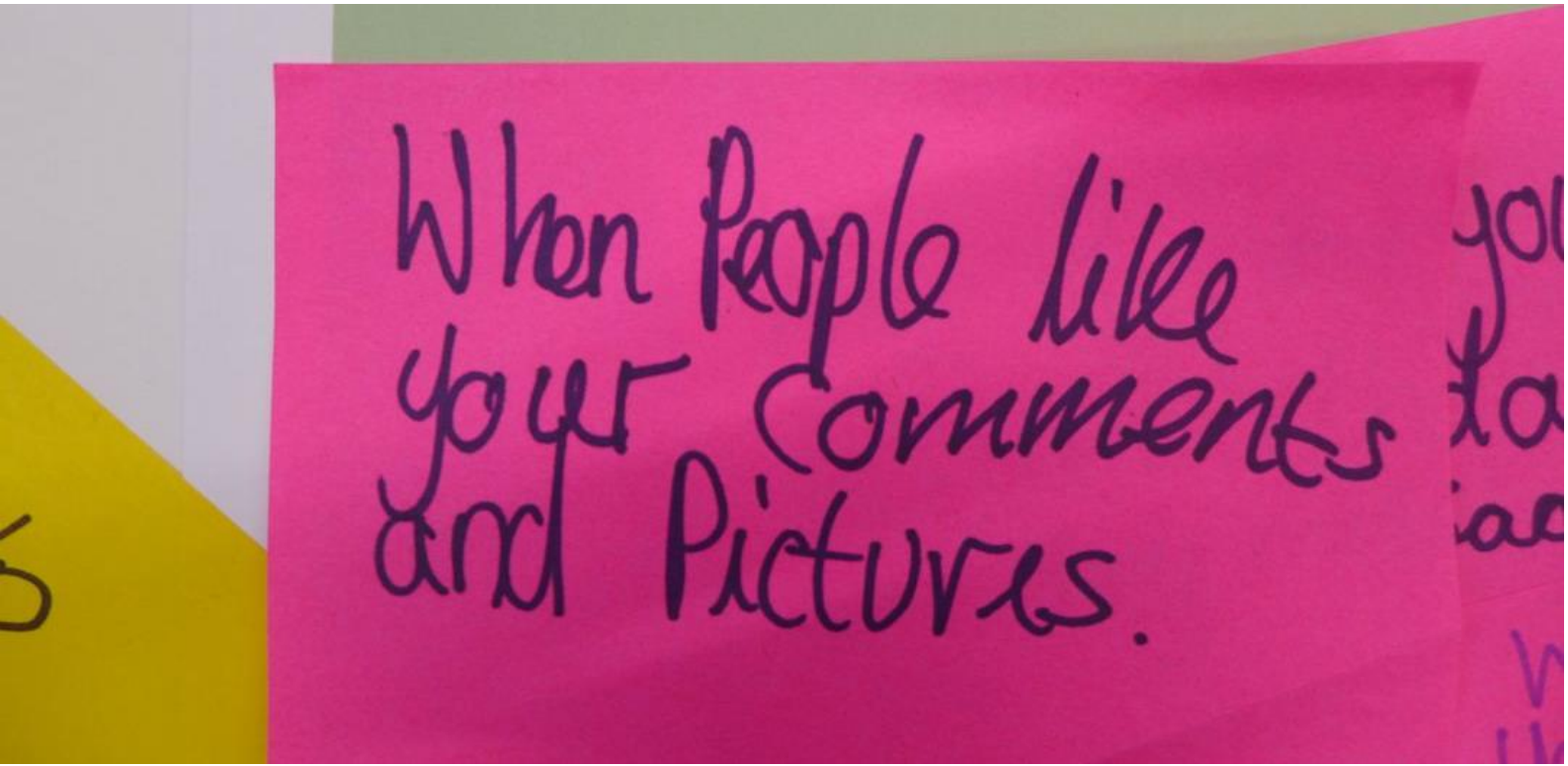
"[On Snapchat] you want to make sure it is funny because if it is silly people won't want to watch it and they just won't like it"

Kieran,10, Year 5

Year 6 & 7 (age 10-12):

However, as children grew older and seemed to become increasingly aware of approval from others, they seemed to care more about the feedback they received on the things they shared on social media. While younger children were thinking about whether a smaller group of

'When people like your comments and pictures' Year 5 Girl



friends would enjoy their posts, older children were concerned with how many people 'liked' their posts.

Likes and comments on Instagram posts from a Year 7 Boy (top) and Year 7 Girl (bottom)

"When you get 50 likes it makes you feel good cos you know people think you look good in that photo. I know that people like the look of me, it makes you feel that you are kind of popular 'cause you got a high amount of likes"

Harry, 10, Year 6

"I posted my rugby and running trophies on Instagram I get so many likes –it's like people are applauding me and noticed I'd done something well"

Joe, 11, Year 7

"If I got 150 likes, I'd be like that's pretty cool it means they like you"

Aaron, 11, Year 7

This tendency to think about the response to their social media posts, suggests a need for social validation and peer acceptance, which platforms like Instagram provide.

Year 7 (age 11-12):

As children transitioned to secondary school, the desire for peer feedback through 'likes' and 'comments' seemed to become more and more important. New school environments exposed children to a bigger group of unfamiliar people, and the importance of popularity and social identity became more salient. Within this context, social media became more important and more about social interactions than games.

Children in Year 7 talked about how it was common among people in their friendship groups to use strategies to encourage friends and family 'like' or 'comment' on their posts. Some children said that their friends often warned them ahead of time (before sharing a photo or video) via text message, WhatsApp or in person, to check their opinions on whether the photo was good enough to post and guarantee enough 'likes'. Others said that their friends send the word 'l&c' (meaning 'like and comment') to a group message as soon as they shared a post, to gather support from friends.

"You post on group chats when you're not sure if you like the picture or not, to see if others think it's not nice and won't get likes or will get bad comments"

Alina, 11, Year 7

Year 4 & 5 (age 8-10):

Younger children were often introduced to these strategies when they had siblings in secondary school who would ask them to like their posts, and some were even asked to like posts of their sibling's friends who they had never met. Although, they often went along with it, they did not always understand why their siblings wanted likes so much.

"Sometimes if my sister's friend posts she asks me to like it but I don't even know her…It kind of annoys me. It's like people say 'tonight I'm going to post a picture of the fireworks, you'd better like it'"

Lucy, 10, Year 6

Is this shareable?

All years (age 8-12):

Across all the groups it was clear that many children were starting to develop an understanding of what is worthy of being shared on social media. Photos or videos that are worth sharing were generally seen as needing to be funny, entertaining or a 'highlight' in someone's life, such as going on a holiday or a sports achievement.

It was clear even from the youngest children in the study that they thought about what their audiences think about what they posted.

"I would only post when I am going out and ready"

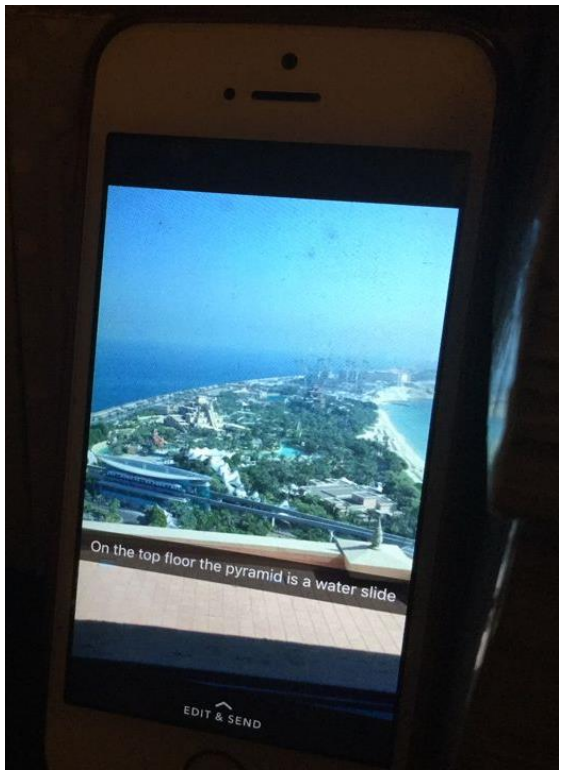
Kam, 10, Year 5

"You want people to know what you are doing"

Annie, 11, Year 7

"I post on like holidays or special occasions"

Lucy, 10, Year 6



A Snapchat one of the Year 4 girls sent while on holiday

Many of the children spoken to showed a high level of confidence in taking and sharing selfies, or doing dances or activities in front of the camera. This was especially true of those respondents using social media apps that encourage performance and self-display, such as Musical.ly with music videos or Snapchat with selfies.

Many of the children seemingly placed so much value on their online image, that they sometimes thought about offline activities in terms of how 'shareable' it was, e.g. what kind of response they would receive if they shared it on social media. For example, Lucy (10, Year 6) explained how some of her friends plan ahead about what to post, sometimes travelling somewhere outside their town 'just to get a good photo'. Others reported sometimes thinking about the places they go to in terms of whether they are worth sharing on social media:

"It's nice when you go to the beach or to a waterpark on holiday and you think – I can show this to people on my Snapchat"

Luna, 8, Year 4

"I really wanted to meet Little Mix – after the show everyone would be so jealous on my Snapchat"

Kieren, 11, Year 6

Children spoke about their friends 'showing off' on social media, which could make them feel jealous. Specific things that children saw their friends 'showing off' were their clothes, holidays and personal talents. Not many children were able to reflect on the fact that their friends were also posting this 'highlight reel' of their life, just as they were.

"People can get jealous of each other's pictures of their clothes and holidays and cars"

Freddie, 9, Year 4

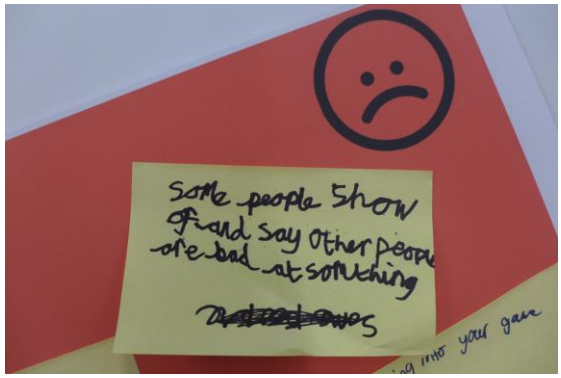
"If someone is good at gymnastics they'll do loads of pictures of them to show off that they are really flexible and things"

Beth, 9, Year 5

Some children also looked to the future and thought about how they might use social media when they were older and have 'better' things to post. This indicated that the implications of doing certain activities or having certain possessions were thought about in terms of their shareable value in terms of 'likes' and 'comments'.

"[When you're older] you might have more things in your actual life than going to school every day, so you have more to post"

Hannah, 10, Year 5



'Some people show off and say other people are bad at something' Year 4 Boy

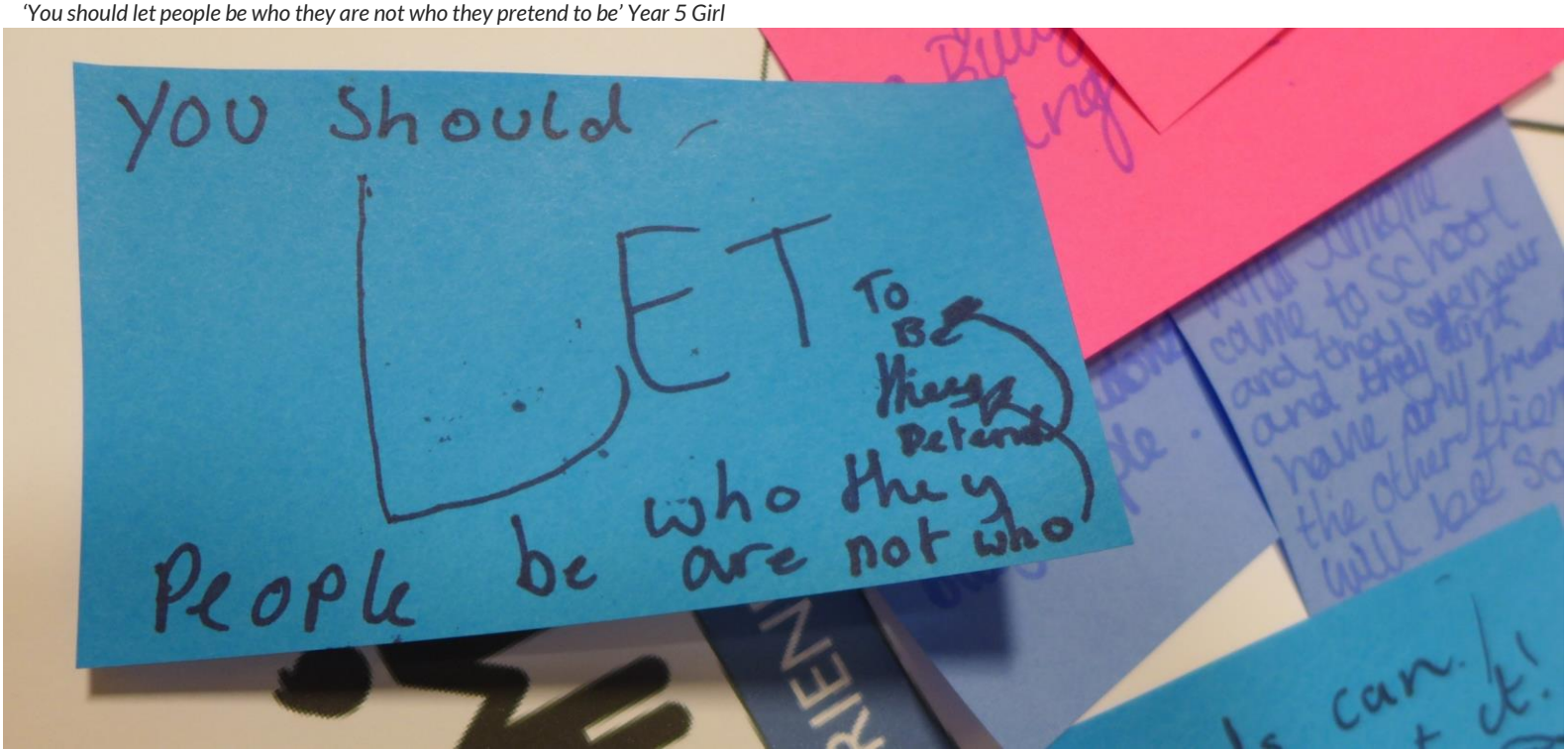
"I'll probably use Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat a lot in the future because I'll be taking lots of pictures of myself and posting them like good things I've done, like me standing by the side of a Lambo [sic]."

Oliver, 8, Year 4

Who should I be?: positives & negatives

Positives	Negatives
▪ I can create things that other people like ▪ I can share my achievements with my friends	▪ I am different to the people I see online ▪ I don't have anything good to post ▪ I worry about what people will think of what I post ▪ I feel jealous when I see what other people are doing and the things they have

'You should let people be who they are not who they pretend to be' Year 5 Girl



The world & my future

When I grow up I want to be a Youtuber

All years (age 8-12):

Many children had developed aspirations after being exposed to new ideas or lifestyles online. For some children, things they had seen on social media shaped their career goals, with three of the children wanting to be 'YouTubers' when they are older. Annie, 11, Hassan, 8 and Oliver, 8 all want to make successful YouTube videos, and Annie had started making them when she had free time, but her parents do not allow her to put them online.

"Sometimes I do videos myself so I can feel like a Vlogger but then I keep them to myself"

Annie, 11, Year 7

"I want to do vlogs on YouTube around the house, not giving too many details, my street, my friends. I will turn off the comments section off cos I don't want people sending bad comments towards me"

Oliver, 8, Year 4

Creating videos was providing a medium for these children to express themselves, and even practice skills. For instance, Oliver also wanted to be a rapper and filmed himself performing different songs he had learnt. The prospect of being able to share their videos seemed to encourage children to improve their skills and be imaginative when coming up with new video ideas.

Lots of the children were following YouTuber Logan Paul (above) on Instagram and watching his daily Vlogs on YouTube, where he performs challenges

Year 7 (age 11-12):

Secondary school seemed to prompt children to think more about who they wanted to be like. For older children, more specific aspirations developed, as they wanted to be like someone they had seen on social media. For example, Bridie, Year 7, followed a girl with popular Instagram account who she wanted to be like when she was older, and Eric and Joe, Year 7, sometimes tried to copy the rugby players that they followed.

"I saw a pretty girl and everything she has I want, my aim is to be like her. I want her stuff, her white house and her MAC makeup. Seeing her makes me feel cosy"

Bridie, 11, Year 7

"You want to act like them because they might help you achieve with fitness and kicking tips."

Eric, 11, Year 7

It seemed that for some children, having certain people to aspire to on social media was inspiring. Bridie's description of feeling 'cosy' was an example of how some children found it comforting that they could imagine their lives being different to how they are now. Indeed, many children were following families on YouTube and Instagram, such as the Davies Family and the Ingham Family, who posted Vlogs and posts about their daily life. Lucy and Becky in Year 6 particularly enjoyed watching them get new cars and houses.

All years (age 8-12):

Similarly, some children felt that social media could help them to learn new things that would let them achieve their goals. For example, Bridie, 11 wanted to be a beautician when she was older and often tried out new beauty tips that she saw on the Instagram Explore page. Meanwhile, Hannah, 10, wanted to be a wedding cake decorator and followed baking tutorials she saw on YouTube and then posted her creations on Instagram. Alina, 11, was interested in arts and crafts, and followed crafts accounts on Instagram where she learnt how to make new things, including slime. Social media enabled these children to pursue their interests and learn new real life skills.

One of the slime accounts that a Year 7 Girl was following, showing tutorials on how to make slime

"If I see something I liked, I'd want to try it out"

Bridie, 11, Year 7

"I like watching videos on how to make slime"

Alina, 11, Year 7

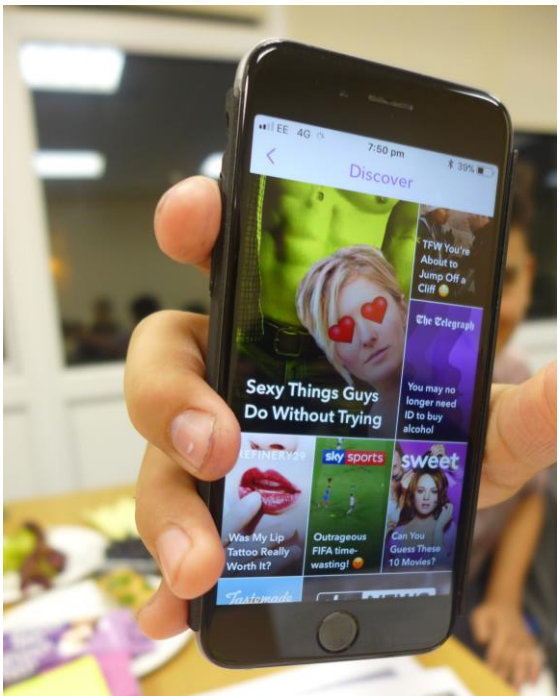
"I made a rainbow cake that Zoella made"

Hannah, 10, Year 5

An Instagram post from a Year 5 girl who enjoyed watching baking videos on YouTube and Instagram

Learning about the world

Social media was rarely seen a source of 'news' about the world for children, although they did access 'news' style reports through the 'Explore' page on Snapchat and Instagram. These personalised (algorithm driven) pages of content tended to contain articles that catered to children's personal interests, and contained stories such as local news, sports news, celebrity gossip, and health and beauty tips.



'The Snapchat 'discover' page of a Year 7 boy

"On Snapchat you learn about other countries, like Portugal, depending on where the celebrities have their concerts."

Freya, 8, Year 4

"It was showing the other day that something happened with Love Island people"

Hannah, 10, Year 5

While in this context social media offered children 'up to the minute' information about activities and events, it was observed that these children tended to associate the 'news' more with what celebrities do, as opposed to what may be happening in other countries around the world.

While children appeared to have a general sense of key issues taking place, particularly with regards to popular topics, such as 'Donald Trump', the extent to which children learned about these world issues through social media, or through other mediums was not clear.

A small number of children said they learned about world events through their parents' Twitter accounts, particularly in relation to sports news and politics.

Aside from news, children used social media to help them with school and homework assignments. For example, they watched videos on YouTube to learn how to do things, like building a volcano for a science experiment and 'quick subtraction' tutorials for maths. Similarly, social media meant children could easily get help from their friends with homework, and specific groups were set up for different subjects.

"I have an Instagram group to help with my Chemistry homework"

Merran, 12, Year 7

The world and my future: positives & negatives

Positives	Negatives
▪ I feel inspired for my future ▪ I can learn how to do new things ▪ I can get help with homework	▪ I see news on social media, but most of it is to do with celebrities

Conclusion

The two sides of social media

On the one hand, social media was perceived as having a positive effect on children's wellbeing, and enabled them to do the things they wanted to do, like staying in touch with friends and keeping entertained. On the other, it had a negative influence when it made them worry about things they had little control over.

For younger children this was more related to their families' use of social media, whereas for older children this was more strongly linked to peers and friendships.

The transition from primary to secondary school saw a significant change in the way children used social media and brought with it new concerns. At this age, children were introduced to wider networks of friends and started to follow more celebrities and people they did not know in their offline lives. This meant they were more aware of their own identity, started comparing themselves to a broader group of people and worried about whether they fitted in. This introduced an additional layer of worries, relating to what people would think of them, what they looked like, and who they should be.

"It's 50:50. Sometimes it can make you really sad and then sometimes it can make you super happy and super excited."

Beth, 9, Year 5

Positives	Negatives
▪ I can make friends	▪ I wonder what other people will think of me online
▪ I can talk to my family	▪ I see, and sometimes receive, mean comments
▪ I feel inspired for my future	▪ I worry about how my siblings use social media
▪ I can learn how to do new things	▪ I don't know who I can trust online
▪ It makes me laugh and I can make other people laugh	▪ I see things that weren't meant for me to see
▪ I can show my personality	▪ I don't understand why my parents need to post pictures of me
▪ I can create things that other people like	▪ I have to be on social media because everyone else is
▪ I can share my achievements with friends	▪ I get scared when I think about what could happen if I am not safe on social media
▪ I can get help with my homework	▪ I am different to the people I see online
	▪ I don't have anything good to post
	▪ I feel jealous when I see what other people are doing and the things they have
	▪ I sometimes don't know what to do when bad things happen on social media
	▪ I get lots of messages even when I don't want to be on my phone

Recommendations

Based on this research we have proposed a series of recommendations for Government, schools and social media platforms to recognise the needs of children aged 8-12 who are using social media, and to mitigate the risks posed to their wellbeing.

Government

Digital literacy

In Growing Up Digital (2017), the Children's Commissioner called for a compulsory digital citizenship curriculum in order to help all children develop their digital literacy skills and to improve their digital resilience. Since then, the Government has committed to improving the 'digital literacy' element of online safety lessons and to include it in compulsory Relationships and Sex Education from 2019.

It is not yet clear, however, what these lessons will entail or at what age they will be compulsory. This research demonstrates that digital citizenship from a very early age is critical in order to prepare children effectively for their lives online. As the Government continues to develop digital literacy lessons as part of RSE and other curricula, the following should be considered:

- Year 6 and Year 7 are crucial ages at which to prioritise lessons around digital literacy and online resilience as this is the age at which social media can begin to dominate day-to-day life. Lessons around online safety learned at younger ages are insufficient to prepare children for the 'cliff edge' around the time of transition to secondary school.
- Digital literacy must be applicable to children's everyday experiences so that they are able to apply strong principles in different contexts. For example, this research shows that while children are aware of the message to 'be themselves', when online they often adapt their behaviour in order to gain social approval.
- Digital literacy should aim to develop children's critical awareness of the imagery presented on social media – by friends, celebrities, brands and others – to enable them to differentiate between curated, often digitally altered images and people's real lives.
- Children should be taught about the techniques and algorithms that social media platforms employ to influence what children see online, and to help them understand that they are often designed to prevent children disengaging.
- Where digital literacy is taught as part of Relationships and Sex Education, children should be taught to recognise the power of peer pressure on social media along with techniques that empower them to switch off and help friends to do the same.

Guidance to parents

In the Department for Culture, Media and Sport's Internet Safety Strategy (2017), there was a commitment to improving support for parents. Effective guidance would:

- Highlight the positives and negatives of social media use for children as young as 8 to improve parents' knowledge and confidence. This should include advice to parents about how they can talk to their child about their use of social media, to understand the differences between appearance and reality, to combat peer pressure, and to understand the techniques companies employ to encourage use.
- Inform parents about the ways in which children's use of social media changes with age to enable them to make better informed decisions about the devices which they give to their children
- Educate parents about the change that takes place when children enter secondary school - the broadening of their exposure to peers and older children on social media – and that social media use at younger ages should not be assumed to prepare children adequately for this.
- Help parents to recognise the impact their own relationship with, and behaviour on, social media – including 'sharenting' videos and photos – has on their children.
- Encourage parents to support their children to take part in other activities. This research shows that children who take part in hobbies, sports or other activities are less reliant on social media. The Commissioner's Digital 5 A Day campaign, based on the NHS's 5 Steps to better mental wellbeing, supports this and provides parents with easy to

follow, practical steps to achieve a healthy and balanced digital 'diet'

Schools

While the Government develops a new approach to teaching digital literacy, schools can already apply lessons from this research:

- While children have internalised messages around 'online safety', they are not always aware of the subtler impacts that social media use can have on wellbeing. Teachers should incorporate awareness of this into education about life online.
- This research shows that children learn a considerable amount from their peers and older siblings. A peer-to-peer element in digital literacy education would provide children with a more accessible and relevant way to learn about life online.

Social media companies

This research shows that under 13s are regularly using social media platforms designed for older children and it is time that social media companies recognise this:

- While the Data Protection Bill will ensure that social media companies implement an 'age-appropriate' design in order to support their younger users, companies should do more to acknowledge the needs of the under 13s using their platforms and incorporate them into service design. This has been explored further in 5Rights' 'Digital Childhood' report.
- If social media companies maintain that their services are not suitable for under 13s then it is important they address this underage use through closer and more rigorous moderation.

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Appendix 1

Methodology

The approach to this research centred on 8 x friendship groups (4 children in each), preceded by a set of digital pre-tasks. The pre-tasks were an essential element to the work, capturing data on what platforms the children are using and what they are posting, but also providing stimulus to use in later conversations.

Sample and recruitment

We recruited a total of 32 children aged 8-12. Children were recruited in 'friendship pairs', so that each focus group consisted of 2 pairs of friends who were in the same year group and the same gender. Two groups were conducted for each year group, from Year 4 to Year 7.

Respondents	London	Bristol	Birmingham	Leeds
Year 4 (2 x group, age 8-9)			1 x boys group	1 x girls group
Year 5 (2 x groups, age 9-10)			1 x girls group	1 x boys group
Year 6 (2 x groups, age 10-11)	1 x boys group	1 x girls group		
Year 7 (2 x groups, aged 11-12)	1x girls group	1 x boys group		

Groups took place in 4 locations across England; London, Bristol, Birmingham, and Leeds. Respondents were from a mixture of rural and urban locations.

Respondent demographics:

- **Ethnicity**: 24 White British, 4 Asian Pakistani, 1 Asian British, 3 Mixed/Multiple Ethnicity
- **Religion:** 13 No religion, 12 Christian, 6 Muslim, 1 Jewish
- **Socioeconomic spread**: Mixture of respondents from ABC1C2DE backgrounds

Fieldwork

Pre-task: respondents were given 5 calendar days to complete a short pre-task, where they were asked to upload some photos & 1-2 videos to Connect, our online platform.

- Videos
  - About me & House tour
  - My social media use
- Screenshots

- My social media profiles
- Things I have posted to social media
- My social media feeds
- The thing I spend the most time doing on social media

Focus groups: Children participated in 90 minute 'discussion sessions' in which they spoke about their social media use and reflected on the different impacts it had on them, both positive and negative.

Colourful stimulus was used to help children articulate their thoughts and keep them engaged throughout the session. The stimulus for each session was adapted based on the pre-task content, for example to include pictures of the different accounts children told us they were following.

The session structure and stimulus was also adapted for the younger groups (Year 4 & 5), to be more interactive and questions were tailored toward the different types of things they were doing on social media and platforms they were engaging with.