



**The  
New Britain  
Project**



# Public attitudes to smartphones, social media, and online safety

March 2025

# Foreword



## **Daniel Kebede, General Secretary of the National Education Union:**

How many of us have seen a post on Instagram promoting hateful content? How many of us have seen a viral Tiktok video with content we know to be untrue? How many of us feel addicted to our smartphones and turn to them first thing in the morning? Now imagine what impact this is having on our children, who are so easily influenced by the content they see at a young age.

Our children need protecting more than anyone from the ills of social media. It cannot be disputed that excess screen time distracts from learning and has a negative impact on children's education. Ask any teacher and they will be able to tell you of rising behavioural incidents or greater safeguarding issues that they are having to deal with as a result of content young people view online.

It shouldn't have to be this way.

This research demonstrates that there is widespread support for greater regulation on social media access. Parents, and even young people themselves, are crying out for steps to be taken to better regulate content.

Controlling social media is a top priority for parents, and one they think that the Government should be taking more seriously. Young people also overwhelmingly think that social media generally does more harm than good to young people. The consensus is clear, with everyone agreed that children would be happier if social media did not exist.

Listening to the evidence from parents I was struck by how powerless so many of them feel. As a father this really resonated with me. We are all trying to do our best in keeping our children safe online, but we cannot regulate what they are encountering in the playground or what other children are showing them. This is why we need support from the government.

This is a clear public health issue that requires state intervention to solve. Social media giants should be made to have social responsibility to our children, and if they cannot do this, steps need to be taken to protect our children. For too long the power of social media giants has gone unchecked. They have manufactured vast digital empires built upon a model that feeds young people addictive content, whether it is appropriate or not, to keep them on their platforms for as long as possible. They have proven they cannot be trusted to self-regulate, ignoring widespread concerns about harmful content, and even announcing that they will no longer fact-check content.

It is time for decisive action. The Government must take these concerns seriously and act to keep our children safe online. There needs to be stricter enforcement so that young people cannot get around restrictions and more research into how they are accessing harmful content.

In a world where we see more and more diagnoses of mental illness amongst young people, increases in behavioural issues in schools and misinformation being commonly spread online we must be doing all we can to protect our children from these harms. The lack of regulation on who can access social media and what content they are viewing has gone on too long.

# Capturing the full breadth of public opinion

## Nationally Representative

1 representative poll  
(N = 2,016)

2 focus groups  
(Rother Valley and  
Newcastle-Under-Lyme)

## Parents

1 representative poll  
(N = 2,102)

4 focus groups  
(Darlington, Lowestoft,  
Pontrefact Castleford  
and Knottingly,  
Doncaster North, Hove  
and Portslade, and  
Brighton Kemptown)

## Gen-Z (aged 16-24)

1 representative poll  
(N = 1,675)

2 focus groups  
(Houghton and  
Sunderland, and Ilford  
North)

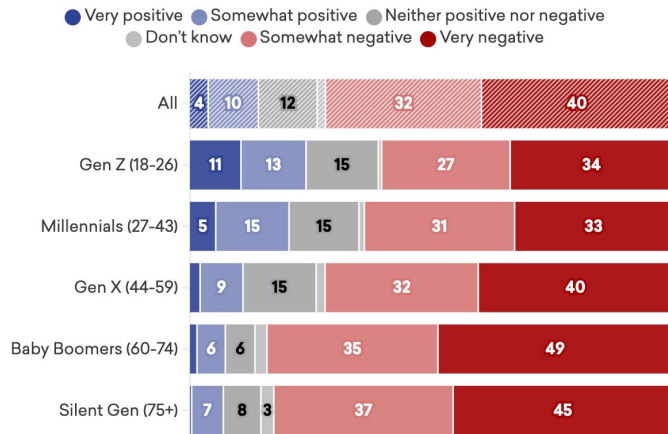


# The problem

# 72% of Britons say social media is harming kids

## 72% of Britons think that social media has a negative impact on young people

Would you say that social media has a positive or negative impact on children younger than 16?

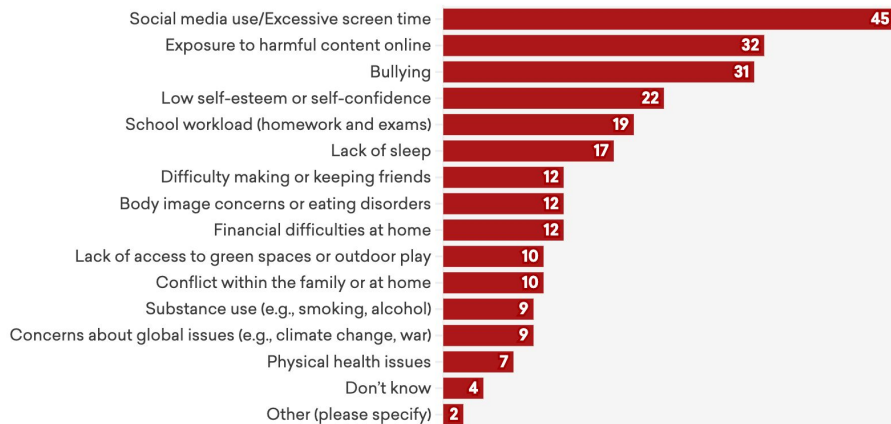


*"Social media can be as harmful as cigarettes or alcohol, yet we allow 13-year-olds access. It's crazy."*

Nick, Parent, Rother Valley

## For parents, social media use and online harms top the list of impacts on their children's mental health

Which of the following do you think has the biggest NEGATIVE impact on your child(ren)'s mental health? Select up to three.



*"My daughter witnessed self-harm on TikTok... we had to have that discussion really young."*

Sarah, Parent, Lowestoft

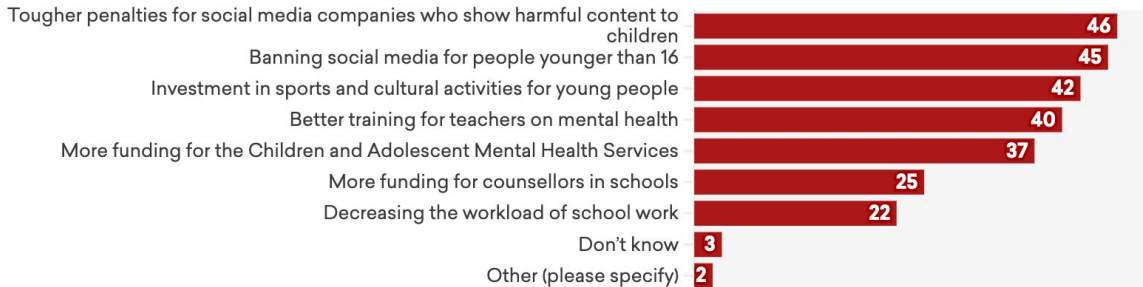
# Controlling social media is a top priority for parents...

Parents across Britain's divides rank social media use as the biggest risk to their children's mental health: it is ranked top for parents of all voter groups (including Conservative, Labour and Reform voters), and it also ranks highest for all parents regardless of how old their children are, although parents of teenagers rank it higher.

Furthermore, restrictions on social media also top the list of potential policies that would support young people's mental health.

## Policies on social media are the most popular policies with parents to address young people's mental health

Which of the following policies do you think would have the best POSITIVE impact on children's mental health in Britain? Select up to three.



Source: More in Common, 2025 • N = 2,106 GB parents

**52% of parents say their children would be happier without social media.**

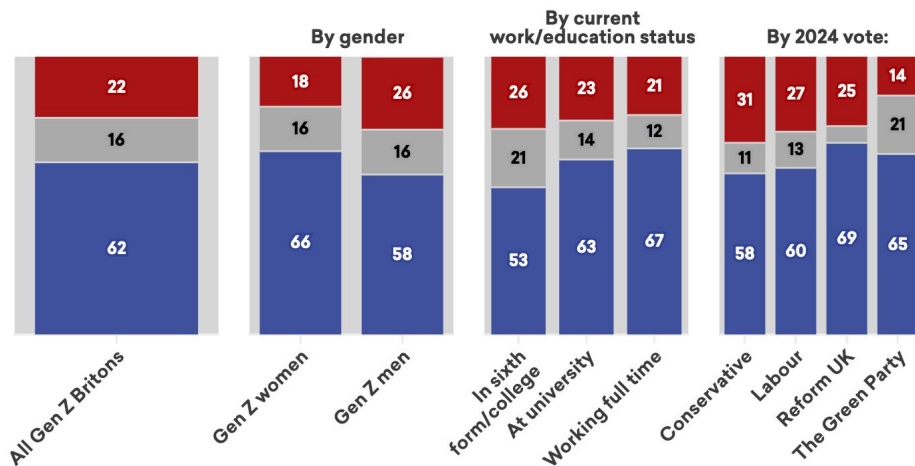
*She would come onto the landing and she would go and get it in the night... I literally had it next to me at night time so she couldn't get to it." Jill, Parent, Hove*

# ... and for Gen Z

## Gen Z Britons overwhelmingly think social media does more harm than good to young people

On the whole, would you say that social media does more harm or more good for young people under the age of 16?

● Social media does more harm than good ● Don't know ● Social media does more good than harm



"Sometimes you have, like, the urge to improve your life... But then sometimes I just feel a bit guilty that I could have done something else."

Laura, 23, Ilford North

Almost half of Gen Z cite either social media or harmful online content as a top-three negative influence on teens' mental health.

50% of Gen Z say they wish they had spent less time on their phones growing up.

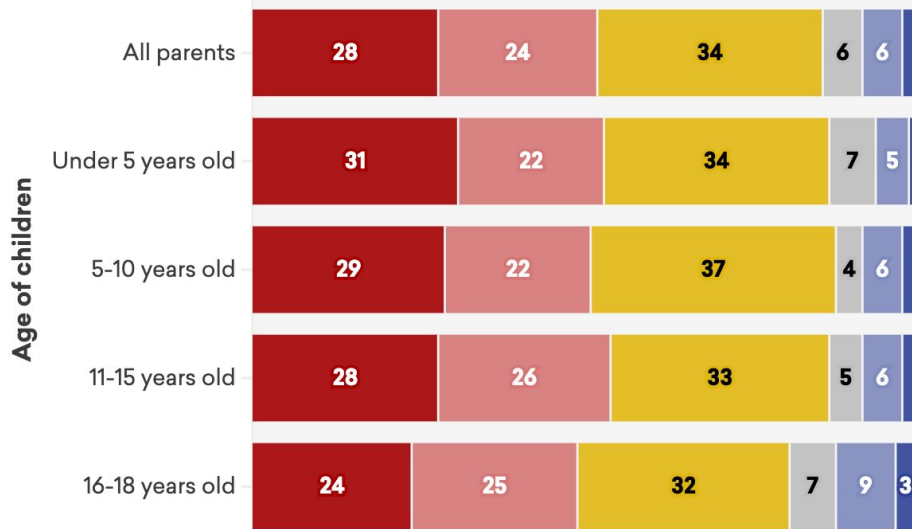


# Parents are worried about the impacts of social media across their children's lives

## Most parents think their children would be happier if social media didn't exist

If social media did not exist at all, do you think your child would be...

● Much happier ● Slightly happier ● Neither happier nor sadder ● Don't know  
● Slightly sadder ● Much sadder



In total, 48 per cent of parents say their children spend too much time on social media

43 per cent say that their children's social media use **negatively impacts their family time;**

A third (36%) say that smartphone use is **impacting their child's sleep patterns;**

A quarter (26%) say that smartphone and social media use **has caused stress and anxiety for their child** - this is highest for parents of teenage girls where a third (32%) say the same;

30 per cent say that they **notice their child becoming withdrawn or isolated due to smartphone use** - this is highest with parents of teenage boys (at 37%);

A fifth (20%) say that their child's smartphone use is **negatively impacting their academic performance;**

# Gen Z would be happier if social media didn't exist

74% say there should be stronger rules in place to protect younger people from harms on social media; only 17% say there is no need

78% say if they were a parent they would try to delay their child using social media for as long as possible.

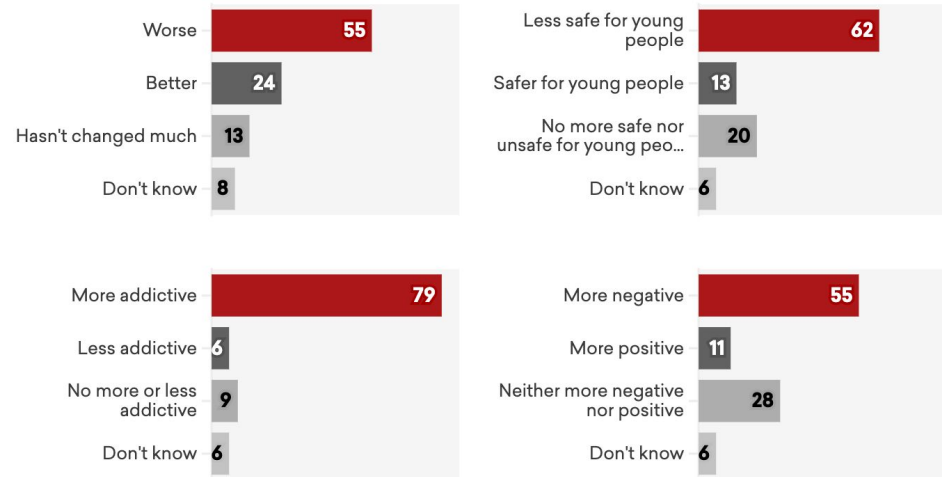
**55% of Gen Z say life would be better if social media was banned for people under 16; only 22% say it would be worse**

*"14 to 16, I'd say it was really really negative... Tumblr was absolutely horrendous. There was a lot of eating disorders when I was in secondary school, and a lot of me and my friends latched onto that."*

Laura, 23, Ilford North

## Gen Z Britons overwhelmingly think that social media has changed for the worse in the last five years

In the last 5 years, would you say that social media has become:



# The collective action problem: Why people want government action

*"If the government was saying, 'No, you have to be 16,' even if your kids are coming home like, 'Oh, my friends have got it,' you've kind of got that backing."*

*Julie, Parent, Darlington*

*"There's a real attachment... she gets a little bit lost if it's not near her, or you know, in her hands, or just in the pocket, there's a real obsessive trait coming."*

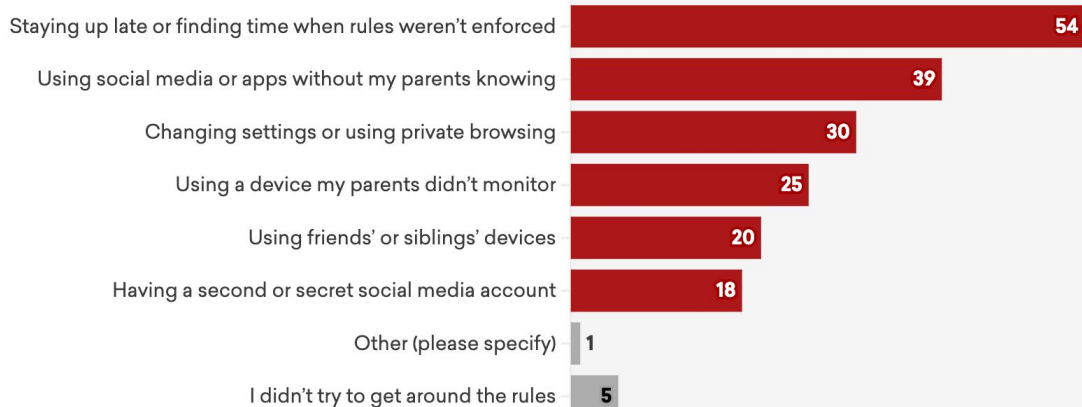
*Alex, Parent, Lowestoft*

*"Even if you do everything right at home, they're still going to see things at school, on their friends' phones, or when they're out."*

*Julie, Parent, Darlington*

## How do Gen Z get around smartphone rules?

If you got around the rules [that your parents set you on smartphone use], how did you do it?  
(Select all that apply)



From the focus groups and polling it is clear that tackling online harms is not something that people can do alone. Parents say they struggle to keep their kids off social media because the social pressure for them to be on is too great, 84% of Gen say they found ways to get around parental restrictions, and 69% of Gen Z say it would be difficult to quit social media.



# Regulating social media

# Strong public support for raising the digital age of consent

## Three quarters of Britons support increasing the age at which people can access social media

To what extent would you support or oppose raising the age at which children can use social media from 13 to 16?

● Strongly support ● Somewhat support ● Neither support nor oppose  
● Don't know ● Somewhat oppose ● Strongly oppose



Britons overwhelmingly support raising the digital age of consent to 16, meaning anyone younger could not access social media. Just 11 per cent are opposed.

A range of other policy measures on protecting young people from the harms of social media are also popular:

75% support **the creation of a new licensing scheme for 'child friendly' smartphones** ( 7% oppose)

79% support **giving Ofcom new powers** to prevent children being exposed to 'addictive by design' apps and services by internet companies ( 4% oppose)

77% support **commissioning new independent health guidance** on protecting young people from spending too much time on social media or facing other online harms (4% oppose)

# Support for regulating social media spans Britain's divides

Most notably, this support spans all of Britain's voter groups - and many of the policies are most popular with Reform UK voters.

Support for these policies also spans other traditional divides in British politics: age, education level, region and more.

*"These companies think they're untouchable, don't they?"*

*Wayne, Parent, Pontefract*

*"If the government used half the power that they can, like other countries do, it would make these social media companies stand up."*

*Claire, Parent, Pontefract*

## Three quarters of Britons support increasing the age at which people can access social media

To what extent would you support or oppose raising the age at which children can use social media from 13 to 16?

● Strongly support ● Somewhat support ● Neither support nor oppose  
● Don't know ● Somewhat oppose ● Strongly oppose



# Parents back raising the digital age of consent

86 per cent of parents support increasing the digital age of consent to 16, so that people under 16 cannot access social media.

*"Thirteen is far too young. They're still kids, they're still learning about the world, and suddenly they've got access to everything."*

*Michelle, Parent, Pontefract*

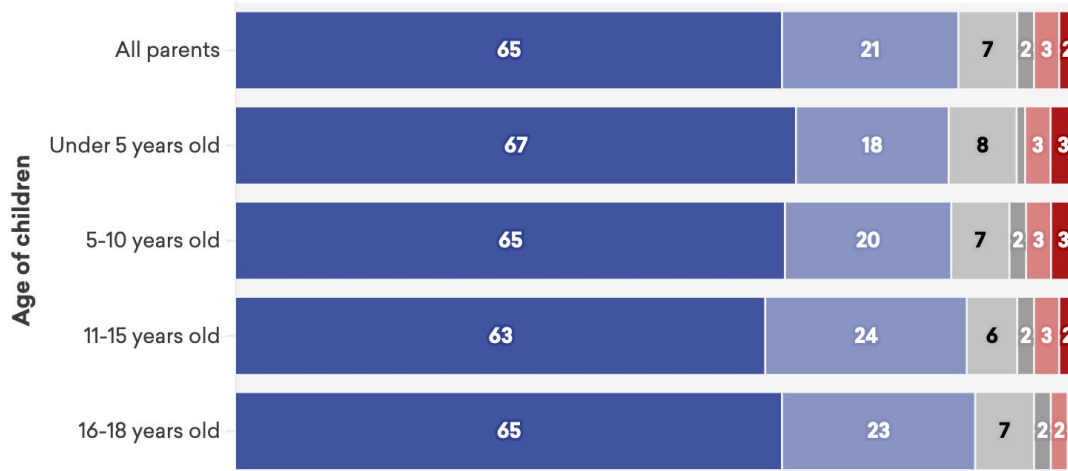
*"My daughter witnessed self-harm on TikTok... we had to have that discussion really young."*

*Sarah, Parent, Lowestoft*

## The vast majority of parents support raising the digital age of consent

Do you support raising the digital age of consent from 13 to 16, so companies cannot collect data from children under 16 without parental consent?

● Strongly support ● Somewhat support ● Neither support nor oppose ● Not sure  
● Somewhat oppose ● Strongly oppose

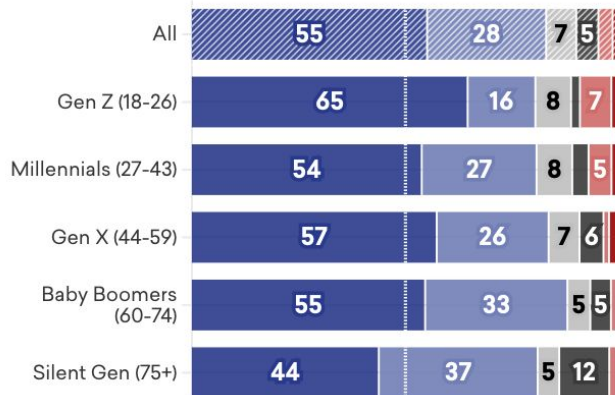


# The specifics: demand for better enforcement and targeting specific apps

## Most think that young people can get around current age restrictions on social media

In the UK, most social media platforms set a minimum age of 13 for children to create an account. In practice, how easy or difficult do you think it is for children under 13 to create social media accounts despite this rule?

● Very easy ● Somewhat easy ● Neither easy nor difficult  
● Don't know ● Somewhat difficult ● Very difficult

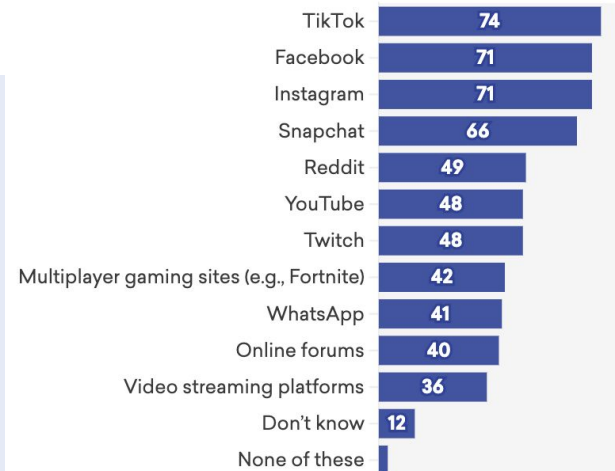


Currently, people think it is very easy for people get around the current age limit of 13 for social media platforms. For any new age limit to have credibility, it must be accompanied by effective mechanisms to enforce it.

At the same time, there is some discussion about which apps this app any ban should apply to. The overwhelming majority think that TikTok, Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat should be included in such a ban, but there is more division over YouTube in particular.

## TikTok, Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat top the list of potential app bans

If the government were to increase the age at which young people could create a social media account to 16, which of the following should be included in those restrictions? (Select any that apply)



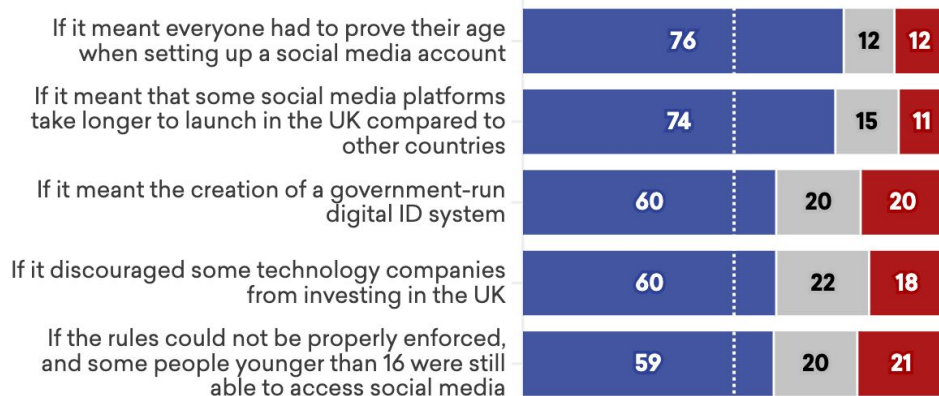


# Age verification is popular in spite of tradeoffs

## Support for raising the age of social media remains high even when tradeoffs are made clear

Would you support or oppose increasing the age at which people can access social media to 16 even if it meant each of the following...

- I would support increasing the age at which people can access social media
- Don't know
- I would oppose increasing the age at which people can access social media



The public rejects the argument that regulating social media will distract from other priorities

The vast majority of Britons (79%) believe the government can tackle online harms while also addressing key priorities like the NHS and cost of living.

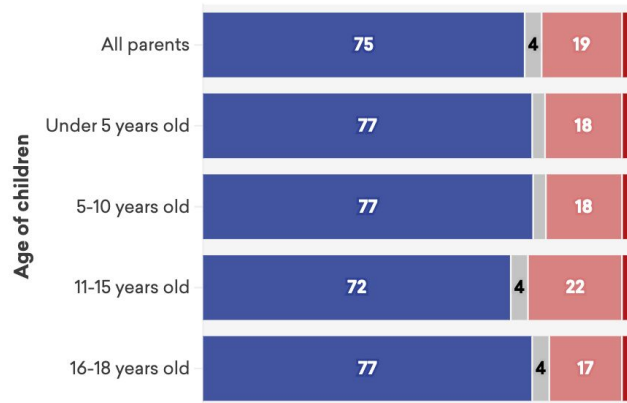
**The public also supports age verification on social media in spite of potential privacy or ease-of-use tradeoffs.** The public supports age verification through a range of methods: linking children's accounts to parents accounts (78% support), using government-issued ID (71%), or requiring in-person age verification at designated location such as post offices (66%).

# Parents and Gen Z back age ID on social media

## Three quarters of parents support legal requirements on social media platforms for age verification

Which of the following comes closest to your view?

- Social media platforms should be legally required to verify users' ages before allowing them to create an account
- Social media platforms should verify users' ages before allowing them to create an account, but it does not need to be a legal requirement
- Social media platforms should not verify users' ages before allowing them to create an account
- Not sure



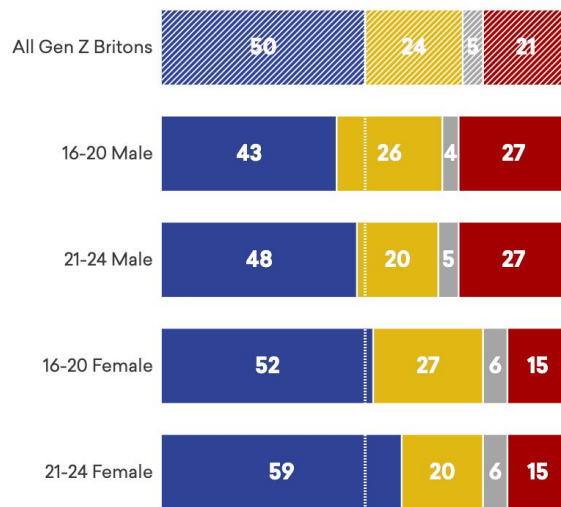
Three quarters of parents support legally requiring social media platforms to verify the ages of their users- holding across different demographic and social groups of parents.

Similarly, Gen Z tend to support age restrictions on social media up to the age of 16, and only 21% oppose it.

## Gen Z tend to support an age verification rule for social media

How would you feel if social media apps required ID or verification codes to confirm your age, and not let anyone younger than 16 access the apps?

- I'd like it
- I don't mind either way
- Not sure
- I wouldn't like it





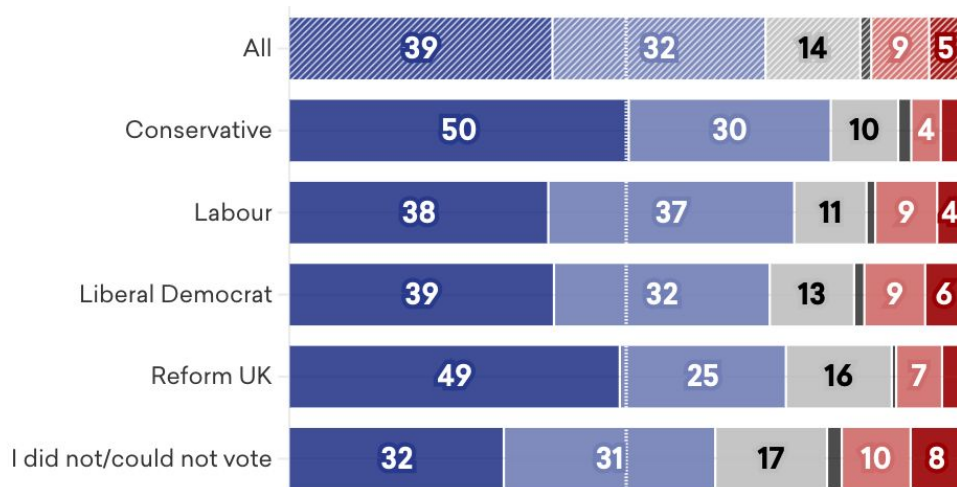
# **Controlling smartphones in school**

# Strong public support for a ban on smartphones in schools

## 71% support a ban on smartphones in school

To what extent would you support or oppose a national ban on the use of smartphones in schools, for people under 16?

● Strongly support ● Somewhat support ● Neither support nor oppose  
● Don't know ● Somewhat oppose ● Strongly oppose



The overwhelming majority of Britons support a national ban on the use of smartphones in schools for people under 16, and only 14% oppose. Like many of the other policies in this report, support spans all of Britain's voter groups.

*"I think they should just be banned. They shouldn't be allowed in school at all."  
Nick, Rother Valley*

# Parents strongly back tighter restrictions on smartphones in schools

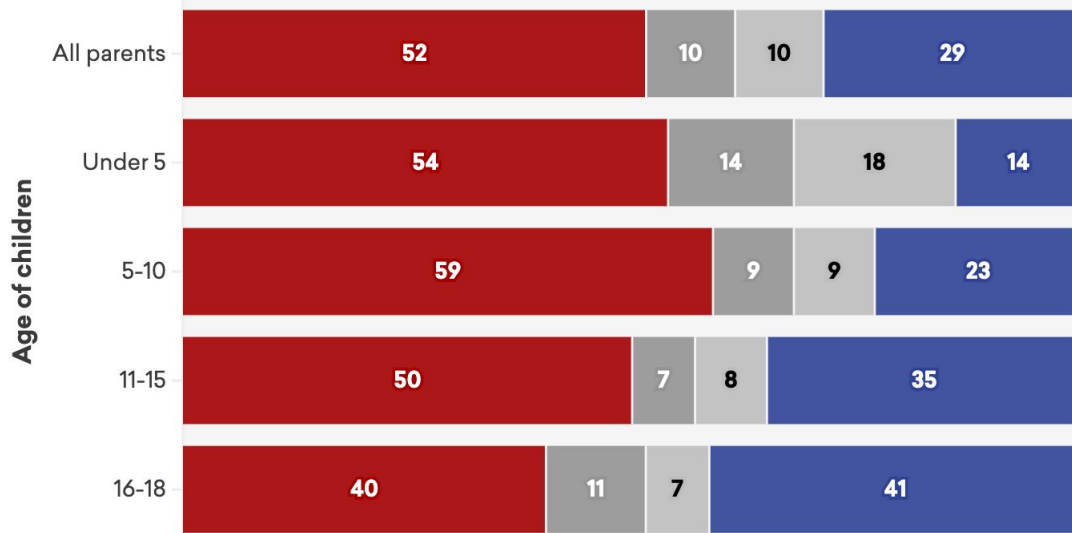
52 per cent of parents would like their child's school to have tighter restrictions on smartphone use - only 10 per cent would like them to have less tight restrictions.

Parents are most likely to say that their children's schools smartphone policy works well if their child's school outright bans phones, and where schools have no restrictions on smartphone use parents are most likely to say this policy works poorly.

## Most parents would like their children's school to have tighter smartphone policies

Do you think it would be better if your child's school had...

- Tighter restrictions on smartphone use
- Less tight restrictions on smartphone use
- Don't know
- It would make no difference





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