



Inequalities in how parents support their children's development with digital technologies

Parenting for a Digital Future: Survey Report 4

Dongmiao Zhang
Sonia Livingstone

January 2019



Department of
Media and
Communications

Parenting for a
Digital Future

Executive summary

Parenting is never easy, especially when kids are ‘growing up digital’ and parents have to grapple with new ways of connecting and supporting them. With smartphones and tablets becoming an integral part of our lives, it is critical to understand how digitalization is transforming parental activities and education. In this report, we seek to understand which digital inequalities are influential for parenting, socialisation and the family.

This report, the fourth in a series, is based on a nationally representative survey of 2,032 UK parents of children aged 0-17. We inquire into possible digital inequalities between more and less societally advantaged groups, focusing on gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status (SES), parental education, family composition and special educational needs (SEN) and disabilities. The key findings include issues related to access and use, digital skills, online support for opportunities and, online risks and parental mediation.

Access and use

- **Parents of higher SES or education are more digitally advantaged.** Parents with a higher level of education use a wider range of devices to go online, especially more smart devices. Twenty-four per cent of parents with a postgraduate degree have used wearable devices during the past month, compared to 11% of those with a college or university degree and 6% of those with a secondary school education.
- **Echoing the behaviour of the parents, children from a high SES family use the internet more often and on a wider range of devices.** One in five children from low SES homes never or hardly ever uses the internet. Sixteen per cent of children from a high SES family have used smart home devices, 12% internet-connected toys and 9% a virtual reality headset, compared with 6%, 5% and 2.4% of those from a low SES family respectively. Children with SEN also use a wider range of devices, but they do not use the internet more often.
- **Parents experience barriers to internet use if they are Black or parents of a child with SEN.** Parent gender makes little difference overall, although mothers and fathers encounter different barriers – fathers report more difficulty in using the internet, more privacy concerns and tend to think that ‘the internet is not for people like me’. Mothers report more problems of connectivity and cost.

Digital skills

- **Fathers and mothers report, on average, similar levels of digital skills.** However, mothers know how to find information and report better privacy skills than fathers (managing settings, deciding what to share, managing contacts), while fathers are more likely to say they know how to code, and how to edit music and content online.
- **Parents with more education report more digital skills** – such as saving a photo found online, changing privacy settings, or coding and programming. Parents with a higher SES tend to report more advanced digital skills such as creating a website, editing music or using coding/programming language.
- **Parents’ level of education and SES are not related to the child’s digital skills**, such as whether they know how to search for information, save a phone number found online or

A decorative border at the top of the page features a dense collection of colorful icons representing various digital concepts such as social media, technology, communication, and family. The icons are arranged in a repeating pattern along the top edge.

Parenting for a Digital Future

programming. However, children with a single parent¹ are reported to have more digital skills than those from a couple family.

Online support for opportunities

- **Mothers are more likely to use the internet to support their children, although fathers are not falling behind much.** Thirty-one per cent of mothers used the internet to search for information or advice about their child's health, while 25% fathers did so. This shows that mothers are more inclined to use the internet to search information related to their child's health than fathers. Mothers are also more likely to connect with other parents for advice or support: 18% of mothers have done this compared to 14% of fathers. On other online support activities such as searching for local activities, searching for information to help a child's learning, downloading videos, apps or games and signing up for classes and activities etc., mothers and fathers performed similarly well, with minor differences.
- **Advantaged parents (parents with a higher SES² and level of education) and parents of children with SEN offer notably more forms of online support to their children,** such as searching for information or advice about their child's health, local activities and events, information to help their learning, signing up or paying for classes and activities etc.

Online risks and parental mediation

- **Mothers do more parental mediation, although fathers don't do much less.** We asked parents if they adopted a range of parental mediation practices to monitor their child's internet use. Parents on average report that they 'sometimes' do a range of enabling and restrictive forms of parental mediation. However, mothers do a bit more in terms of rules and controls. Nevertheless, fathers are not falling behind much in terms of overall parental mediation activities compared to mothers.
- **Parents of higher SES and education, single parents and parents of children with SEN report more online harms for their children, and also do more parental mediation,** such as suggesting ways that their children can use the internet safely, discussing their online activities and using parental control or apps to block children's access to certain types of websites. Parents with a higher SES report more conflicts caused by screen time compared to those from a lower SES. However, there is no ethnic divide in parental mediation activities. Although parents of children with SEN tend to report more conflicts with their children, they do not differ in terms of conflicts caused by screen time.

The findings of the report highlight why digital inequalities matter in our increasingly digitalized and connected world. New possibilities for teaching, learning and parenting need to be accessible to everyone, if digitalization is to have a positive impact on the inclusiveness, diversity and healthy growth of our society. Governments and policy-makers need to recognize and act on the digital inequalities, and provide the necessary economic and social support to less advantaged groups.

¹ The full categories in the questionnaire are single parent, share with a partner, share with an ex-partner, share with grandparent/relative, and share with a paid caregiver. However, for the scope of this report, we only focused on whether being a single parent or in a couple makes any difference.

² Respondents were grouped according to the SES of their household into categories A, B, C1, C2, D, and E based on responses about the household's chief income earner. We refer to categories A and B as high SES parents, C1 and C2 as middle SES parents and D and E as low SES parents.

About our research

Parenting for a Digital Future investigates how parents and caregivers imagine and prepare for their own and their children's personal and professional futures in a digital age. We start from three crucial assumptions:

- Our project focuses on the family as a whole, exploring parents' views, concerns, practices and experiences in their own right and in relation to their children.
- Contesting the idea of 'screen time' as a catch-all category, we explore how parents and children engage with different forms of media to learn, create, communicate and play – as an essential part of family life, but depending on their own values, interests and needs.
- Transcending outdated ideas of 'digital natives' and 'digital immigrants', we recognize that parents are themselves gaining digital skills and interests, albeit unevenly, so we ask what they know and what difference this makes.

Here, we report on the findings from our nationally representative survey of UK parents, which surveyed 2,032 parents of children aged 0-17 in late 2017. Participants were recruited via an online panel, supplemented with a sample of low or non-internet users interviewed in-person. This multi-method research aims to understand parents' values, skills and attitudes towards digital media use in their own lives and how these influence their expectations for and management of digital media in the lives of their children. We consider the following:

- How do parents imagine digital media in 'the future', and does this affect their actions in the present? What opportunities and challenges do parents think technology brings?
- In what ways are digital media integrated into family life? How do parents balance the resulting risks and opportunities for their children?
- What strategies do parents develop to mitigate the risks and realise the opportunities opened up by digital media, and who supports them?

In this report, we focus on digital inequalities in:

- Access and use (of parents and children)
- Digital skills (of parents and children)
- Online support for opportunities for children provided by parents
- Online risks and parental mediation

We examine whether fathers and mothers, single parents, parents of children with special educational needs (SEN) and parents from different ethnicities, education and socioeconomic status (SES) are equally capable, receptive and confident to navigate the opportunities and risks brought about by the internet. Demographic differences are only reported if statistically significant (see the data tables for test results).

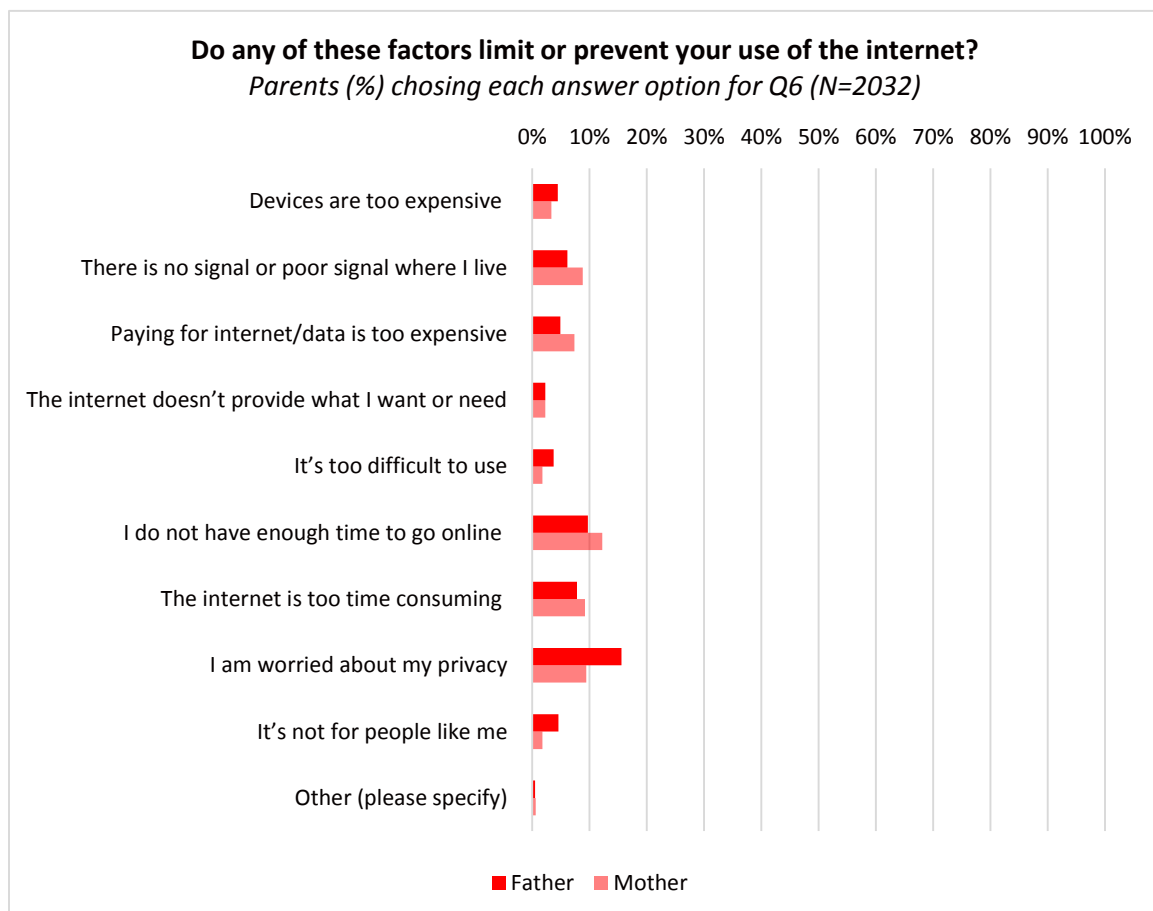
Reports 1-3, the survey methodology, data tables and the questionnaire are at www.lse.ac.uk/media-and-communications/research/research-projects/preparing-for-a-digital-future. Note that survey questions were designed based on findings from our in-depth qualitative fieldwork, reported separately – see www.parenting.digital.

1. Access and use

Digitalization and automation initiate profound changes across sectors. In the new technological landscape, there is a need to harness the digital skills of parents to benefit and protect their children. In this section, we analyse parents' digital access and use – their barriers and frequency of internet use, as well as access to devices – in a context of wider research and policy efforts to foster social and digital inclusion.

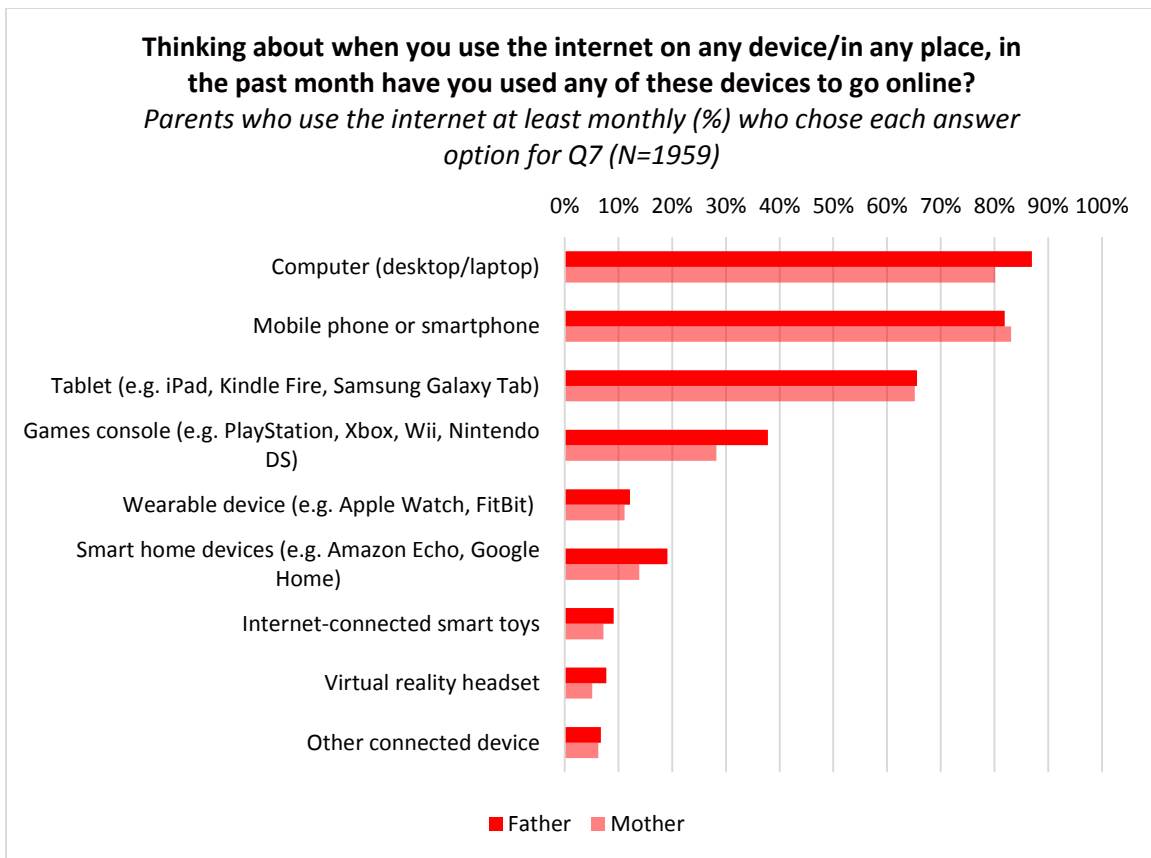
Mothers and fathers encounter different barriers to internet use

- Mothers and fathers report using the internet with a similar frequency – averaging several times a day. Mothers are rarely non- or very low-users compared with fathers.
- When asked if there are any factors that prevent the use of the internet, mothers and fathers report similar levels of overall barriers, although the types of barrier vary. For instance, fathers report more difficulty in using the internet, more privacy concerns and tend to think that 'the internet is not for people like me', while mothers report more barriers of connectivity and cost.



Parenting for a Digital Future

- We also asked parents if they had used any devices to go online in the past month. Fathers use a wider range of devices than mothers, although the difference is relatively small. On average, fathers use 3.27 kinds of devices, compared to 3.00 for mothers. However, fathers use more smart devices than mothers: 19% of fathers had used smart home devices in the past month, compared to only 14% of mothers. Also, 9% of fathers report that they have used internet-connected smart toys to go online, compared to 7% of mothers; 8% of fathers sat they have used a virtual reality headset, compared to only 5% of mothers.

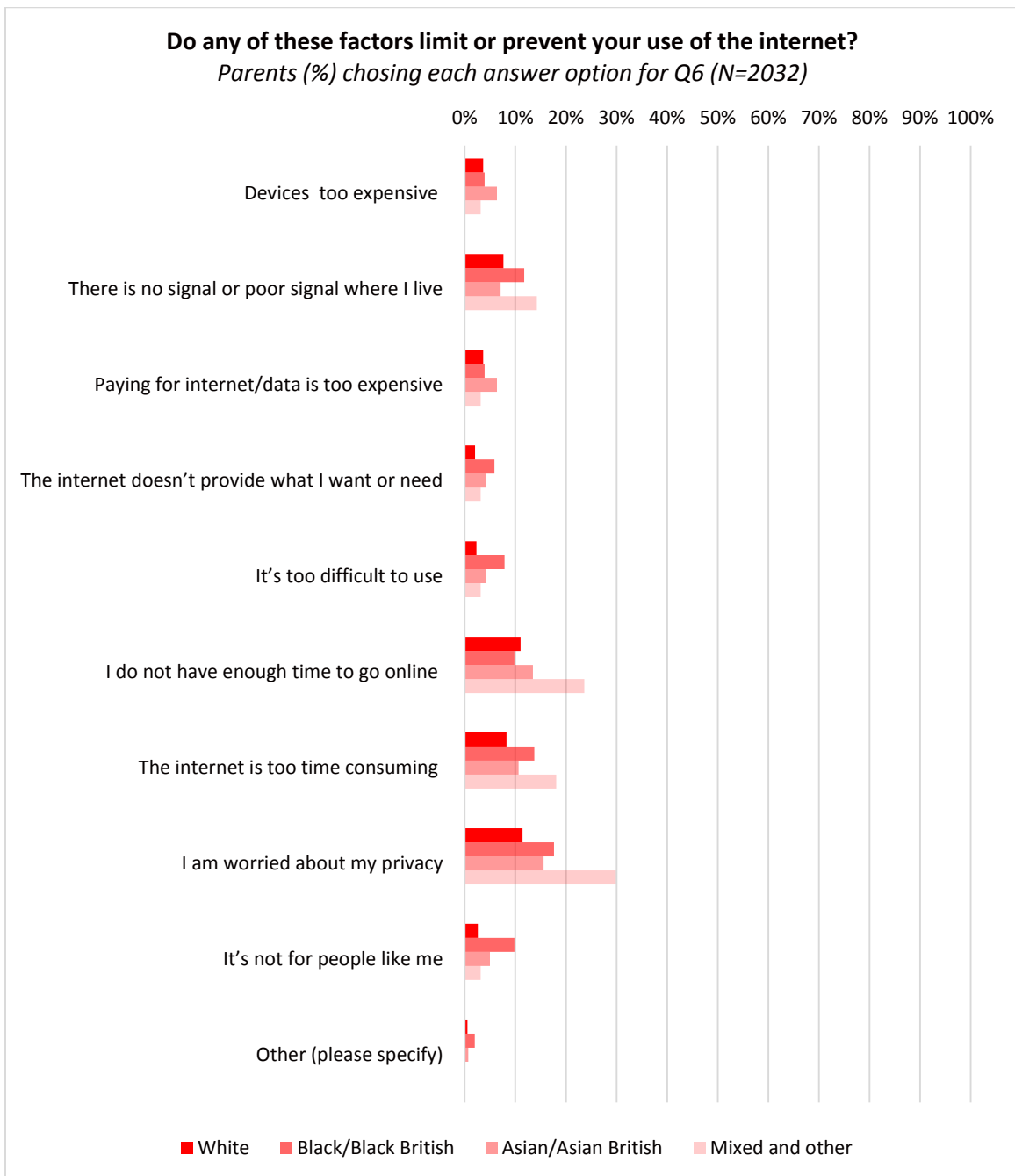


Black parents and parents of children with SEN face more barriers to using the internet

In addition to the gender divide, we also analysed parents' digital access and use from parents' different ethnicities, parents of children with special educational needs (SEN) and parents with different educational and socioeconomic backgrounds. Our findings suggest that digital inequalities in access exist across different ethnicities, educational backgrounds and SES.

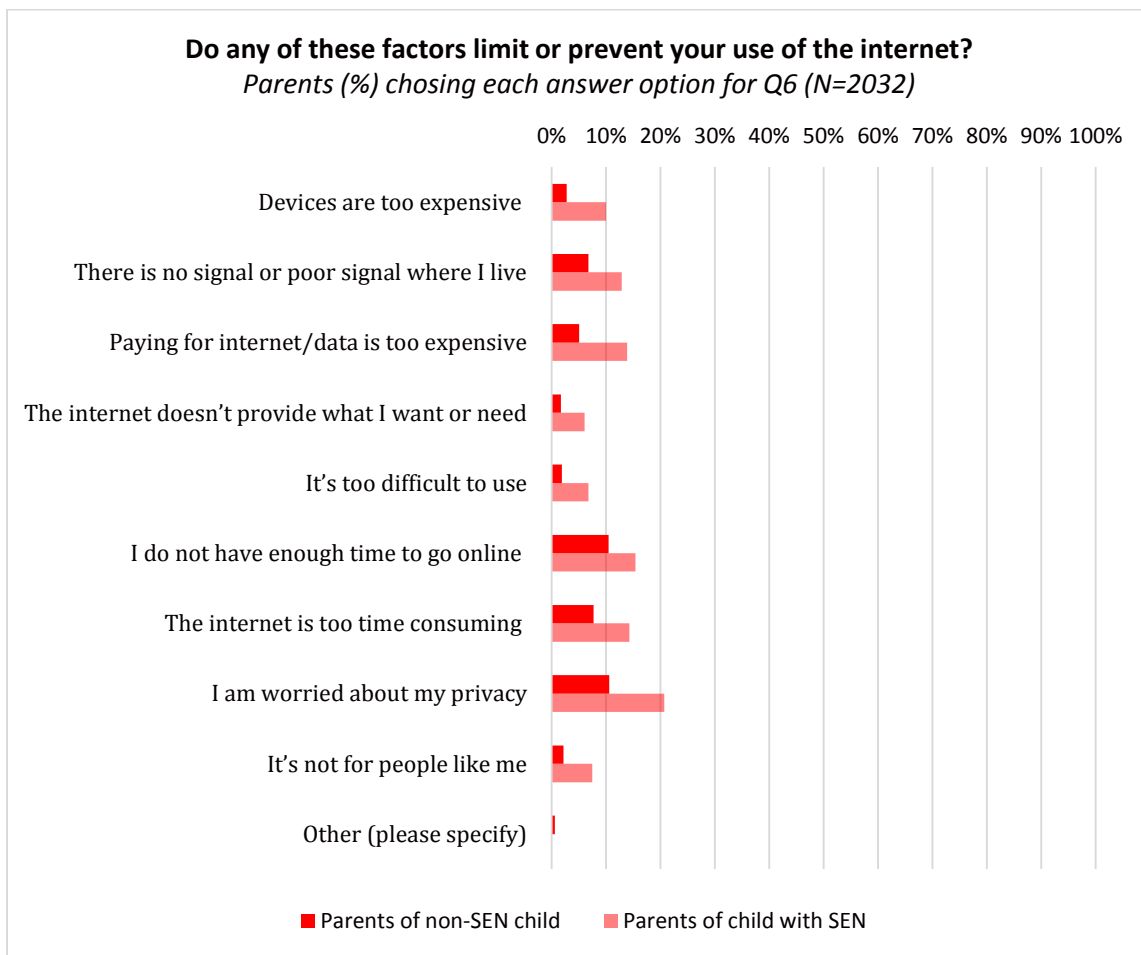
Parenting for a Digital Future

- We asked parents if there are any barriers that prevent their use of the internet, such as the device being too expensive, a poor signal, not enough time etc. Black parents report more overall barriers in internet access, followed by Asian parents, while White parents face the least barriers. For Black parents, the top three barriers are privacy concerns (18%), the internet being too time consuming (14%) and a poor signal (12%).



Parenting for a Digital Future

- Parents of children with SEN say that they (as parents) use the internet less often and face more barriers to use compared with other parents; 21% of parents with a child with SEN reported the 'internet being too time-consuming' as a barrier for internet use, compared to 11% of those with a non-SEN child. However, they report using a wider range of devices and offer more overall online support to their child such as seeking information on their child's health or helping their child with their studies.



Parents with more education/higher SES are digitally advantaged in access to the internet

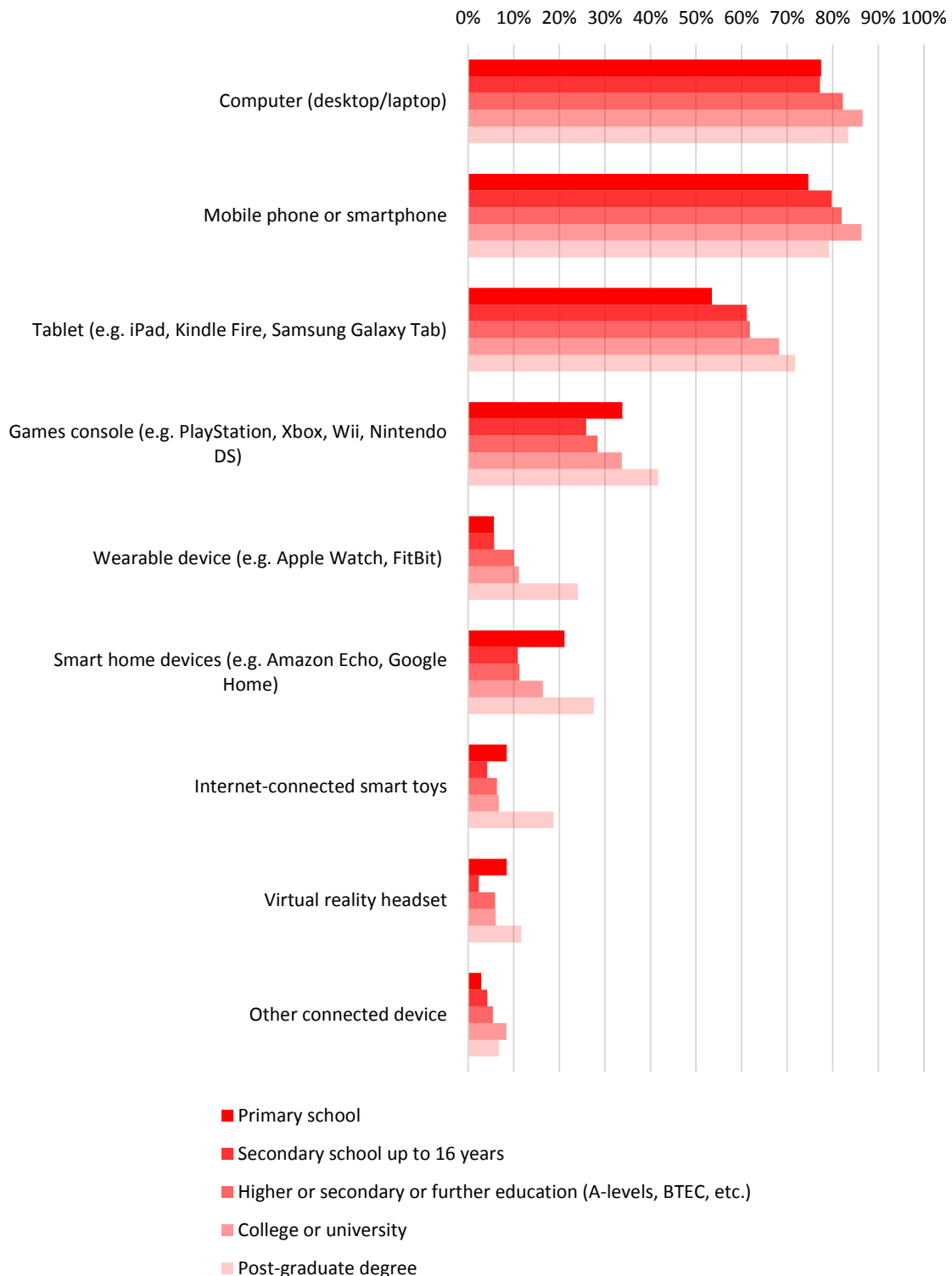
We asked if parents had used any device to go online during the past months, ranging from a computer, mobile phone, virtual reality headset and more.

- Parents with more education report having used a wider range of devices, especially more smart devices: for example, 24% of parents with a postgraduate degree used a wearable device during the past month compared to 11% of those with a college or university degree and 6% of those with a secondary school education.

Parenting for a Digital Future

Thinking about when you use the internet on any device/in any place, in the past month have you used any of these devices to go online?

Parents who use the internet at least monthly (%) who chose each answer option for Q7 (N=1959)

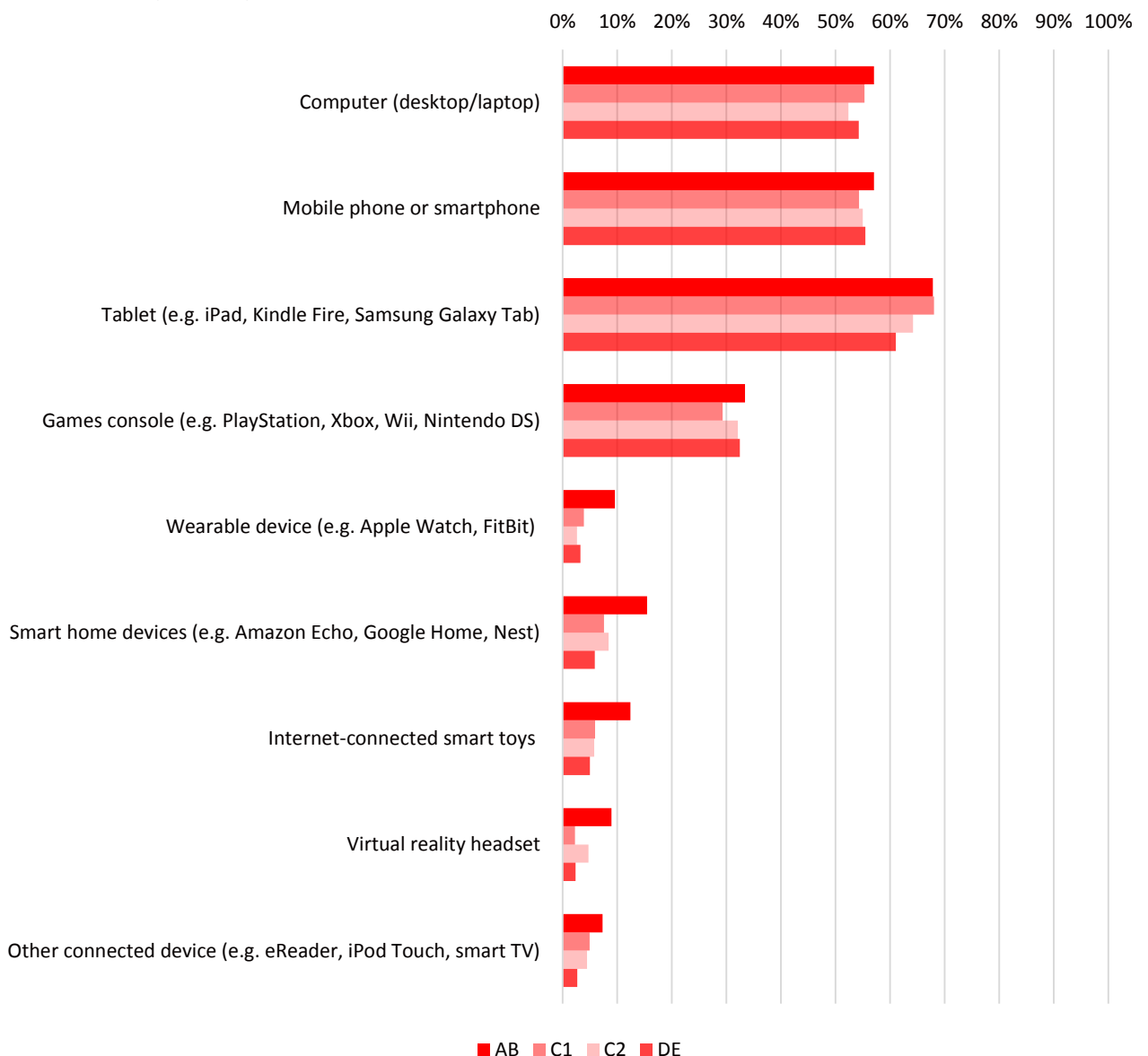


Parenting for a Digital Future

- Parents from higher SES homes report having used more varieties of devices on average. However, differences in SES are most noticeable in relation to the newer technologies – tablets, games consoles, wearables, smart home, virtual reality headset and other connected devices are all being tried out by the highest SES group. It is reasonable to assume that having access to more devices allows for personalization and flexibility. It is also likely that the devices are more up to date and better at addressing privacy concerns.

Thinking about when your child uses the internet, independently or with help, on any device/in any place, in the past month, has your child used any of these devices to go online?

Parents of children who use the internet at least monthly (%) who chose each answer to Q10 (N=1699)



A decorative border at the top of the page features a dense pattern of colorful icons representing various digital concepts: people, devices, communication, and technology. The icons are arranged in a grid-like fashion, with some larger and more prominent than others, creating a vibrant and modern aesthetic.

Parenting for a Digital Future

- We also asked parents how often they use the internet, ranging from ‘never’ to ‘almost all the time’. Parents in the highest SES group use the internet more often than other SES groups, although the differences are slight. However, it is important to note that among DE parents, one in eight are ‘low users’ of the internet, meaning that they don’t go online every day. Parents with more education also use the internet more often.
- Echoing their parents, children from a high SES family use the internet slightly more often and on more devices, in particular, smart devices; 16% of children from a high SES family use smart home devices, 12% internet-connected toys and 9% a virtual reality headset, compared with 6%, 5% and 2.4% of those from a low SES family respectively. Girls and boys use the internet to a similar degree, although it is striking that one in five children from low SES homes never or hardly ever use the internet. Children with more educated parents use more devices to go online, but they do not use the internet more often.
- Single parents report their children use the internet more often compared with couples: 14% of single parents say their children use the internet almost all the time, compared to 11% of couples. They also say their children use a wider range of devices, especially in terms of the latest technology: 9% of single parents report that their child has used a wearable device (e.g. Apple Watch, Fitbit) to go online during the past month, compared to 4% of couples; 10% of single parents say that their child has used internet-connected smart toys (e.g. drones or a robot), while only 7% of couples say so. Unsurprisingly, then, single parents report their children being more digitally skilled.

2. Digital skills

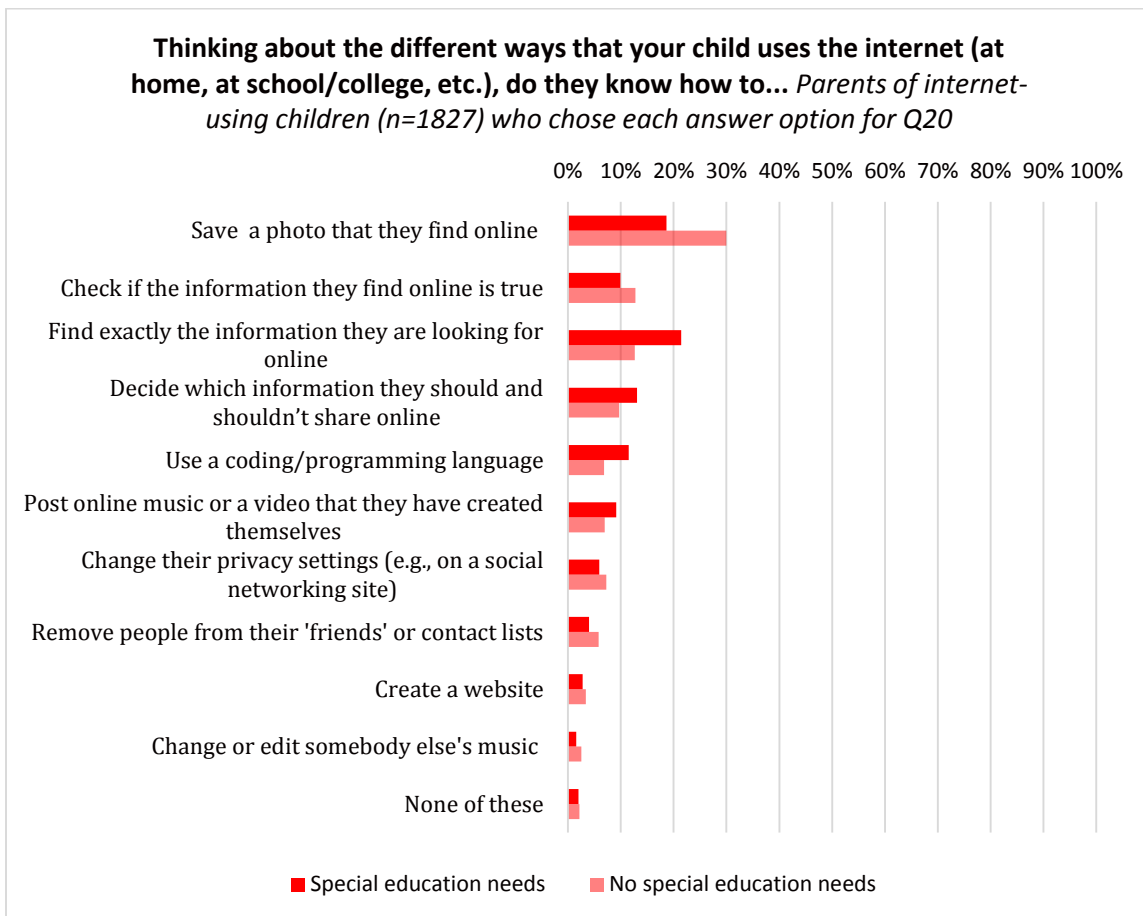
Parents with more education have more digital skills

Parents’ digital skills have significant implications for their adaptation to the future working styles and their ability to utilize the internet for parenting support. We seek to understand if there is a digital skills gap across parents of different backgrounds, and whether the gap has any impact on children’s development. Our findings show that parents with more education tend to have more digital skills. However, parents’ level of education and SES are not correlated with their children’s digital skills.

- We asked about 10 different digital skills, from changing privacy settings, managing contacts, coding and more. Across all the 10 digital skills, fathers and mothers report, on average, a similar level of skills. However, mothers know how to find information and report better privacy skills than fathers (managing settings, deciding what to share, managing contacts), while fathers are more likely to say they know how to code, and how to edit music and content online. Recall, above, that more fathers than mothers report privacy concerns in general – perhaps they are conscious of concerns, but haven’t translated these into practice. Or maybe mothers are more confident about their privacy skills, and hence they have fewer privacy concerns.

Parenting for a Digital Future

- Parents with more education report more digital skills, such as saving a photo found online, changing privacy settings, or coding and programming. Parents with a higher SES tend to report more advanced digital skills such as creating a website, editing music or using coding/programming language.
- Parents' level of education and SES are not related to their children's digital skills, such as whether they know how to search for information, save a photo found online or programming.
- Parents of children with SEN report that their child has a similar level of digital skills overall compared to non-SEN children, though there are some differences on specific skills.



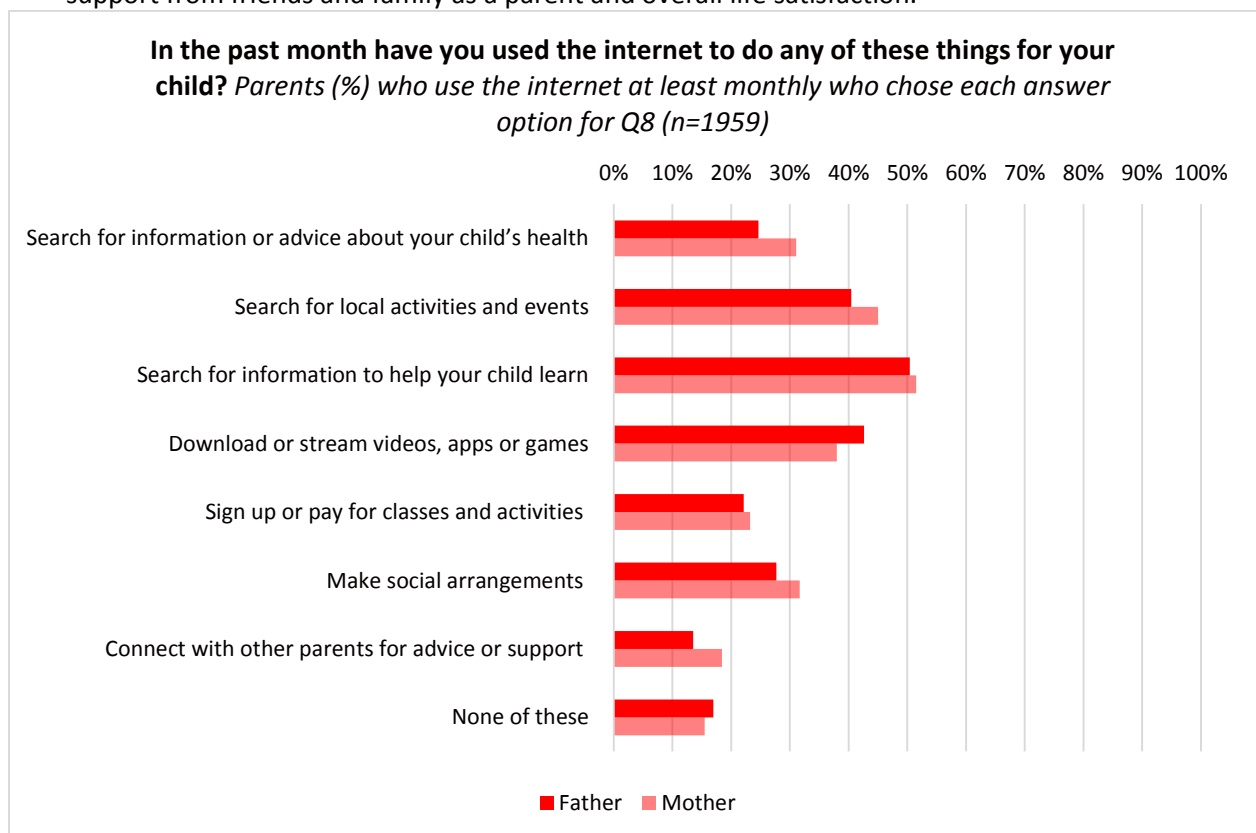
- There is no ethnic divide in the frequency of internet use and range of devices for both parents and children. Children from different ethnicities have similar digital skills, although White parents are reported to have more digital skills than Black/Black British and Asian/Asian British parents.

3. Online support for opportunities

Mothers are more likely to undertake online activities to support their children

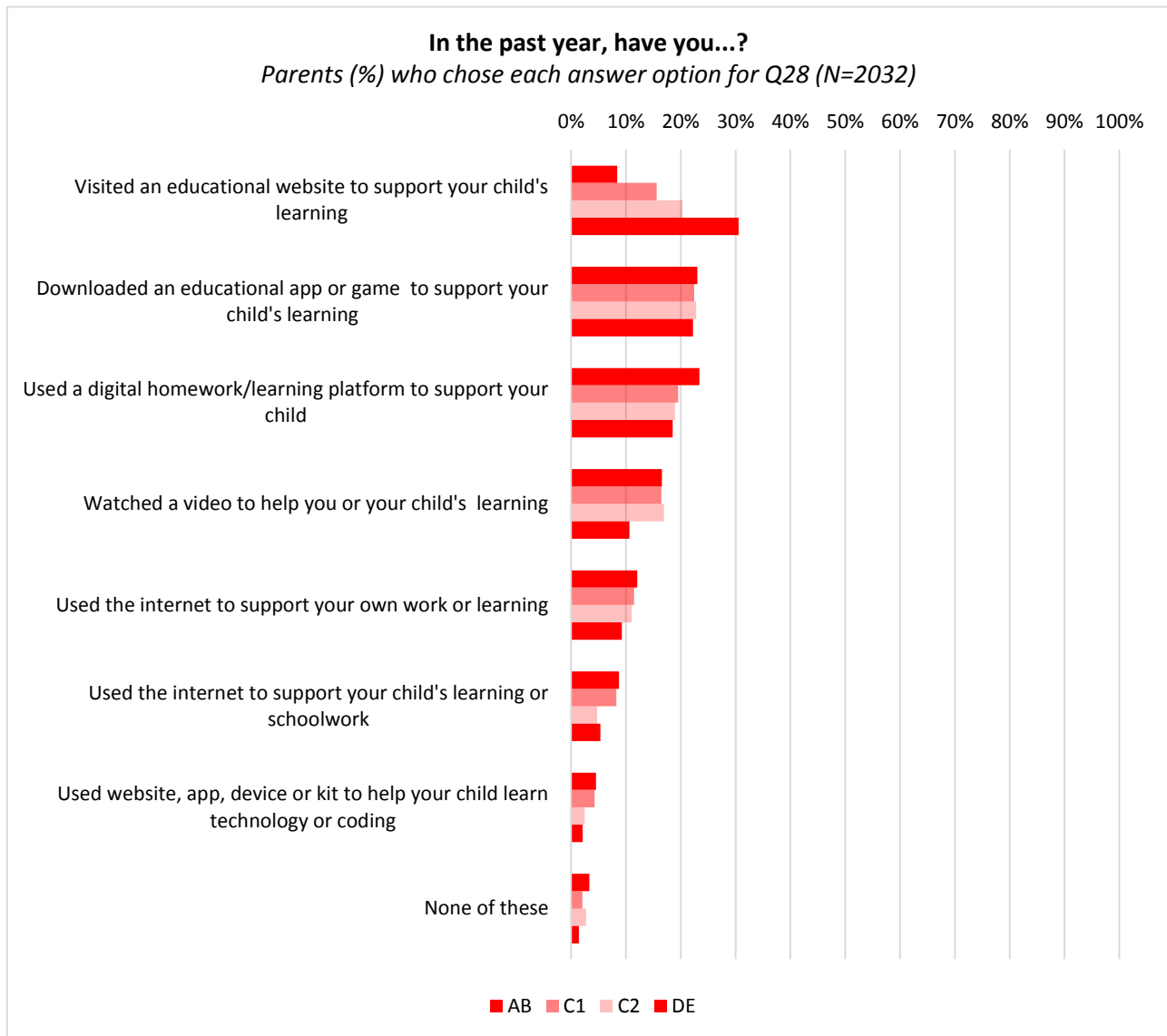
Digitalization has opened up new possibilities for parents to support their children. Are parents of different backgrounds equally capable of using the internet to offer support to their children?

- Mothers are more likely to use the internet to support their children, although fathers are not falling behind much; 31% of mothers used the internet to search for information or advice about the child's health, while 25% of fathers did so. Mothers are also more likely to connect with other parents for advice or support: 18% of mothers have done this compared to 14% of fathers. On other online support activities such as searching for local activities, searching for information to help the child's learning, downloading videos, apps or games and signing up for classes and activities etc., results for mothers and fathers were similar.
- We asked if parents agree with a range of statements on their experience as a parent and the support they receive. Mothers agree more with the statement 'I know where to get information and advice I need for dilemmas I face as a parent'. However, they do not differ in terms of whether they think they are doing a good job as a parent, whether they have support from friends and family as a parent and overall life satisfaction.



Parenting for a Digital Future

- Advantaged parents (those with a higher SES and education background) offer notably more forms of online support to their children such as searching for information or advice about their child's health, local activities and events, information to help their child's learning, signing up or paying for classes and activities etc.



A decorative border at the top of the page features a dense pattern of colorful icons representing various digital and parenting concepts, such as people, devices, and communication. The background of the top section is a solid blue color.

Parenting for a Digital Future

Mixed findings for how supported parents feel they are

- More advantaged parents (those with a high SES status and education) are more satisfied with their lives, feel more supported by family and friends in terms of parenting and know better where to get the information and advice for dilemmas faced as a parent. But SES and education are unrelated to whether they feel they are doing a good job as parents.
- There is no ethnic difference in parental support by friends and family, access to information when facing dilemmas as a parent and life satisfaction. However, Asian parents are more likely to think that they are doing a good job as a parent, followed by White parents. Black parents have the least confidence in thinking themselves as good parents.
- Single parents feel equally good at their parenting and as supported as do parents in couples, although they are overall notably less satisfied with their lives.
- Parents of children with SEN are less likely to say they are doing a good job as a parent, report less support from friends and family, and are less satisfied with their lives (although there is no difference in availability of information).

Connected learning and use of the internet for educational support are linked to relative privilege

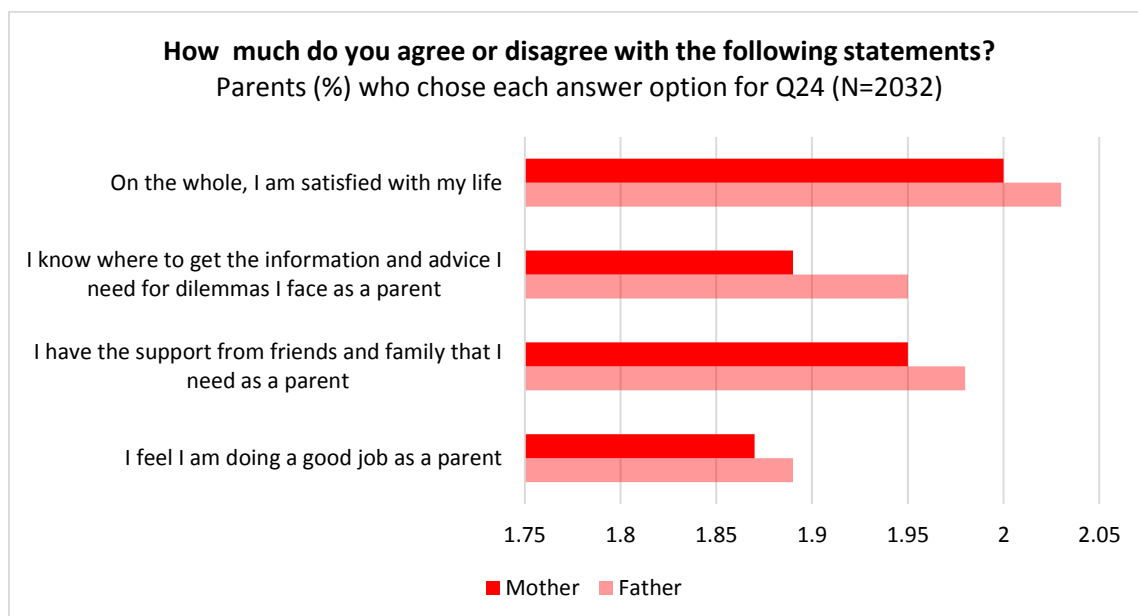
- Digital inequality is also mirrored in enrichment activities. The findings suggest that connected learning and use of the internet for educational support are a relatively privileged phenomenon for children from high SES backgrounds and parents with more education. Children from a higher SES background have more connected learning opportunities at home and school. More parents with a higher SES also agree that the child's teacher values what they learn in after-school or extra-curricular activities.
- Children with more educated parents participate in more enrichment activities such as sports clubs, language group/lessons, computing or coding clubs and other technology-related club (e.g. video games, Lego Mindstorms, video editing, music technology).
- Children with SEN appear to receive less enrichment or connected learning opportunities, but their parents take up more opportunities for educational support.
- However, Black children participate in more enrichment activities, followed by Asian children, with White children participating the least.

4. Online risks and parental mediation

Mothers do more parental mediation, although fathers don't do much less

The extraordinarily rapid innovation and adoption of digital devices opens up new imaginations about the practice of parenting. Are parents from different backgrounds ready to embrace the changes with the same willingness? Are they equally capable of adopting online support activities and addressing online harms/risks? Do they know where to seek information and advice when faced with dilemmas and risks? We find that:

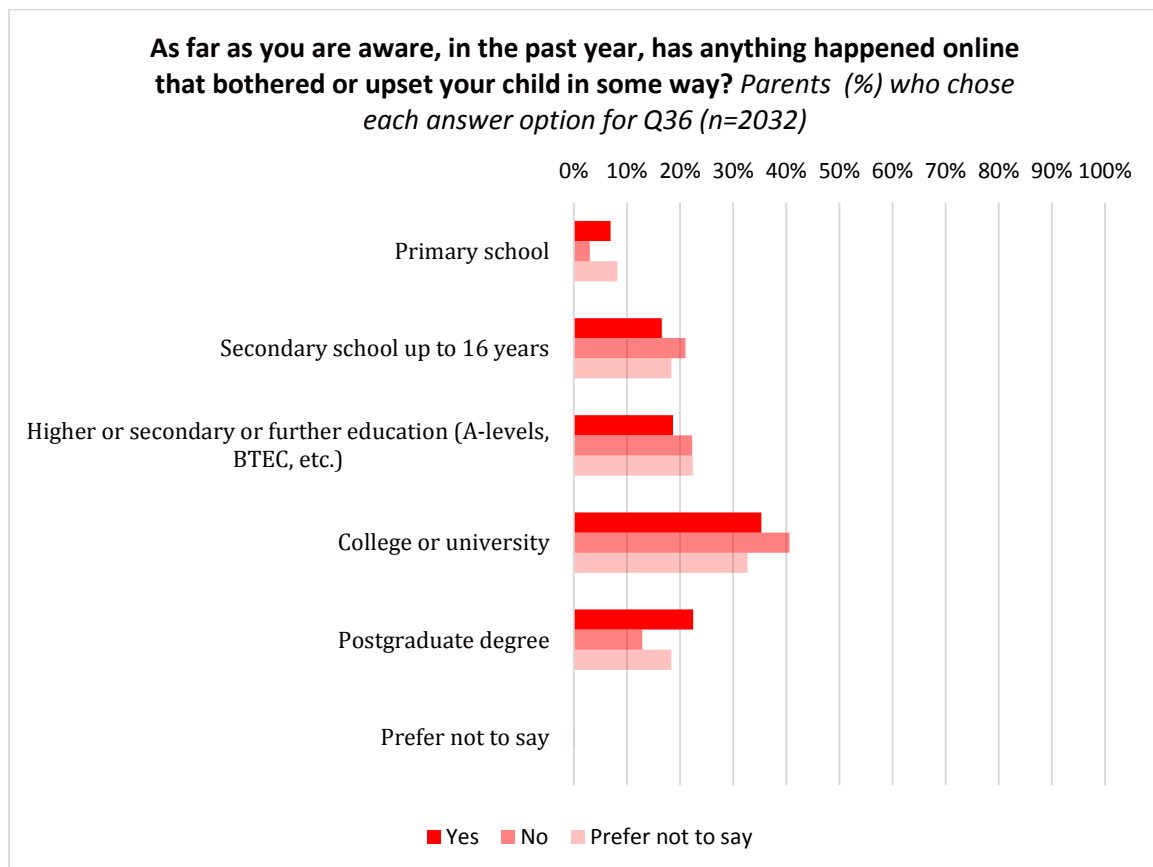
- Mothers do more parental mediation, although fathers don't do much less. We asked parents if they adopted a range of parental mediation practices to monitor their child's internet use, such as encouraging their child to explore and learn things on the internet, making rules about how long or when the child is allowed to go online and more.
- Parents on average report that they 'sometimes' do a range of enabling and restrictive forms of parental mediation. However, mothers do a bit more in terms of rules and controls such as talking to the child about what they do on the internet, using parental control apps and making rules of how long the child can stay on the internet. Nevertheless, fathers are not falling behind much in terms of overall parental mediation activities compared to mothers.
- There are no notable differences between girls and boys in terms of access to the internet, frequency of internet use, digital skills, connected learning opportunities, enrichment activities and educational support; they also face similar levels of online risks.
- We asked parents how much they agree with the following statements, where strongly agree = 1 and strongly disagree = 5. The findings suggest that mothers report themselves as knowing better how to seek information and advice when faced with dilemmas than fathers, but they do not differ in terms of parental satisfaction/support or overall life satisfaction.



More educated/higher SES parents, single parents and parents of children with SEN report more online harms for children

We asked parents if anything has happened online that bothered or upset their child in some way in the past year.

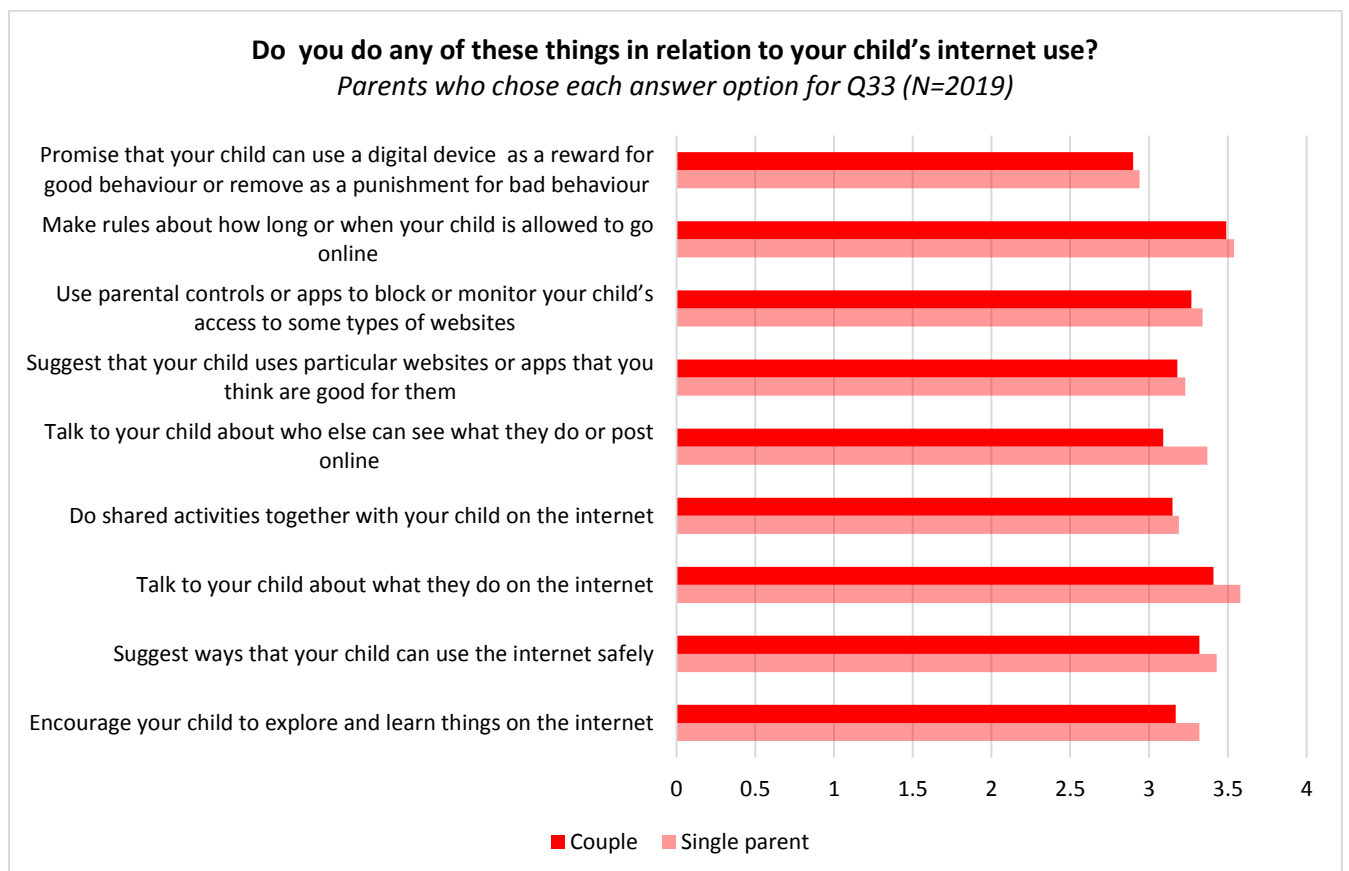
- Parents with a higher SES and education background report more problems for the child: around twice as many parents from high SES homes report problems as parents of low SES status.
- Single parents report more harms experienced online by themselves and by their children.
- Parents of children with SEN also report more online harms for both themselves and for their children.
- There is no ethnic divide in the online harms experienced by both parents and children.



Parenting for a Digital Future

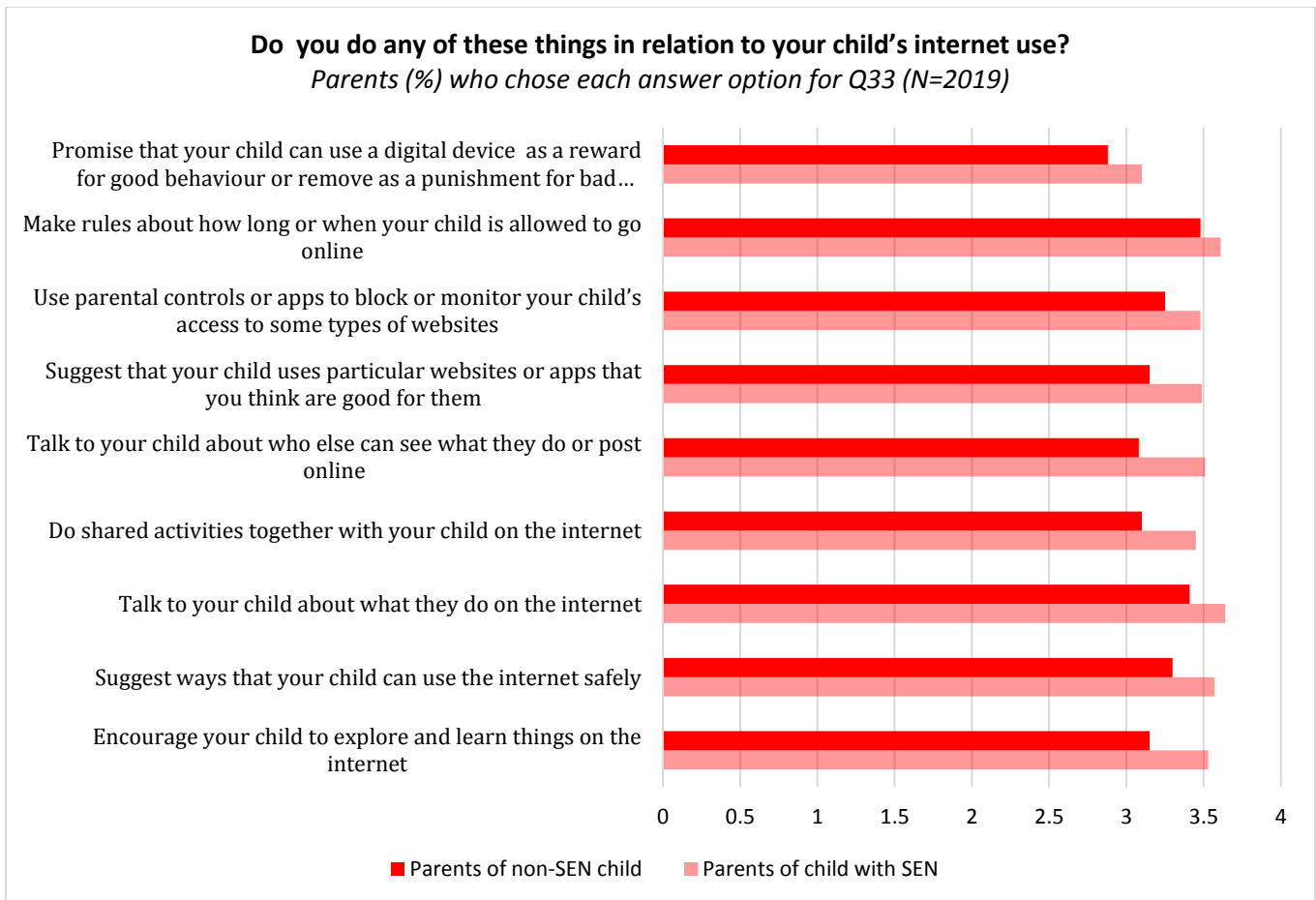
Parents of high SES and education, single parents and parents of children with SEN do more parental mediation

- Parents with a higher SES and higher education background do more parental mediation activities such as suggesting ways that their children can use the internet safely, discussing their online activities and using parental control or apps to block their child's access to certain types of website. However, there is no ethnic divide in parental mediation activities.
- Single parents do more parental mediation. In particular, single parents talk to their children about who else can see what they do or post online more often than couples.



Parenting for a Digital Future

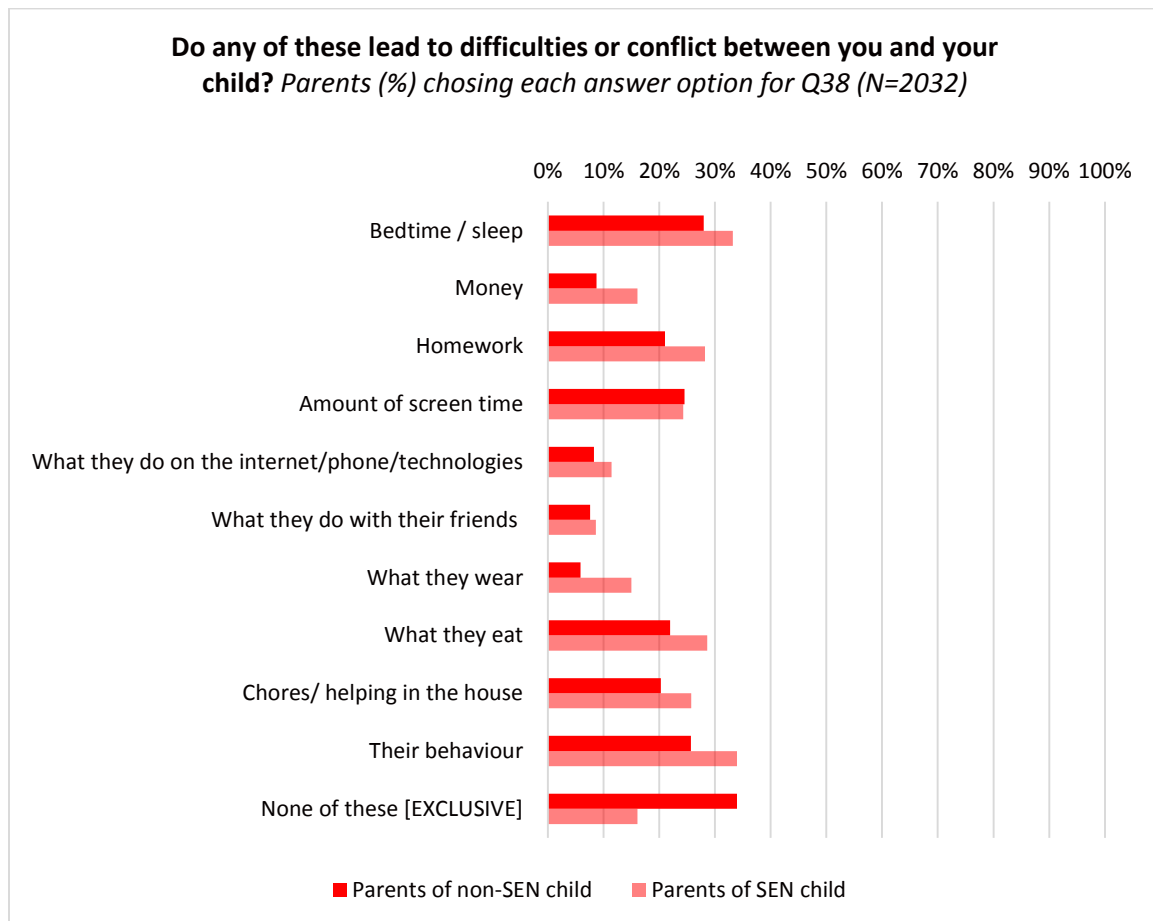
- Parents of children with SEN also report doing more parental mediation in the majority of the activities we asked about, ranging from suggesting ways to use the internet safely to doing shared activities together with their children on the internet. However, they do not differ from parents of non-SEN children in terms of using parental controls or apps to block or monitor their child's access to some types of website, making rules about how long or when their child is allowed to go online, or promising that their child can use a digital device (e.g. use a phone, play a game, spend time online) as a reward for good behaviour or removing it as a punishment for bad behaviour.



Parenting for a Digital Future

Parents of children with SEN report more conflicts, but no difference in conflicts linked to screen time

- Parents of children with SEN report more conflicts with their children. We asked parents if the following activities ever led to conflicts with their children, ranging from bedtime to what they wear and eat etc. More parents of children with SEN report conflicts caused by money, homework, what they wear and their behaviour. However, in terms of conflicts caused by screen time, there is no difference between children with SEN and non-SEN children.



- Even though advantaged parents (those with a higher SES and education) conduct more parental mediation activities, these do not translate into more overall conflicts with their children. Nevertheless, parents from a higher SES do report that the amount of screen time led to conflicts with their child more than those from a lower SES home. It is interesting to note that parents with more education, although conducting more parental mediation activities, do not have more conflicts with their children about screen time.
- Advantaged parents report no more or fewer conflicts with their children on what they do on the internet/phone/technologies than disadvantaged ones.
- Nor is there any ethnic divide in overall conflicts between parents and children.



Parenting for a Digital Future

Parenting for a Digital Future recent publications

- Blum-Ross, A., and Livingstone, S. (2018) The trouble with 'screen time' rules. In Mascheroni, G., et al. (eds.) *Digital Parenting: The Challenges for Families in the Digital Age*. Nordicom. Available at http://www.nordicom.gu.se/sites/default/files/kapitel-pdf/16_blum-ross_livingstone.pdf
- Livingstone, S. and Blum-Ross, A. (2018) Imagining the future through the lens of the digital: Parents' narratives of generational change. In *A networked self: Birth, life, death*. Papacharissi, Z. (ed.) University of Chicago Press. Available at <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/87750/>
- Livingstone, S. and Blum-Ross, A. (2017) Researching children and childhood in the digital age. In James, A. and Christensen, P. (eds.) *Research with children*, 3rd edition. London: Routledge. Available at <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/68897/>
- Blum-Ross, A. and Livingstone, S. (2017) 'Sharenting', parent blogging and the boundaries of the digital self. *Popular Communication*, 15(2): 110-25. Available at <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/67380/>
- Blum-Ross, A. and Livingstone, S. (2016) From youth voice to young entrepreneurs: The individualization of digital media and learning. *Journal of Digital Media Literacy*, 4(1-2). Available at <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/67045/>
- Blum-Ross, A. and Livingstone, S. (2016) Families and screen time: Current advice and emerging research. *Media Policy Brief 17*. London: Media Policy Project, LSE. Available at <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/66927/>

Our blog at www.parenting.digital

We aim to give researchers, advocates, industry and parents easy access to the latest research on parenting, children and digital media. Visit www.parenting.digital to subscribe. Recent posts have included:

- Critical digital literacy: Ten key readings for our distrustful media age
- How are social media companies protecting children online? Evaluating anti-cyberbullying
- Banning kids from having smartphones misses the point
- Fake news and critical literacy: New findings, new questions

Acknowledgements

This report was made possible by grants from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation in connection with its grant-making initiative on Digital Media and Learning. We thank the colleagues who advised us on this project, including from the Connected Learning Research Network (www.macfound.org/networks/research-network-connected-learning/), Department of Media and Communications at the London School of Economics and Political Science, Ofcom, Common Sense Media and Childwise. Thanks to Alicia Blum-Ross especially, and to Helena Dare-Edwards, Ellen Helsper, Jackie Marsh, Mimi Ito, Simon Leggett, Vicky Rideout, Mike Robb, Julian Sefton-Green, Mariya Stoilova, Lori Takeuchi and Ellen Wartella. Cover image credit: V.D. Nguyen, CC BY-SA 2.0.jpg.

Contact

Sonia Livingstone s.livingstone@lse.ac.uk / [@Livingstone_S](https://twitter.com/Livingstone_S)
Alicia Blum-Ross a.blum-ross@lse.ac.uk / [@aliciablumross](https://twitter.com/aliciablumross)