

FAMILY ONLINE SAFETY INSTITUTE



Connected and Protected: Insights from FOSI's 2025 Online Safety Survey

**SPRING 2025
SURVEY REPORT**

Supported by





ABOUT THIS STUDY

In February through March of 2025, FOSI partnered with Ipsos to field the Online Safety Survey among 1,000 children aged 10 to 17 and 1,000 parents of children in that age range. This survey was conducted in the United States among a sample representative of the general population. This research sheds light on how parents and children feel about children's experience using the internet. While only half of parents utilize parental controls to restrict their children's online activity, parents are engaged in other ways; many have more informal house rules governing online activity, and nine in ten children feel comfortable talking to their parents if they ever feel unsafe online. The study also explores specific risks of internet use and other online safety concerns. The Online Safety Survey is an ongoing, bi-annual research project designed to track online safety trends over time.

Key Insights:

- Parental controls are underutilized across each device tested. Adoption of parental controls varies widely, from 51% on tablets to 35% on video game consoles.
- Posting on and scrolling social media is a top concern for both parents and children.
- 89% of kids say they feel comfortable turning to their parents if something online makes them feel unsafe.
- Parental awareness of kids' AI use is increasing.
- Parents who report lower screen time for their children are more likely to have installed parental controls.





TOPICS SURVEYED

Device Ownership

The Online Safety Survey gauges screen usage and parental control implementation across six different types of devices: laptop computers, desktop computers, tablets, smartphones, smart TVs, and video game consoles. Of these devices, children are most likely to have access to smartphones (88%) and smart TVs (87%). Just over half of children (51%) have access to a desktop computer.

Screen Time

Children spend their time online in a wide variety of ways, with most using the internet for any given purpose more often than parents think they do. For example, **75% of parents say that their child has played video games within the last week, but 81% of children say they've done so in the same time period.** This trend can be observed across numerous different types of activities: watching videos (84% to 88% respectively), streaming TV and movies (70% to 75%), and especially scrolling (50% to 60%) or posting (39% to 46%) on social media. Some parents may be engaging in some wishful thinking by overestimating the amount of time children spend on traditionally productive activities: working on creative projects (28% to 23%) and reading books/articles (25% to 19%).

IN OVER TWO THIRDS OF HOUSEHOLDS, PARENTS HAVE INSTITUTED SOME RESTRICTIONS ON SCREEN TIME

Even if they don't have a perfect understanding of how their children are spending their time online, most parents are mindful about overall screen time. **In over two thirds of households, parents have instituted some restrictions on screen time**—though these rules differ according to the gender of the child. Parents of boys are much more likely to set limits on playing video games, while parents of girls are much more likely to limit time spent posting and scrolling social media. Limits on screen time are one of many house rules parents use to govern children's online activity, whether or not they set parental controls on the devices children use. Virtually all parents set rules on the use of devices in the home, with the most popular being “must finish all homework/chores before using this device.” The device being taken away if household rules are broken is also extremely prevalent across devices.

This highlights the fact that many types of devices in households are treated as rewards for finishing tasks, either instead of or in addition to being tools to utilize in the completion of those tasks.



Parental Controls

This study examines seven different types of parental controls, listed below:

WEB FILTERS

These can block specific websites, words or images from being accessed

APP RESTRICTIONS

These prevent your child from accessing specific content on the web and from downloading specific apps without parent permission

PRIVACY SETTINGS

These prevent sharing of personal information via social media or email

TIME LIMITS

Setting the amount of time spent online or on certain apps

ACTIVITY MONITORS

Allow parents to see which websites children visit and what they do online

COMMUNICATION LIMITS

These set limits for who your child can message/call/FaceTime

SPENDING LIMITS

These set limits on the amount of money that can be spent in-game or in-app

In this survey, both parents and children were asked if the devices accessible to children had parental controls installed. On each device tested, **about half or fewer parents are currently using parental controls**. Parents most often apply controls on tablets (51%), while only 35% do so for video game consoles. This may be due to the U.S.'s widely established video game rating system. Parents may feel these ratings help them purchase age-appropriate games for their children, so they don't need to focus as much on parental controls.

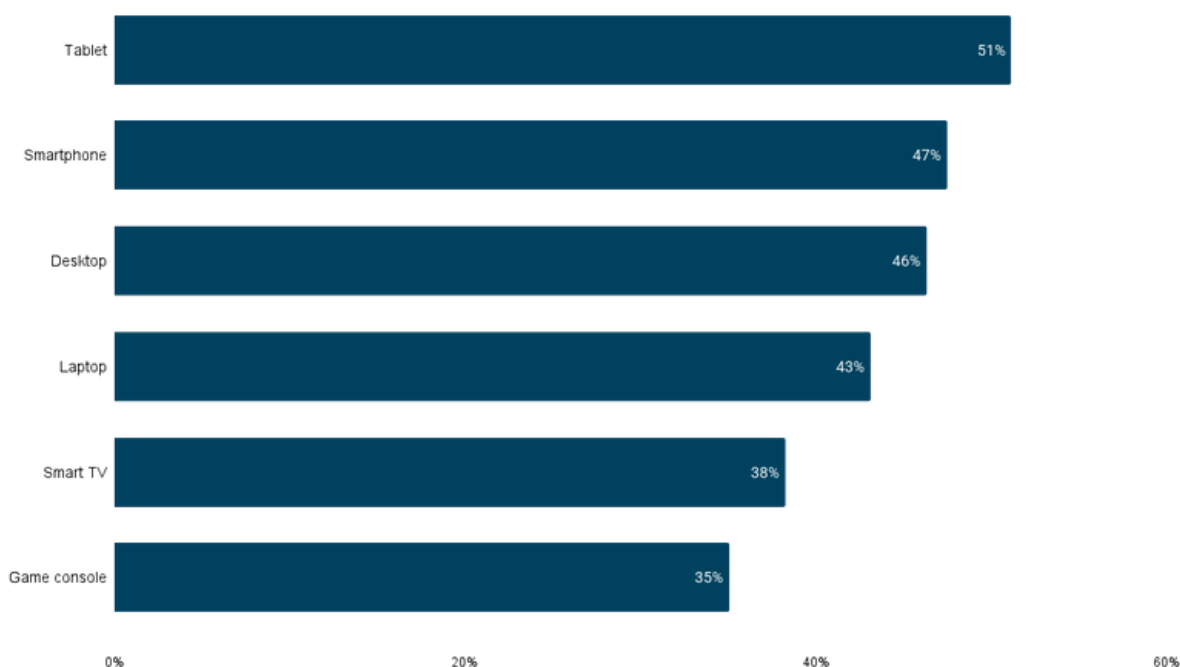




These numbers could also reflect parents' higher level of concern around social media, which can be accessed via the top four devices for which parental controls are utilized. These concerns will be discussed in detail later in the paper.

Parents in nearly three in four households set app restrictions on their children's devices, making this the most common of the parental controls tested. These restrictions are especially common on smartphones. Interestingly, parents who report less screen time are those most likely to set parental controls on devices. This seems to indicate that parental involvement can be effective at bringing down screen time as well as keeping children safer online. This level of involvement and collaboration might also enhance the efficacy of the parental controls.

Overall, more than four in five households using each type of parental control find them effective. Time limits are seen as significantly less useful than other types of parental controls—perhaps because the online world is rich and varied, and it can be difficult to set time limits on screens that children use for a wide variety of purposes, including socializing, homework, and entertainment. Additionally, children often have access to more than one device, making time limits difficult to enforce. In households that report six or more conversations about online safety annually, both parents and children are more likely to say that parental controls succeed in keeping children safe online. This shows that by openly discussing online safety in the home, children and parents derive more value from online safety tools put in place.



Q: Which of these devices have you/your parent set parental controls on?

Base: Tablet owners (n=1,500), Desktop owners (n=1,032), Smartphone owners (n=1,763), Laptop owners (n=1,461), Smart TV owners (n=1,739), Game console owners (n=1,629)



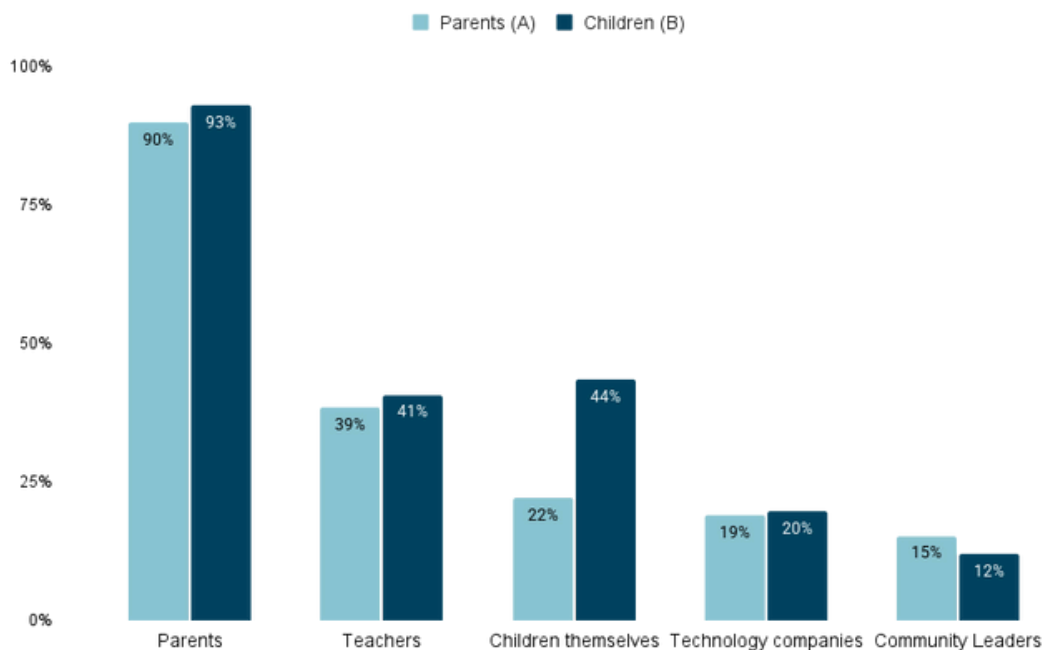
Responsibility for Education

Both parents and children overwhelmingly agree that parents should be teaching their children about online safety. However, **children themselves are twice as likely to report that they are responsible for teaching themselves about online safety than parents.**

Parents are also more likely than children to agree that community leaders (i.e., police, religious leaders) should be teaching kids about online safety.

CHILDREN ARE 2X AS LIKELY TO SAY THEY ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR TEACHING THEMSELVES ABOUT ONLINE SAFETY THAN PARENTS

All agree that parents should be engaged in the process of online safety education, and there is a clear desire on the part of children to involve themselves as well; this means that any online safety conversation should be a two-way conversation between parents and children, with both parties learning from each other.



Q: Who do you feel is responsible for teaching your child/you about online safety?
 Base: Parents (n=1,000), Children (n=1,000)



Concerns

In general, children are less concerned about using the internet than parents are. While 76% of children surveyed say that they feel safe when using the internet, only 54% of parents say they feel safe with their child using the internet. This highlights a potential gap in communication and understanding regarding online experiences, a gap we also see when probing about concern around specific activities.

Posting on social media is the most worrying online activity for both parents and children, with parents (46%) even more likely to report concern than children (39%). The same is true for the next most common areas of concern:

scrolling social media (44% to 30%, respectively) and watching videos (43% to 32%). Scrolling social media is a particular point of disagreement for girls and parents of girls. Only 30% of girls cite it as the most worrying online activity, compared to 46% of parents of girls. This heightened awareness is also seen among parents of girls when asking what activities they are most likely to place limits on, with parents of girls much more likely to put limits on scrolling and posting to social media than parents of boys. When it comes to more specific threats, both children (23%) and especially parents (31%) identify predatory behavior as the single most dangerous risk children may encounter online. More than parents, children focus on technology-driven risks like data breaches and scams.

	Total	Parents	Children
Predatory Behavior	70%	73%	66%
Giving away personal information	66%	66%	65%
Cyberbullying	63%	63%	63%
Seeing age-inappropriate content	60%	68%	52%
Accidentally downloading viruses	49%	41%	57%
Data breaches and privacy risks	42%	38%	46%
Getting scammed out of money	42%	36%	47%
Spending too much time online	39%	44%	34%
Spending money without permission	29%	28%	30%
Encountering mis/dis-information	28%	30%	25%
Plagiarism related to AI tools	13%	13%	14%

Q: Please rank your top 5 biggest concerns related to using the internet. Ranked 1-5 risk.
Base: Total respondents (n=2,000), Parents (n=1,000), Children (n=1,000)

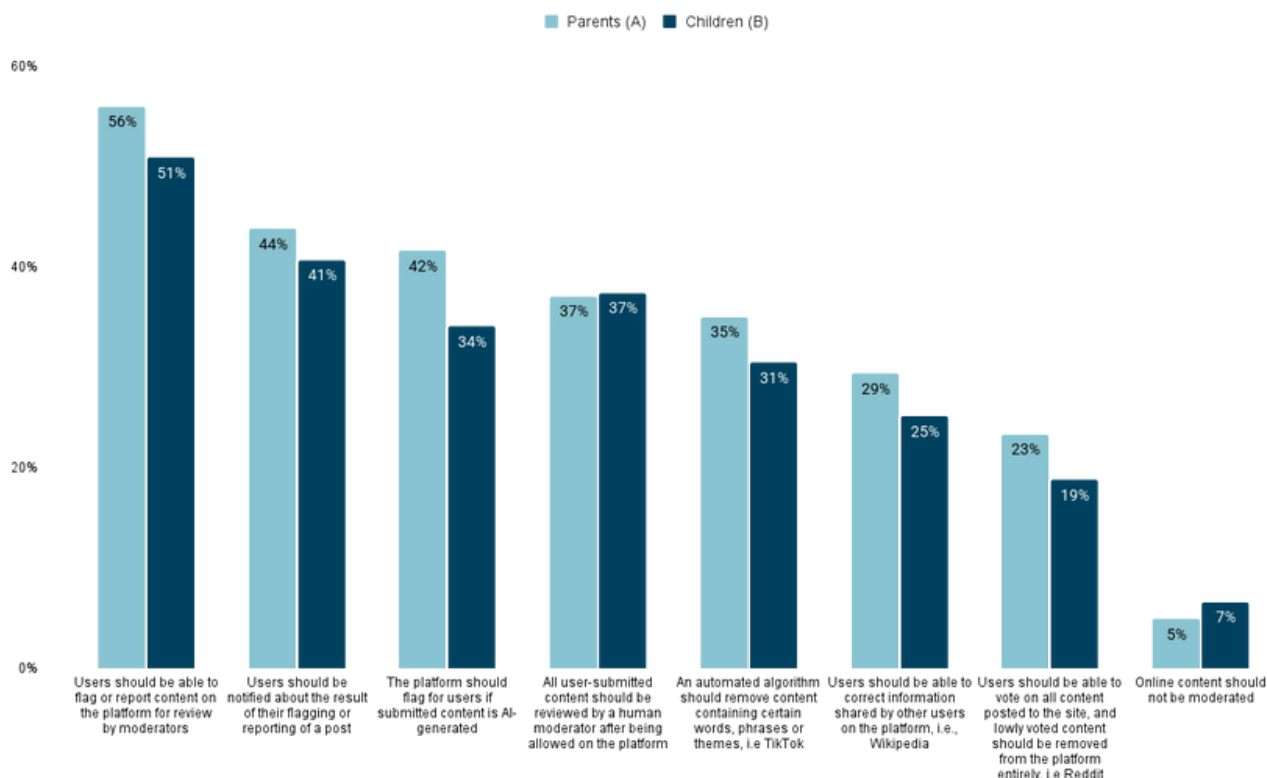


This could be due to children being more aware of online scams through privacy-focused online safety education, or an emphasis on online security on school-owned devices.

Despite the widespread and consistent threats that contribute to concerns about online safety, **89% of children say that they feel comfortable talking to their parents about anything that happens online that makes them feel unsafe.** Parents agree with this, as 83% of parents feel that their child talks with them openly about what happens online. This underscores the importance of trust between parents and children, and supports the view of online safety as a collaborative effort as opposed to a priority imposed by parents on their children.

Content Moderation

While parents are more likely than children to support content moderation strategies, **both groups favor flagging/reporting content to moderators as their preferred form of content moderation.** The largest difference between parents and children is in their advocacy for auto-flagging all AI-generated content, which parents (42%) are significantly more likely than children (34%) to support. Compounding the issue, parents think their children understand generative AI tools' platform practices at a higher rate (68%) than children say they actually do (60%).



Q: In your opinion, how should content on online platforms be moderated?
Base: Parents (n=1,000), Children (n=1,000)



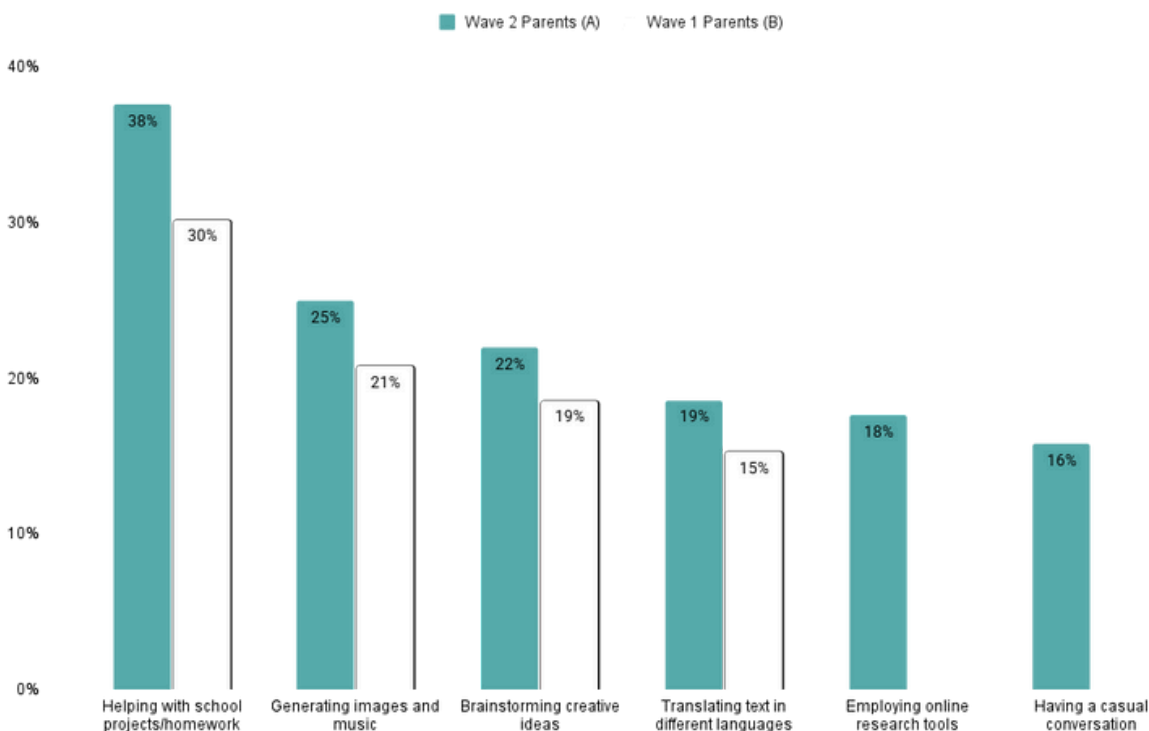
Generative AI

Use of AI has increased in just the short time between a previous wave of this research (conducted in September 2024) and this most recent wave. Parents are more likely to say their children use generative AI to help them complete schoolwork (38% in Wave 2 vs. 30% in Wave 1), and also report increased use for generating images (25% vs. 21%) and translations (19% vs. 15%).

When it comes to children's generative AI use, over 60% reported using it for at least one of the tasks surveyed.

ONLY HALF OF PARENTS AND CHILDREN THINK AI WILL HELP MAKE THEM SAFER ONLINE

While the majority of parents predict positive impacts from AI, particularly in the realm of creativity, they are more cautious than children when it comes to possible effects on academics and media literacy. Crucially, **only half of parents and children think AI will help make them safer online**. It is up to platforms that develop and/or use AI tools to demonstrate how they can use those tools to make the internet a safer and easier to navigate place for children.



Q: Has your child previously used generative AI for any of the following tasks?

Base: Wave 1 Parents (n=1,000), Wave 2 Parents (n=1,000)

Note: "Employing online research tools" and "Having a casual conversation" were not included in the first wave of this survey



Implications for Parents

These findings indicate that parents should take time to learn about and adopt parental controls. With parents generally underutilizing these tools, it is clear they may be hesitant or overwhelmed. The over-abundance of information available about these tools could lead some parents to give up on parental controls partially or altogether. As a first step, parents should check in with their children about how they are spending their time online, and start implementing the relevant parental controls. For example, if a child frequently plays video games on a console, parents should learn about the controls specific to that device, rather than trying to master the controls for every device and platform all at once. Familiarizing themselves with one form of parental controls will likely help parents understand these tools elsewhere as well. Our findings demonstrate a clear benefit to using parental controls, as four out of five caregivers who use these controls find them effective.

Parents should be cognizant of their children's screen time and online activities. These results show that, in most cases, kids are spending more time online than their parents think they are. This is especially true when it comes to posting on and/or scrolling social media, which are also parents' top concerns about their children's screen time. To gain a clearer picture of their children's digital habits, parents should regularly check in and ask open-ended questions, such as why certain activities appeal to their kids more than others. To emphasize a previous point, implementing parental controls such as activity monitors can provide useful insight into children's online behavior. Good digital parenting is rooted in mutual understanding, and knowing where and how often children are spending their time online is a significant step in the right direction.

This research makes a strong argument for the importance of families talking openly and often about their digital lives.





The data show that both parents and children view parents as primarily responsible for teaching children about online safety—though nearly half of children also see themselves as having a role in their own safety education. This suggests that both parents and children see digital safety as primarily a family affair. In order to make sure that children are accentuating the positives of online life while mitigating the negatives, it is important to normalize frequent family online safety conversations before problems arise that necessitate these types of discussions. Encouragingly, most children report feeling comfortable talking to their parents if something online makes them feel unsafe. Parents should feel heartened by their kids' trust, and use it as motivation to confidently initiate ongoing discussions about online safety.

Implications for Industry

There are substantial opportunities for industry to take these findings and make some internal improvements to increase online safety and user trust. First, tech companies could address both kids' top fear of online scams and parents' prominent fear of predatory behavior by issuing alerts or offering additional context. This could include flagging that a user has zero mutual connections, appears to be in a different country, or has a suspicious profile. Much like how phone companies now add a "Potential Spam" label to calls with a high likelihood of being spam.

Platforms adding similar types of flags or notifications can go a long way toward addressing families' fears and building users' trust.

There is always an opportunity to improve the ease of implementing and using parental controls. While parental controls can be effective in improving kids' online safety, this survey revealed that they are underutilized across each device tested. Efforts to streamline and simplify, especially collaborative efforts across apps, platforms, and industry, will go a long way towards increasing adoption. This is necessary because the data also show that the use of parental controls is correlated with lower screen time for kids. Companies have built effective parental controls, they just need to work together to increase the ease of use and interoperability of these important tools.

Another opportunity for industry is to provide more transparency around AI and generative AI technology. Providing children with clear explanations of why a generative AI system produced a specific answer, why an algorithm recommended certain content or accounts, and what its chatbot limitations are can greatly improve their ability to use this technology safely. This is especially important as over half of kids reported using generative AI. Kids and families are already using generative AI technology. Companies can provide more transparency to their users, leading to safer online experiences.



Finally, online platforms should inform their content moderation practices based on this study. Both parents and kids acknowledged the importance of content moderation, and highlighted their clear preferences. The top moderation intervention for parents and kids was a user reporting mechanism, followed by requiring a response from the platform to the user about the results of their report. Another popular intervention was to automatically flag/label all AI content. Companies already invest significant time, money, and personnel into content moderation. These investments will be worthwhile when they best align with users' preferences and expectations.

Implications for Policymakers

This study provides important data that will be helpful to policymakers crafting online safety legislation. While parental controls can be effective in improving kids' online safety, more than 50% of parents do not use these controls on each device tested in the survey. Companies have invested heavily in designing and publicly rolling out these tools targeted to parents and families, and have made efforts to improve their adoption and efficacy. However, the low adoption rate could indicate that parents are overwhelmed and struggle to adopt such a wide array of tools, let alone use them effectively.

Policymakers have an opportunity here to improve the interoperability of parental controls across devices, platforms, and services. The Kids Online Safety Act ([KOSA](#)) includes a section on parental controls, which lays out basic and appropriate controls that platforms must offer if they know a user is a child. This is a particularly strong part of the bill, as it strikes the right balance between requiring effective controls while respecting the privacy rights of minors and preventing the controls from turning into surveillance tools. The text of the bill could go even further towards setting a standard for similar "covered platforms" to meet. Standardizing and harmonizing parental controls would improve parents' experiences with setting up and effectively using these safety tools.

This study shows that parental controls, when used, can work to reduce screen time. Screen time is inversely correlated with parental controls, which means that families who use parental controls report lower screen time for their children. These tools do not solve every risk or harm to online safety, but they are certainly part of the solution.

**POLICYMAKERS HAVE AN
OPPORTUNITY TO IMPROVE THE
INTEROPERABILITY OF PARENTAL
CONTROLS**



Children and families are using AI more often and more regularly. Even in the six months between the first wave of this study and the second wave, significantly more parents reported that their children were using generative AI for tasks like schoolwork and image creation. Policymakers must be forward-thinking in online safety regulation, moving beyond social media platforms to include technology like AI. Families need basic protections when using these newer technologies including data privacy and transparency requirements. There is also an opportunity to go further in the regulation of algorithmic systems, dark patterns, and other specific risks to kids such as character chatbots. The TAKE IT DOWN Act is a good example of clarifying and updating the prohibition of spreading non-consensual intimate image abuse online, including AI-generated deepfakes.

Finally, policymakers should be clear about the intent of their legislation. Is the goal to set a baseline online safety standard that applies to all apps and services connected to the internet, or to target specific harms, design features, or types of apps? Parents and kids report that posting on and scrolling social media are the most concerning uses of screen time. Policies to improve youth safety on social media platforms can look different than those that apply to streaming services, video games, and other online activities. Policymakers should be thoughtful about the scope and implementation of their proposed legislation.

CONCLUSION



This study reveals crucial insights into the evolving landscape of online safety. While this research demonstrates that there are risks associated with the digital world, it is also clear that online safety measures help children, and their parents, feel they can navigate online life confidently and securely. The findings highlight the importance of open communication between parents and children, proactive online safety education, and the need for collaboration across industries to make parental controls interoperable and easier to use. By continuing to study online safety trends, FOSI will advance its mission to make the online world safer for children and their families.



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This survey was conducted with support from the Entertainment Software Association and TikTok.



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

About Ipsos: Ipsos is the third largest market research company in the world, present in 90 markets and employing more than 18,000 people.