

Screen time, digital life and social media use of children and young people

Pupil Wellbeing Survey 2026

Contents

Introduction 3
The Pupil Wellbeing Survey 3
Limitations and caveats of the survey 3
Analysis of deprivation.....4
Education about screen usage.....5
Screen time.....7
Activity online.....7
Time spent online 9
Impact of excessive screen time.....11
Behaviours linked to excessive screen time 12
Use of social media 12
Online harms and illegal activity online 14
Sexting and sexual exploitation 14
Body image.....15
Purchasing vapes online 15
Online support 15
Conclusion 16

Introduction

Extended screen time has become increasingly normal for children and young people. Research[1] suggests that between 2020 and 2022 there was a 52% increase in children's screen time, and that nearly 25% of children and young people use their smartphones in a way that is consistent with having a behavioural addiction.

The UK government is currently exploring and proposing restrictions and guidance around internet and social media usage for children and young people. This is broad ranging and includes a proposal to ban social media for children under 16[2], but also guidance around time spent online and content appropriate for pre-school children[3].

The Pupil Wellbeing Survey

The Pupil Wellbeing Survey (PWS) and Online Pupil Survey™ (OPS) is a biennial survey that has been undertaken with Gloucestershire students since 2006. Children and young people participate in Years 4, 5 and 6 in primary settings; Years 8 and 10 in secondary settings; and Years 12 and 13 in post-16 settings such as sixth forms and colleges. A large proportion of mainstream, special and independent settings, colleges and educational establishments take part, representing approximately 70.0% of students in participating year groups in 2026. The PWS asks a wide variety of questions about children's characteristics, behaviours and lived experience that could have an impact on their overall wellbeing. The 2026 PWS was undertaken between January and April 2026.

Limitations and caveats of the survey

Not all children and young people who are resident in Gloucestershire attend educational establishments in the county and similarly not all children and young people attending educational establishments in Gloucestershire are residents in the county. It is therefore important to remember this analysis is based on the student population not the resident population.

Gloucestershire is a grammar authority and has a number of notable independent settings, and several mainstream settings very close to the county's boundary; these all attract students from out of county. This results in the education population (particularly at secondary phase) having slightly different characteristics, especially ethnicity, to the resident young people's population. 12.3% of Gloucestershire's resident population (2021 Census) were estimated to be from diverse ethnic communities; however, 23.1% of Gloucestershire's education population were students from diverse ethnic communities in January 2026 and 23.4% of the PWS cohort were students from diverse ethnic communities in the 2026 survey.

Although a large proportion of the county's educational settings took part in the survey, some only had low numbers of students completing the survey; in contrast, others had high numbers. Although this doesn't impact the overall county analysis, as demographics are represented as expected at this geography, analysis by district and education phase might only have certain demographic groups represented due to low student take-up (for example, low numbers completing the survey in Tewkesbury at FE level). Where FE provision

[1] Screen time: impacts on education and wellbeing - Education Committee (parliament.uk)

[2] https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-10468/

[3] https://beststartinlife.gov.uk/screen-time-under-5s/

is situated also impacts the survey, as older students travel further to access FE provision.



Analysis of deprivation

Settings have been categorised into statistical neighbour groups which cluster settings with students of a similar socio-economic profile within the same type of setting (a similar level of deprivation, affluence or personal/family characteristics).

We use Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) to determine the relative deprivation of students. The IMD is based on the home postcode of students (collected in the School Census). This is aggregated to give an overall IMD score for the setting, reflecting the deprivation levels experienced by students. The settings are then split into quintiles based on their scores: quintile 1 is the most deprived and quintile 5 is the least deprived in Gloucestershire.

In addition:

- Grammar/selective[4] settings are compared to other grammar/selective settings in their phase without reference to the IMD.
- Independent[5] settings are compared to other independent settings in their phase without reference to the IMD.
- Post-16 only/Further Education (FE) colleges are compared to all other post-16 only colleges without reference to the IMD.
- Special settings are compared to all other schools of this type in the same phase without reference to the IMD.
- Vocational and alternative settings are compared to other settings in the same phase without reference to IMD.



[4] This is a setting that requires students to sit an entrance exam to attend

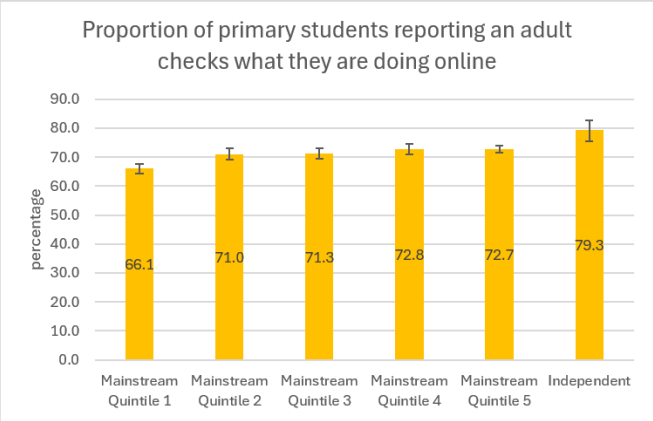
[5] This is a fee-paying setting

Education about screen usage

Key takeaways:

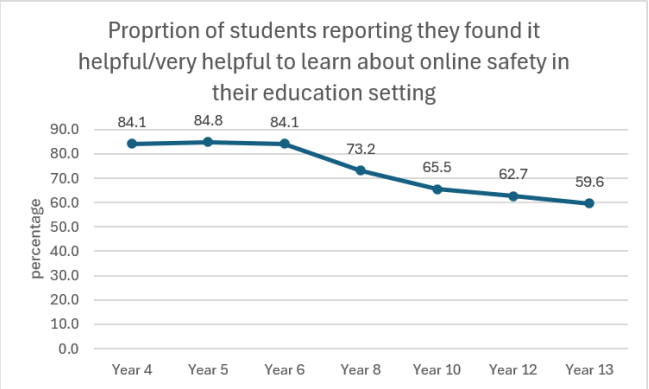
- Online safety education is generally valued, but its perceived helpfulness declines with age and is lower in more deprived settings.
- Younger students show the greatest demand for further online safety, gaming and screen-time support.
- Students with low mental wellbeing and those in some setting groups are more likely to want help managing screen time.
- Support needs differ by group, with males more likely to want gaming support and females more likely to want support around body image and exploitation.
- Findings highlight the need for targeted, age-appropriate online safety support that addresses deprivation, wellbeing, misinformation and AI, gaming, screen time and online harms.

The majority of primary students (71.2%) said an adult checked what they were doing online. There was no difference between year groups however, there appears to be some correlation with deprivation. Students in mainstream quintile 1 settings (most deprived) were significantly less likely to say an adult checked what they were doing online (66.1%) than those at independent settings (79.3%).

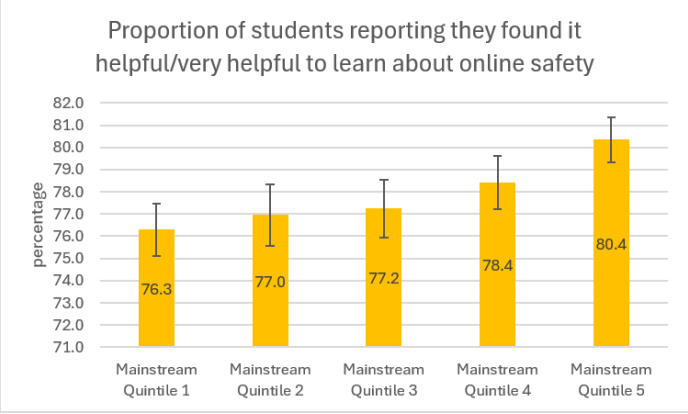


Three quarters (76.1%) of students said they found it helpful/very helpful to learn about online safety in their education setting. A further 13.0% said they found it *Just about helpful enough*.

However, the proportion of students saying they found it helpful/very helpful to learn about online safety reduced as students aged.

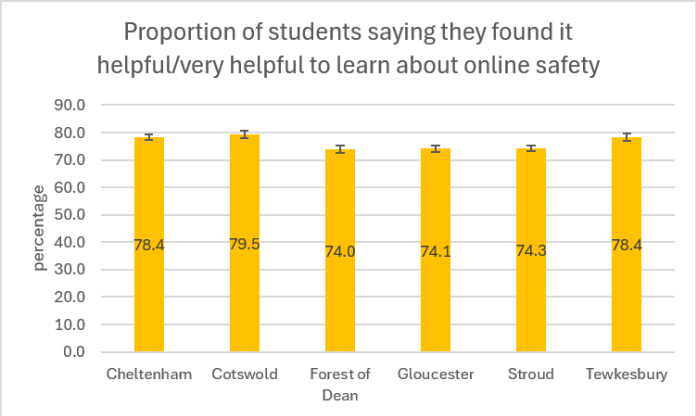


There appears to be some correlation between deprivation and finding learning about online safety helpful, with those in the least deprived settings the most likely to say they found it helpful.



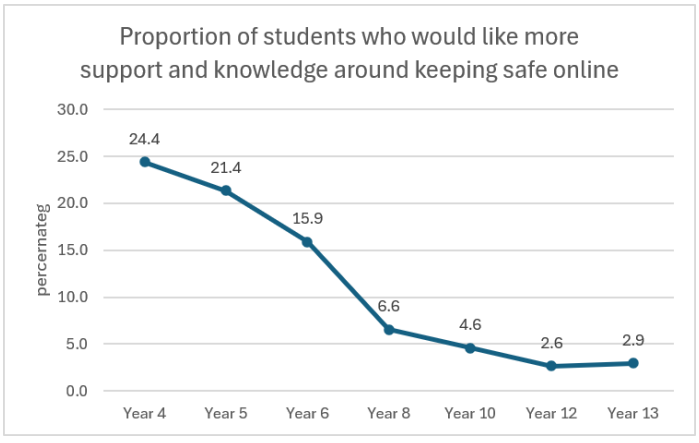
Students in settings in Forest of Dean, Gloucester and Stroud were significantly less

likely to report they found it helpful to learn about online safety than those in Cheltenham, Cotswold and Tewkesbury settings.

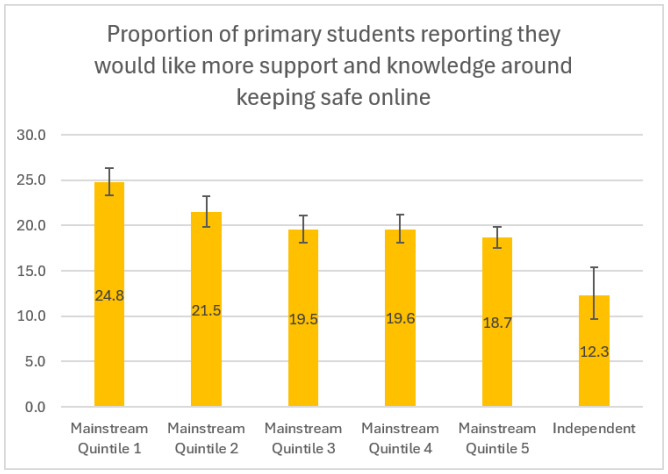




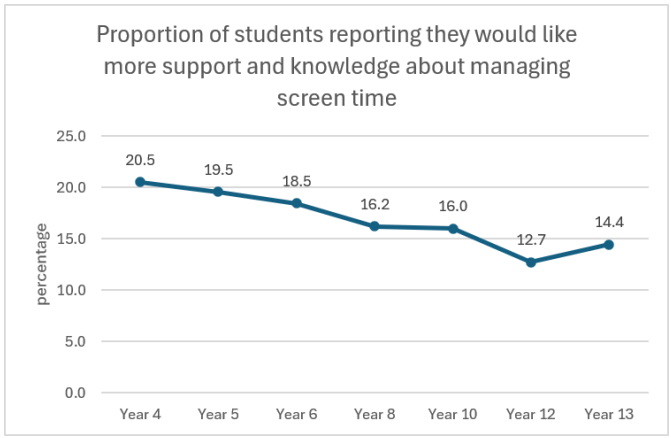
1 in 8 students reported they would like more support and knowledge around *Keeping safe and secure when online/using the internet*. This was highest in the youngest students and reduced as they aged.



There is some association between deprivation and wanting more support around online safety, this is most evident in the primary phase.

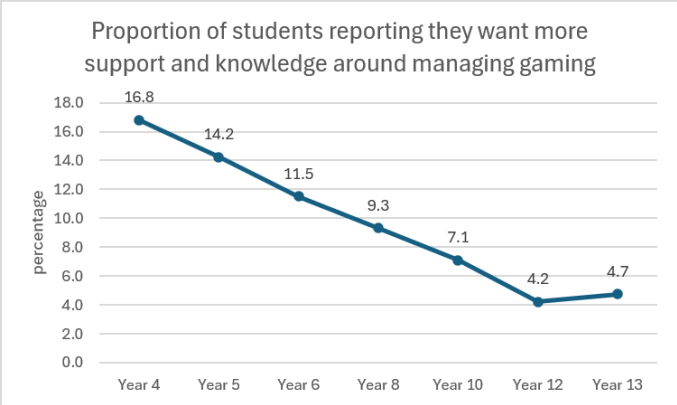


1 in 6 (17.4%) of students wanted more support and knowledge around managing screen time. Again, this reduced as students aged.

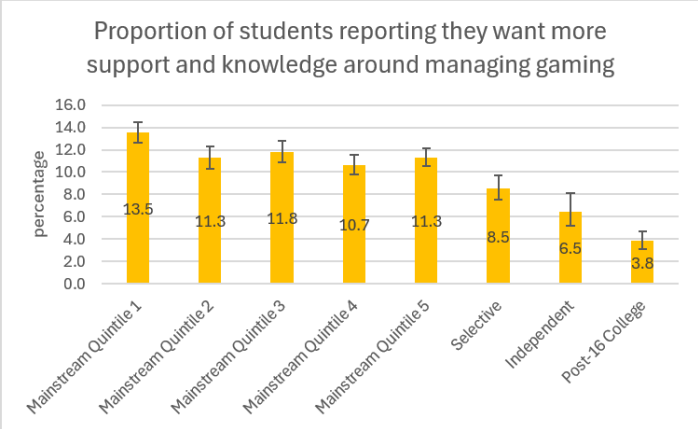


Students from selective settings (25.9% at the secondary phase) were significantly more likely to want more support and knowledge about managing screen time than any other statistical neighbour group. Students with low mental wellbeing (LMW) were also significantly more likely to report they wanted more help managing screen time than their peers with average and high mental wellbeing.

1 in 10 students said they wanted more support and knowledge about managing gaming. Males (14.7%) were significantly more likely to want more support managing gaming than females (7.1%). Younger students were more likely to want help in this area, deprivation also appears to have an impact on wanting to have more support with managing gaming.







1 in 6 secondary and post-16 students wanted more support and knowledge around *Fake news and AI* (15.3%) and 1 in 20 wanted more support and knowledge around the effect that social media and the internet had on the way they feel about their appearance. Females (6.9%) were significantly more likely to report this than males (4.5%).

Whilst not explicitly linked to online harms, 4.1% of secondary and post-16 students wanted more support and knowledge about keeping safe from exploitation and abuse. Females (5.3%) were significantly more likely than males (3.1%) to want more support about keeping safe from exploitation.

Screen time

Key takeaways:

- Excessive screen time affects 1 in 4 students and increases sharply with age, especially after Year 6.
- Excessive screen time is more common among males, deprived groups, vulnerable students and those with low mental wellbeing.
- Students with excessive screen time report poorer friendship confidence and are more likely to engage in social media, gaming and gambling.
- Higher screen time is strongly associated with low mental wellbeing across phases and sexes, particularly among secondary-aged females, though the findings show correlation rather than causation.
- Findings highlight the need for targeted support on healthy screen habits, social media, gaming, wellbeing and online risk.

Activity online

Students were asked to rank their top 5 online activities in terms of the amount of time they spent doing different activities online, where the activity in rank 1 was what they spent most time doing.

In 2026 over a quarter of students said *Gaming online with others* was their number one activity[6], and almost half (44.8%) ranked it in their top three activities.

[6] The activity they spent most time doing online



Gaming online with others was ranked as the number one online activity across all students, regardless of how much time they spent on screens. However, when looking at the top 3 online activities[7] *Watching videos on social media* appears to be the most common activity with two thirds of all students and nearly 80% of those with excessive screentime including it in their top three activities.

The table below shows the proportion of students who put each activity in their top 3 online activities, and includes the percentage for all children, those with average screen time, and those with excessive screen time.

% in TOP 3 online activities	All pupils	Average	Excessive
Watching videos on social media (TikTok, Instagram, YouTube etc.)	65.4	60.8	78.4
Gaming on my own	50.3	50.8	49.1
Keeping in touch with friends (messaging on any media)	45.1	44.1	47.8
Gaming online with others	44.8	42.1	52.4
Watching TV – either on demand or live	33.6	37.8	21.6
Learning a new skill e.g. a language	12.5	15.3	4.6
Other	8.7	9.3	7.2
Posting my own social media	6.3	4.5	11.3
Keeping up with current affairs/news	5.9	6.4	4.6
Gambling	1.0	0.7	1.8

There were some differences between the sexes in terms of top 3 online activities. Females were significantly more likely to have the following as one of their top 3 online activities:

- *Keeping in touch with friends (messaging on any media) (OR 2.2)*
- *Posting my own social media (OR 2.5)*
- *Other e.g. online shopping (OR 3.7)*
- *Learning a new skill e.g. a language (OR 1.8)*

Males were significantly more likely to have the following as one of their top 3 online activities:

- *Gaming online with others (OR 3.4)*
- *Gaming on my own (OR 2.5)*
- *Gambling (OR 4.1)*

Primary age students were more likely to have *Learning a new skill e.g. a language (OR 3.0); Gaming online with others (OR 1.8) and Gaming on my own (OR 3.1)* in their top 3 online activities.

Secondary and post-16 students were significantly more likely to have *Watching videos on social media (TikTok, Instagram, YouTube etc.) (OR 2.7); Keeping in touch with friends (messaging on any media) (OR 3.1)* and *Posting my own social media (OR 3.1)* in their top 3 activities.

This suggests social media accounts for a substantial proportion of online activity among older students

The government plans to ban certain social media use for children and young people under 16[8] in spring 2027, it will be interesting to see how this impacts the top online activities for students in future PWS waves.

Some differences are also observed by statistical neighbour group.

Students at selective and independent settings were significantly less likely to report *Gaming online with others* or *Gaming on my own* than mainstream settings. They were significantly more likely to say one of their top 3 online activities was *Keeping in touch with friends* and

[7] E.g. all activities ranked one, two or three

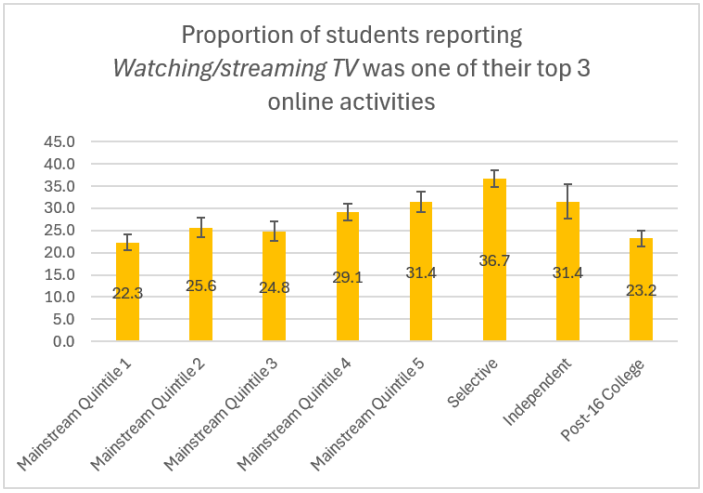
[8] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/fact-sheet-new-rules-to-protect-children-online/fact-sheet-new-rules-to-protect-children-online

Keeping up with current affairs than their peers in mainstream settings.



Students at independent settings were significantly more likely to report *Gambling* was one of their top online activities than any other statistical neighbour group.

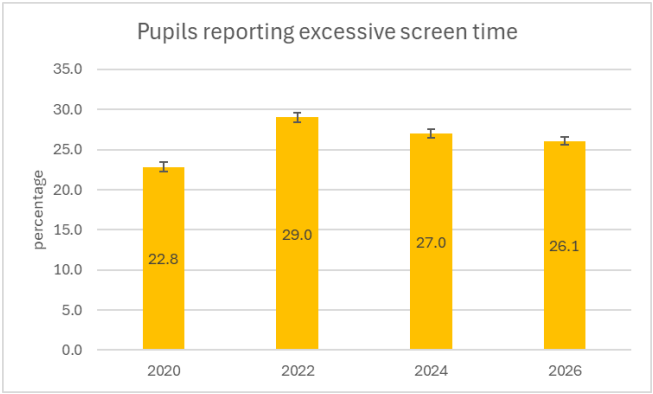
Having *Watching/streaming TV online* as one of their top 3 online activities appeared to be correlated with deprivation. This was the only online activity to show consistent relationship to deprivation.



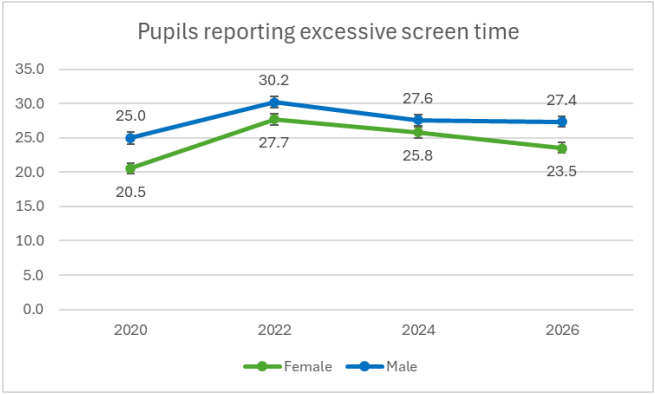
Time spent online

In the UK, the average screen time of a teenager is estimated to be 6-7 hours per day[9]. In 2026, the mean amount of screen time was 4-6 hours for students in both secondary and post-16 phases and between 0-3 hours for primary phase students. An Ofcom study published in 2025[10] used passive monitoring technology (technology that records actual device use rather than relying on self-report) and found that children aged 8-14 had on average 3 hours screen time across all devices, which is in line with the PWS primary student reported time. Excessive screen time has been classified in the survey for students who report having 7+ hours of screen time per day.

In 2026, 1 in 4 (26.1%) students reported excessive media/screen time. This was lower than in 2024 (27.0%) but still above the 2020 figure (22.4%).



Males were significantly more likely to report excessive screen time.

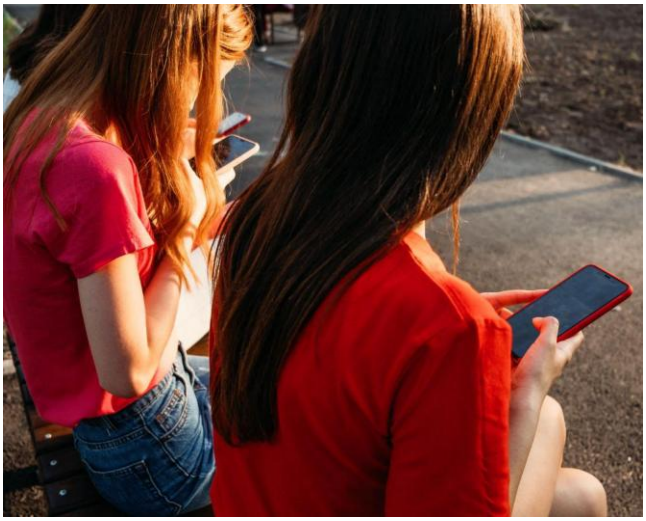


There was no significant difference between students from diverse ethnic communities and *white British* students reporting excessive screen time, however students from *Black* backgrounds, *Gypsy/Roma* and *White Eastern European* backgrounds were significantly more

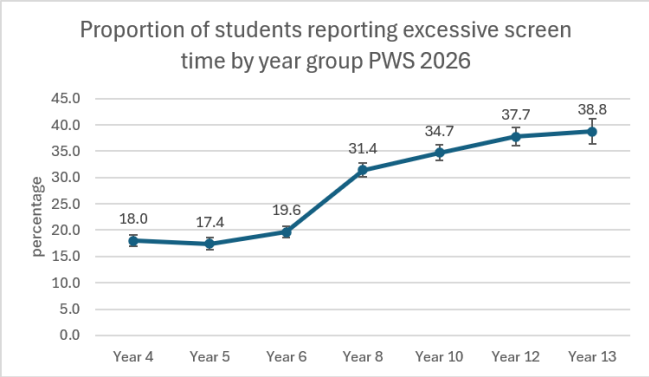
[9] https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0025/217825/children-and-parents-media-use-and-attitudes-report-2020-21.pdf

[10] https://www.ofcom.org.uk/media-use-and-attitudes/media-habits-children/top-trends-from-our-latest-look-at-uk-childrens-online-lives

likely to report excessive screen time than *white British* students.



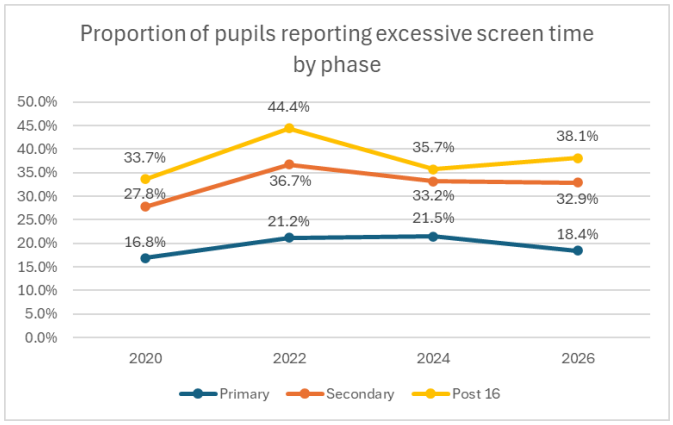
The chart below shows the trend that the older students become, the more screen time they engage in.



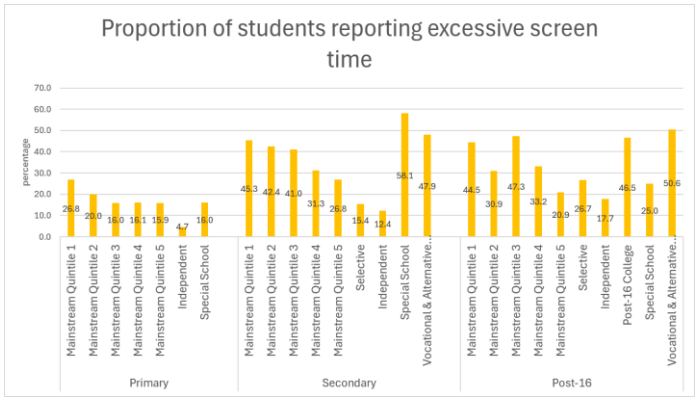
In the transition to secondary education there is a significant increase in screen time, from 19.6% in Year 6 to 31.4% in Year 8. There is also a significant increase in excessive screen time between Year 8 and Year 10. There is no significant increase year on year between Year 10, Year 12 and Year 13 students, however there is a significant difference between students in Year 10 and students in Year 13.

Following a reduction in excessive screen time by secondary and post-16 students in 2024, the most recent survey shows that this has increased in post-16 students.

Between 2022 and 2024, the proportion of students in the primary phase reporting excessive screen time remained stable, with a slight reduction in 2026.



There appears to be a correlation between screen time and deprivation at every phase. Students in the most deprived quintile were significantly more likely to have excessive screen time than those in the least deprived areas, although there was some variation across quintiles for post-16 students.





Students with low mental wellbeing (LMW) were two and a half times more likely to have excessive screen time (*OR 2.5*) than those with average or high mental wellbeing. Those known to social care and eligible for FSM were almost twice as likely to report excessive screen time than their less vulnerable peers (*OR 1.8*).

Impact of excessive screen time

Students engaging in excessive screen time were significantly less likely to say they found it easy to make and keep friends (48.9% vs. 56.3% respectively). This was the same across all phases.

Students engaging in excessive screen time were significantly more likely to report one of the following being in their top 3 online activities:

- Gaming online with others
- Watching videos on social media (TikTok, Instagram, YouTube etc.)
- Keeping in touch with friends (messaging on any media)
- Posting my own social media
- Gambling



This compares with students who spend an average amount of time using a screen reporting that they were significantly more likely to engage in

- Keeping up with current affairs/news
- Learning a new skill e.g. a language
- Watching TV – either on demand or live

Children who spend too much time using online media can be at risk of:

- **Insufficient and inadequate sleep**. Media use can interfere with sleep[11] by delaying bedtimes or decreasing total sleep time.
- **Being overweight**. Teens who watch more than 5 hours of TV per day are 5 times more likely to be overweight than teens who watch 0 to 2 hours[12].
- **Delays in learning & social skills**. This could be because they don't interact as much with their parents and family members[13].
- **Negative effect on educational performance**. Children and teens often use entertainment media at the same time that they're doing other things, such as homework[14].
- **Behaviour problems**. Violent content on TV and screens can contribute to behaviour problems in children, either because they are scared and confused by what they see, or they try to mimic on-screen characters[15].
- **Problematic internet use**. Children who spend too much time using online media can be at risk for a type of addictive behaviour called problematic internet use[16].
- **Risky behaviours**. Teens' displays on social media often show risky behaviours, such as substance use, sexual behaviours, self-injury, or eating disorders. This can influence others and lower the age of initiation[17].
- **Sexting, loss of privacy & predators**. Teens need to know that once content is

[11] Youth screen media habits and sleep: sleep-friendly screen-behavior recommendations for clinicians, educators, and parents
[12] Screen Media Exposure and Obesity in Children and Adolescents
[13] Parenting Matters: Supporting Parents of Children Ages 0-8
[14] Associations between screen use, learning and concentration among children and young people in western countries: a scoping review
[15] Screen violence: a real threat to mental health in children and adolescents
[16] Problematic internet use: A growing concern for adolescent health and well-being in a digital era
[17] Social Media Effects Regarding Eating Disorders and Body Image in Young Adolescents

shared with others, they may not be able to delete it completely.

- **Cyberbullying**. Cyberbullying can lead to short- and long-term negative social, academic, and health issues for both the bully and target.

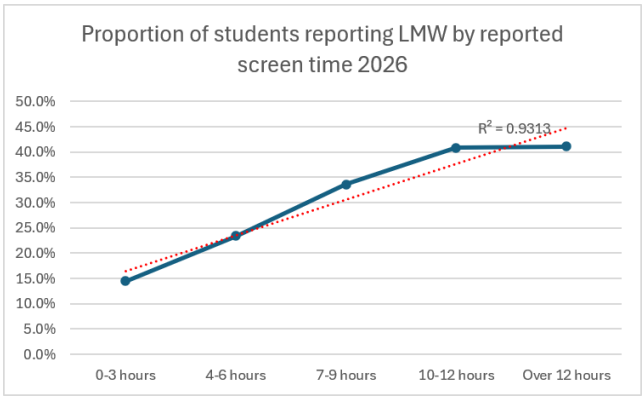
Behaviours linked to excessive screen time

Media interfering with sleep

In 2026, 4.7% of those who reported they woke in the night stated that this was because they woke to check or send messages or play games on their phone/tablet/computer, which is lower than in 2024 (6.8%).



Higher screen time appears to be directly correlated with LMW. As screen time increases so does the proportion of students reporting LMW. This is observed at all phases of education and in both sexes.



Students engaging in excessive screen time in all phases and across both sexes, were more than twice as likely to report LMW, except in post 16 females (*OR 1.8*).

In all phases and both sexes likelihood of LMW and excessive screen time was over twice as high as those with average or below screen time). The association between excessive screen time and low mental wellbeing appears strongest on secondary aged females when the likelihood of LMW was 3 times higher than those with average or below average screen time (*OR 2.9*).

Whilst this indicates a strong correlation it doesn't imply causation.

Use of social media

Key takeaways:

- Social media video watching is widespread and linked to higher rates of low mental wellbeing.
- Posting and messaging are also associated with low mental wellbeing, particularly among females.
- The findings suggest social media-related wellbeing risks should be understood within the wider context of deprivation, vulnerability and children's broader lived experiences

Since 2024, students have been asked to select and rank their top online activities. In 2026, a quarter (25.7%) of students said *watching videos on social media (TikTok, Instagram, YouTube etc)* was their top online activity and two-thirds (65.4%) that it was in their top 3 online activities.

Students who cited watching videos on social media in their top 3 online activities were almost twice as likely to report LMW than those for whom it wasn't in their top 3.

Although a smaller proportion of students in less deprived areas report watching social media videos as a top activity, those who do

are more likely to experience low mental wellbeing. This could suggest there are more significant factors affecting wellbeing associated with deprivation than *Watching videos on social media (TikTok, Instagram, YouTube etc.)*.

6.3% said *Posting my own social media* was one of their top 3 online activities and 0.4% that it was their top online activity. These figures have both reduced since 2024.

Around a third of students who had *Posting my own social media* as one of their top 3 online activities in all mainstream settings reported LMW. The odds of having LMW in students who cited *Posting my own social media* was one of their top 3 online activities was significantly higher than those who didn't (*OR 2.4*). However, there was little difference in the odds of LMW by statistical neighbour group except in post-16 settings where there were no increased odds of LMW from having *Posting my own social media* as one of their top 3 online activities.

The impact of social media usage appears to be more pronounced in female than male students. Female students who report *watching videos on social media* as one of their top 3 online activities are 2.5 times more likely to report having LMW compared with 1.2 times in male students. Similar figures are observed in female and male students who report *posting their own videos* as one of their top three activities, (*OR 2.3* vs. *1.8*).



Students who had *keeping in touch with friends (messaging on any media)* as one of their top 3 activities (45.1%) were also significantly more likely to report having LMW than those who didn't.

Again, differences between rates of reported LMW in female and male students who engage with this online behaviour was observed. There is a significant difference between females engaging in this online activity reporting LMW (28.7% vs. 18.4%) and those who don't, but no significant difference in wellbeing for males.

There is no higher likelihood of LMW if *keeping in touch with friends (messaging on any media)* is cited as a top 3 online activity by age, overall screen time, or real-world friendship confidence.



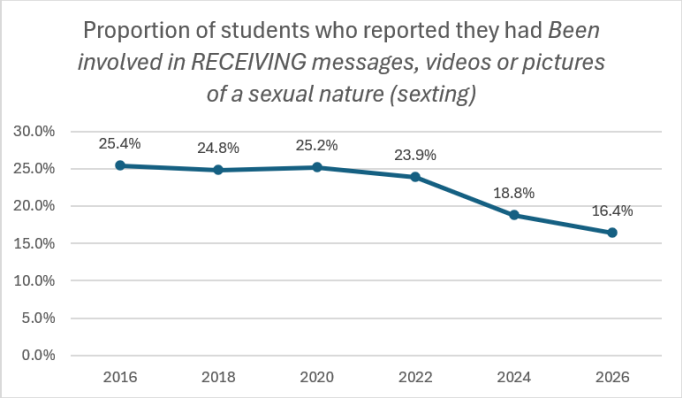
Online harms and illegal activity online

Sexting and sexual exploitation

Key takeaways:

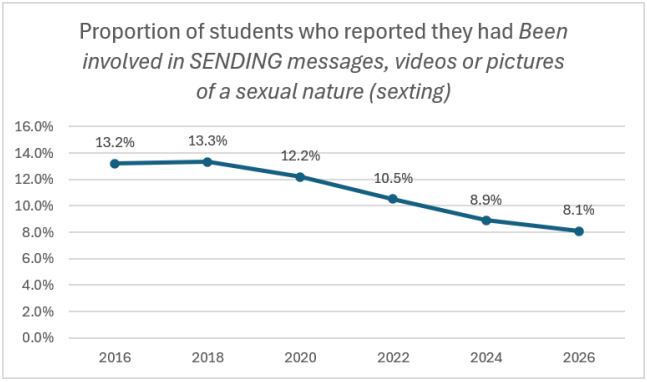
- Sexting and sextortion indicators have declined, but remain important safeguarding risks, especially for females and students with low mental wellbeing.
- Reported adult coercion, body image concerns and illegal online vape purchasing highlight the need for targeted online safety and exploitation prevention support.

Around 1 in 6 students said they had received a message or picture of a sexual nature in 2026; this continues a downwards trend observed since 2020.



Females were more likely to have received a message or picture of a sexual nature than males (20.2% vs. 14.7%).

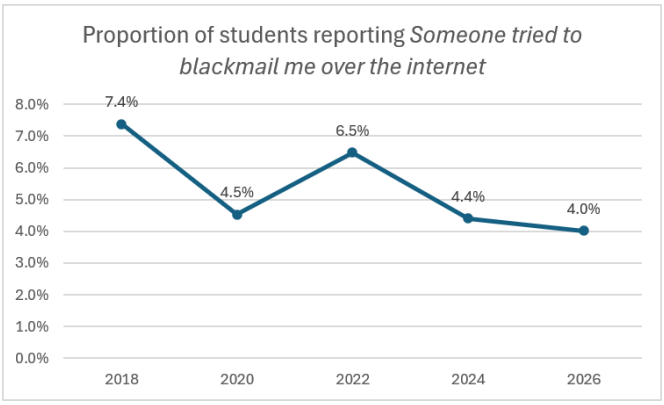
8.1% of students reported they had sent a message or picture of a sexual nature in 2026 this has been reducing since 2018 (13.3%).



There was no difference between the sexes in likelihood to have sent a message or picture of a sexual nature.

The proportion of students reporting sending a sexual image of themselves (6.3% all students, 7.5% of females and 6.3% of males) has reduced by almost half since 2016 (11.1%). Students with low mental wellbeing were almost twice as likely to report sending a message or picture of a sexual nature than those with average or high mental wellbeing (*OR 1.9*).

4.0% of students said *Someone tried to blackmail me over the internet e.g. tried to force me to send money or naked pictures* however, this was higher in females than males (5.1% vs. 3.4%). After increasing significantly during the pandemic, the proportion of students saying *Someone tried to blackmail me over the internet e.g. tried to force me to send money or naked pictures* has returned to be in line with pre-pandemic (4.5% in 2020).



Students with low mental wellbeing were 3 times as likely to say *Someone tried to blackmail me over the internet e.g. tried to*

force me to send money or naked pictures than those with average or high mental wellbeing (*OR 3.1*).

Around 1 in 33 students said they would like more advice about *Sexting/Sextortion*, this was higher in females (3.6%) than males (2.7%).

In 2026 a new question was introduced to the survey - *Has an adult ever taken advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, manipulate or deceive you into sexual activity, online or in person?*

Around 1 in 20 (4.7%) of secondary and post-16 students said they had been taken advantage of by an adult to coerce, manipulate or deceive them into sexual activity. Students from vulnerable groups were significantly more likely to report being taken advantage of by an adult.

Sexual abuse by an adult	
Vulnerable group	**Increased liklihood (odds ratio)**
Females	3.3
Disability	2.0
SEN	2.2
Neurodiverse	2.6
Known to social care	2.9
LGBTQ+	3.1
Young Carer	3.6
Bullied	3.3
Eligible for FSM	2.0
4+ ACEs	6.2

Body image

5.4% of secondary and post-16 students reported they wanted support around the *Effect that social media and the internet (including pornography) has on the way I feel about my appearance,* this was significantly higher in females (6.9%) than males (4.5%).



Purchasing vapes online

Students who report they vape were asked where they normally get their vapes from. The majority got them from friends/peers, however, 2.5% said they normally got vapes online. Purchasing vapes is illegal under the age of 18[18] and disposable vapes were banned by the UK government in 2025[19].

Online support

Several student cohorts are asked about receiving support and where they access support:

- 5.9% of young carers said they accessed support online.
- 3.8% of students who self-harmed said they had received support around self-harm from a website or online forum.
- 1.0% of students who had experienced bullying said websites and internet forums helped them manage or respond to it.
- 8.9% of secondary/post-16 students said they had used the internet to get help and advice around contraception and sexual health.
- 5.5% of those who had had sex said they accessed condoms online.
- 14.2% of students said when they were worried about something they would go to the internet for help.

[18] https://www.gov.uk/guidance/selling-vaping-and-nicotine-products

[19] https://www.gov.uk/guidance/single-use-vapes-ban

- 2.8% of primary students who said they had received mental health support from a professional said they had received support on the internet

Conclusion

Overall, the 2026 Pupil Wellbeing Survey indicates that screen time remains a substantial part of children and young people's daily lives, with patterns of use changing markedly by age, sex, deprivation and wellbeing. While the proportion of students reporting excessive screen time has reduced slightly since 2024, it remains higher than in 2020, suggesting that the increased levels observed since the pandemic have not returned to earlier levels. The transition into secondary education appears to be a particularly important point of change, with a significant increase in excessive screen use between Year 6 and Year 8, followed by a further increase between Year 8 and Year 10.



The analysis also highlights clear inequalities. Students in the most deprived mainstream settings were more likely to report excessive screen time than those in the least deprived settings and were less likely to say that an adult checked what they were doing online. Vulnerability was also associated with higher levels of screen time, with students known to social care and those eligible for FSM almost twice as likely to report excessive screen time than their peers. These findings suggest that screen time should be considered within the wider context of children and young people's lived experiences, rather than viewed solely as an individual behaviour.

There are also notable differences in the types of online activity students engage in. Gaming was more commonly associated with male students and younger students, while older students were more likely to spend time watching videos on social media, messaging friends and posting their own social media content. These patterns are important because the activities most strongly associated with excessive screen time are also those most closely linked to lower mental wellbeing. In particular, watching videos on social media, posting one's own social media content and keeping in touch with friends through messaging were all associated with higher levels of low mental wellbeing, with the association generally more pronounced for female students.

The survey also indicates that online harms remain an important safeguarding concern, even where some indicators show improvement over time. Reports of receiving or sending messages or images of a sexual nature have continued to reduce, and experiences of online blackmail have returned to levels broadly in line with those seen before the pandemic. However, the scale of reported exposure remains significant, particularly for female students and those with low mental wellbeing, who were more likely to report experiences linked to sexting, sextortion and online coercion.

Findings on body image and illegal online activity further highlight the breadth of risk young people may encounter online. A small but important proportion of students wanted more support around the effect of social media and the internet on their feelings about their appearance, while some students who vape reported usually purchasing vapes online, despite this being illegal for under-18s. These

findings reinforce the need for online safety education to go beyond screen time alone, addressing harmful contact, exploitation, appearance-related pressures and access to age-restricted products.

Online support also appears to play a role in how some students seek help, although it is not the main route for most groups. Students reported using the internet for a range of support needs, including worries, sexual health, self-harm, bullying, young carer support and mental health support. This suggests that online routes can provide an accessible additional source of information and help for some children and young people, but should complement rather than replace trusted adult, school-based and professional support, particularly where risks or vulnerabilities are present.

The relationship between screen time and wellbeing is consistent throughout the survey findings but should be interpreted with caution. Students with low mental wellbeing were substantially more likely to report excessive screen time, and higher levels of screen time were associated with poorer friendship confidence and greater likelihood of low mental wellbeing across phases and sexes. However, the analysis cannot establish whether high screen time contributes to poorer wellbeing, whether poorer wellbeing increases the likelihood of higher screen time, or whether both are shaped by other factors such as deprivation, social isolation, family circumstances or access to alternative activities.



Taken together, the findings suggest that future work should focus on targeted, age-appropriate and inequality-sensitive responses. Younger students may benefit from continued support around online safety, gaming and developing healthy screen habits before the transition to secondary education. Older students may require more nuanced support around social media, appearance-related pressures, messaging, misinformation and AI. Across all phases, responses should recognise that students experiencing deprivation, low mental wellbeing or wider vulnerability may need more proactive support, both from education settings and trusted adults, to help them manage screen time in ways that protect and promote their wellbeing.