



SAFE AND SOCIAL

How **Savvy Kids** and **Smart Parents** are navigating the **Post-Pandemic Digital World**



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Table of Contents

1. Popular Platforms and Online Interactions

1.1	Popular Digital Platforms.....	5
1.2	Negative Online Behaviours	6
1.3	Risks and Risk Management.....	7

2. The Safety Network

2.1	Perceptions of the Internet.....	9
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3. Conclusions

3.1	Summation of Findings.....	11
3.2	Recommendations	12

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has added many complexities for parents and kids looking to manage online safety. Being aware of potential risks while also maximising the benefits of digital communication has become an increasingly relevant discussion between carers and children.

Against a backdrop of home-schooling, work-from-home arrangements and travel restrictions, many children and adults found their time online increasing sharply. With the blurring of device use between entertainment, communication and education, the imperative to inform and empower children to be safe online has never been greater.

The intersection between technology like online safety software and user education is of particular interest and between the two complementary pillars, safer outcomes for children of all ages are possible.

In order to better understand the current challenges faced online by both kids and their parents, Australia's longest-running and most trusted magazines for kids *K-Zone* and *Total Girl* partnered with ESET, a global leader in digital security, to create a unique survey focussed on digital safety.

Focussing on Australian kids aged between 6 to 13, the questions aimed to explore their online experiences and determining how the pandemic has impacted their safety and cybersecurity concerns.

The data gathered varied between discrete age brackets (6-10 and 11-13), largely following the expected physiological differences in comprehension and risk assessment and several key trends emerged which will be explored further in this paper.

While there were differences observed and reported by the various cohorts, the clear findings that can be derived from the data are that a combination of parental oversight, user education and software protection is the best holistic approach to facilitating safer online experiences for kids.

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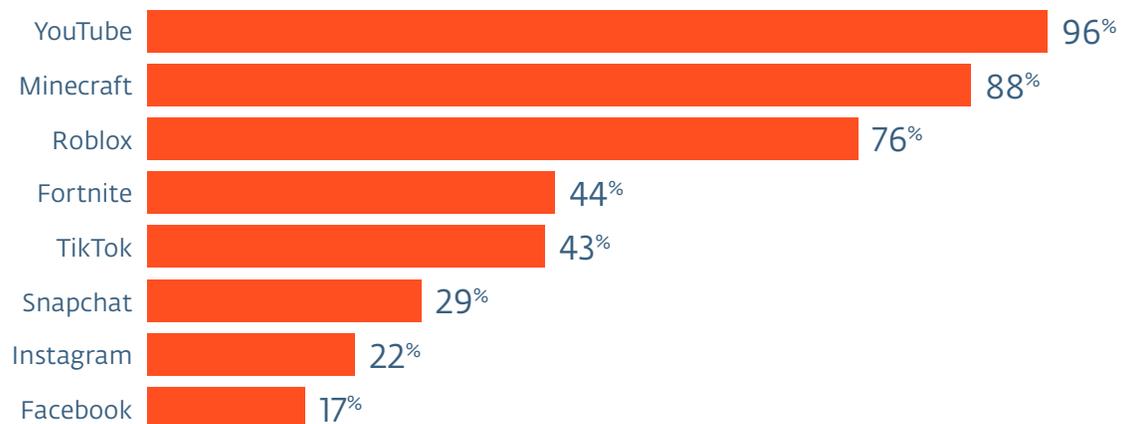
01

Popular Platforms and Online Interactions

Of critical importance to this research was establishing what was meant when kids described being “online” or using “social media”. In practice, the responses revealed that many children are not describing what could be considered “traditional” social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat etc) and that social interactions are a major draw and feature among popular online games such as Roblox, Fortnite and Minecraft. The undisputed leader though among social platforms in this demographic, was YouTube.



YouTube is the most popular (by % rate of use) social media platform for kids in Australia, with gaming networks used more than many Web-based social networks in this demographic.

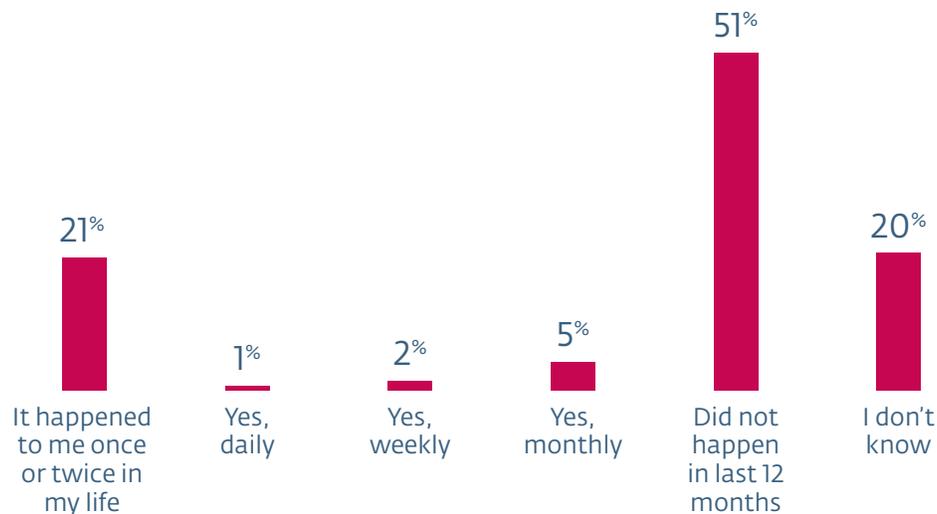


After watching video, gaming formed an active part of most participant's time online, especially in the younger groups, with drift towards more traditional social media platforms happening later, among older children and early teens. Platform wise, kids reported themselves as most happy using YouTube (96.3%), followed by TikTok (42.5%). 71.7% reported themselves as mostly "happy" online when playing Minecraft, while 52.9% reporting the same while playing Roblox.

When online, either gaming or otherwise, experiences of unpleasant behaviour were unfortunately fairly widespread. Approximately 1 in 3 children reported that they experienced nasty or hurtful acts on the internet during the past 12 months. A significant number of children also reported being contacted by a stranger online, and most were worried or angry/upset in such instances.

The relatively high proportion of kids who experienced these feelings is concerning, mitigated slightly by the fact that the negative emotional response suggests that those children were not naive to the danger associated with being contacted by a stranger online.

In the PAST 12 MONTHS, has someone acted in a hurtful or nasty way towards you on the Internet?



Interestingly, 20% of children did not know whether someone had behaved in a hurtful or nasty way. While this response was skewed towards the younger end of the age spectrum it illustrates that education around online safety is constantly required and must be ongoing, tailored to the specific platforms and risks that change as the child matures.

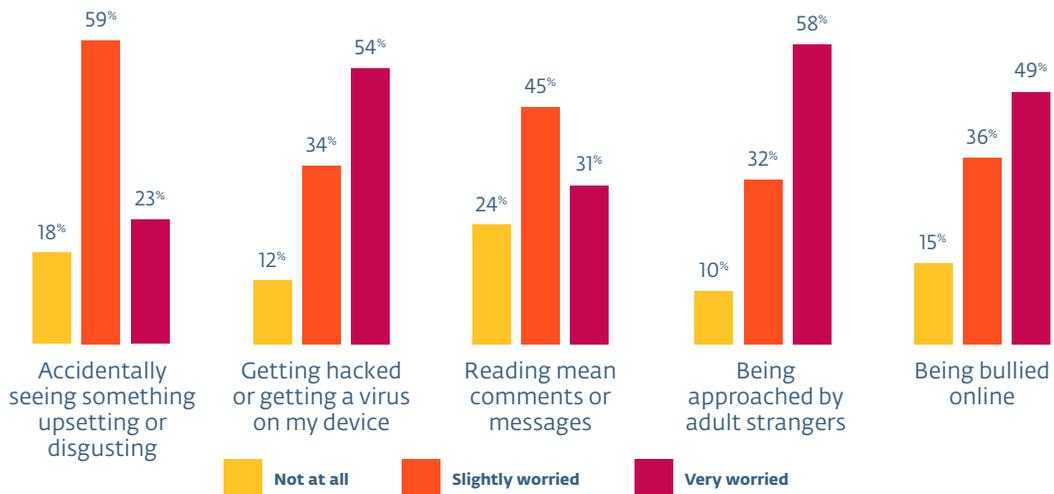
For those children that could identify particular worries, some trends emerged that overlap strongly with the rise of gaming as a significant arena in the field of online safety. As the data in the graph below illustrates, some of the strongest negative responses are related to being bullied online, being approached by adult strangers and importantly “getting hacked or getting a virus on my device” – an impact which would directly affect play functionality.

Comparatively, the threats of “mean comments” or “seeing something upsetting” were secondary concerns, given they appeared in the “very worried” category at only 23.9% and 30.5% respectively. Intriguingly those two interactions are more closely aligned with ‘traditional’ social media platforms and perhaps adult perceptions of online risks.

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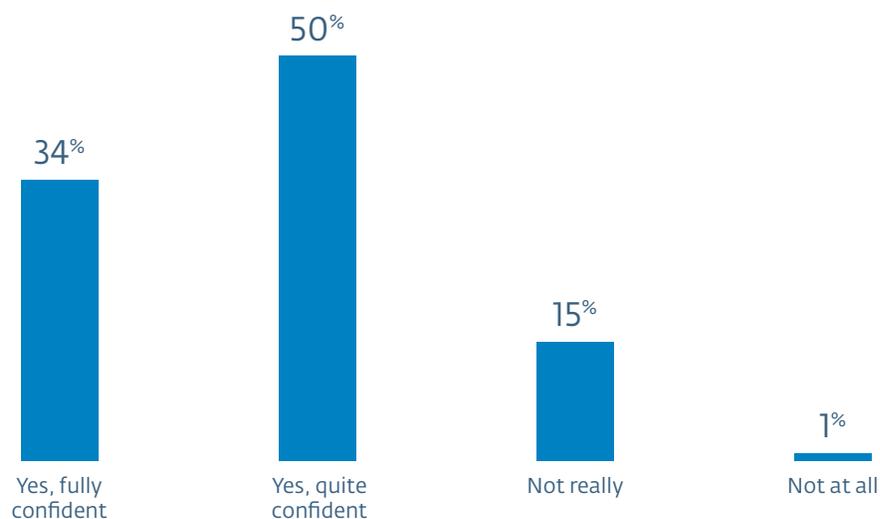
In terms of managing these risks and emotions across the 6-13 age bracket, the responses suggest there is value in building awareness around online security, specifically hacking and virus awareness, as well as online safety. The multi-faceted nature of these results would also suggest that a combination of software safeguards, parental controls and education are effective in not only reducing the security risk, but also helping kids manage their anxieties around such issues.

When online, how much are you worried about:



To offer an encouraging counterpoint to the worries noted above, the study found that despite their valid concerns, 84% of respondents reported that they were confident they know what it takes to avoid online risks, leaving a relatively low 16% exposed to uncertainty.

Do you know what it takes to avoid the risks of being online?



02

The Safety Network

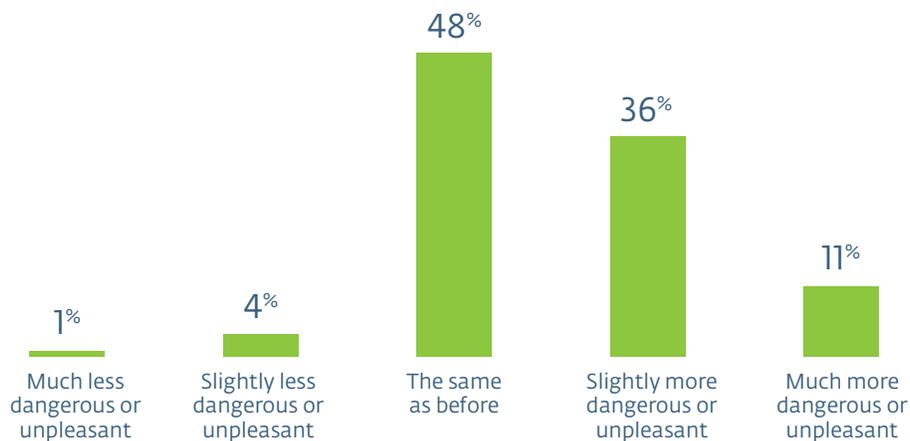
Though most variables and risk factors impacting kids safety online were present prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, there is no question that the pandemic has exacerbated and accelerated many of them. The increased reliance on digital services (social networks, subscription videos on demand streaming services, food delivery, online gaming, work-from-home, online schooling etc) has increased exposure in children and adults to both the benefits and risks of these environments.



Adding a further factor to the increased participation in digital life was that for many kids the device used for remote learning, usually a computer or tablet, was in many cases the same device used for entertainment or socialising. Kids were expected in these scenarios to not only discern the differences in rules for various types of online behaviour but then also behave appropriately and safely while moving between these environments.

Parents meanwhile, were often navigating similar issues in their work-from-home environment, leading in some cases to a decrease in parental supervision and in turn a reported increase in the perception of the internet as unsafe. When kids were asked how they perceive the internet now compared to before the outbreak, the result was profound. Nearly half of all kids surveyed reported the internet is now more dangerous or unpleasant due to the Coronavirus outbreak, with only five per cent saying it was less dangerous or unpleasant.

Compared to before the coronavirus outbreak, kids think the internet is:



This increased perception of danger online (denoting a possible upside in an increased awareness of risk) was sadly partnered with a growing sense of isolation; more than 70 per cent of respondents reported they felt less in touch with friends or classmates since the COVID-19 outbreak.

“ Nearly half of all kids surveyed reported the internet is now more dangerous or unpleasant due to the Coronavirus outbreak. ”

03

Conclusions

Leveraging a robust sample size and examining a pair of somewhat distinct subsets, the data collected and presented displays a complex but often encouraging perspective of kids and adult authority figures managing their safety online in a post-pandemic world.





The research paints a picture of kids who have a growing awareness of both the risks and benefits that can be found online. It also shows that while the pandemic did not necessarily raise any entirely new categories of danger, it increased exposure while simultaneously diminishing supervision, making for a potent mix of risk factors.

New types of online socialising, particularly through gaming, meant that rules and ideas around more established social media platforms were often challenged and the lack of physical interaction between kids contributed to a predictable but nonetheless distressing increase in feelings of isolation.

Encouragingly, the data also showed that many kids reported being happy in their online interactions, displayed an appropriate understanding of the dangers that could be found online and a majority felt comfortable raising issues they encountered with an adult. By implementing some of the suggested technological safeguards and developing further age-appropriate educational material, the percentage of kids who feel safe online can undoubtedly be increased, with particular focus on early commencement of awareness programs for younger children.

That combination of awareness, education and competency forms the core of the conclusions that can be drawn from this study and to that end the recommendations and insights below can be offered to parents, teachers and guardians.

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Recommendations

1. Trust and open dialogue

Investing time and focusing on resilience and knowledge through open dialogue about risk builds trust. Rather than strictly enforced rules and a one-way communication about online safety, kids value discussion and this approach may more easily create a space to negotiate and follow rules and agreements.

2. Learning together

Encouraging kids to share their own experiences of how they practise safe online behaviour is an excellent starting point for dialogue. When posing questions to kids such as “How do I protect my personal information when I create a profile?”, “What is personal information?”, and “What to fill in, which info not to fill in and why?” be patient and give children time and space to think of answers themselves, while also taking the opportunity to guide them if they have not yet encountered particular scenarios or you can share useful knowledge.

3. Online risk does not equal online harm

The online environment offers many opportunities for creativity, knowledge, fun, identity development, communication and exploring the world. These activities go hand in hand with some kind of risk and avoiding risks entirely may mean missing out on opportunities kids may benefit from.

Avoiding online risks entirely and a restrictive approach, if it is dominant, may not serve kids best. Building awareness of specific risks together with children so that they are aware when they encounter risky situations, plus learning the appropriate steps to manage those risks allows space for kids to not only be resilient and competent but to make the most of the positive aspects of life online.

4. Parental and school mediation of children' internet usage

As noted in the report, a significant majority of kids surveyed (93.9%) reported that a trusted adult had discussed online safety with them. The majority (88.3%) of kids also said there were rules of some kind in place at home around internet usage. This is extremely positive news but even with these results there is potential for improvement in online safety education, especially among younger kids, and a possible space for an NGO to supplement and support family education.

For teachers, facilitating peer-to-peer and experiential learning in classes has proven effective and a communal approach builds support and engagement in the classroom, a further real-world social bulwark against behaviours such as bullying and exclusion.

5. When to start with smartphones

Referencing Piaget's theory of cognitive development in children, abstract thinking including better understanding of risks, choices and anticipating possible consequences emerges around the age of 11-12. According to the research, smartphone usage by children significantly increases at age twelve in Australia, reflecting that currently there is an optimal alignment between the data and the level of child cognitive and psychosocial development. It is not recommended to encourage smartphone use for kids, prior to age 12.

“For teachers, facilitating peer-to-peer and experiential learning in classes has proven effective.”



6. When to start with social networking sites

Regarding social media websites and popular online games, respondents in general had more experience with games than with social media, except the most popular YouTube (96.3% use it) followed by TikTok (42.5%). While children reported starting to play games early, usage of social media websites (except widely popular YouTube) only became more prevalent at around the age of 12 or 13.

This could be a reflection of good quality parental mediation of online activity and also perhaps well-arranged rules and family culture when it comes to media. We recommend parents continue this approach and keep the age of children starting with social media as close as possible to the recommended age (generally 13 years old) proposed by most social media platforms.

Further to this, and of particular relevance to social media platforms are the risks of strangers presenting themselves under false identities. Educating children about the importance of not talking to strangers is key, along with also not adding them to contact or friends lists unless they have mutual friends and always discussing any approaches by a stranger with a parent or educator as soon as possible.

7. Being a proactive online bystander and up-stander

Compared to other threats online, survey respondents displayed a strong resilience to mean or upsetting language. This information can be viewed as a positive but there is also the potential that children are also becoming habituated to unpleasant online behaviour such as trolling and hate speech. Addressing these scenarios is also not as simple as removing oneself from the situation or “switching off”. An approach that encourages kids to pro-active in not ignoring or accepting hurtful behaviour online both empowers and educates, and creates the role of “up-stander” or pro-active bystander that in turn produces a supportive online network. Fostering empathy is key and most current preventative strategies focus on three important concepts;

- a) Recognise bullying or hurtful behaviour.
- b) Distinguish between ok and not ok behaviour online.
- c) Know what kind of response or support is appropriate for the person in need.

The ability to move from the role of bystander into the role of up-stander is the critical tool which may prevent cyberbullying or stop and transform it into something else rather quickly. Finally, to further provide a safety net in these scenarios it is recommend that authority figures such as educators, parents or carers stress importance of telling a trusted adult when cyberbullying is encountered.

safer kids online

BY



About the survey

*This survey was conducted in Australia in Oct-Nov 2021
by K-Zone and Total Girl on behalf of ESET.
N = 2881, aged between 6-13 years old.*



Digital Security
Progress. Protected.