

AFRAID, UNCERTAIN, AND OVERWHELMED:

A Survey of Parents
on Online Sexual
Exploitation of Children



ParentsTogether

2023



CHILDREN ARE IN CRISIS

Online sexual exploitation of children is an urgent and exponentially growing problem. Reports of child sexual abuse images online have tripled in just 5 years – from 10.2 million in 2017¹ to 29.3 million in 2021.² It's not just images. We are at a crisis point for all types of child sexual exploitation. Last year was the worst year on record³ for online sexually explicit requests and sexual abuse cases, and the FBI has warned⁴ of an unprecedented surge in sextortion – when predators use sexual images to blackmail children for money or more images. Recent research shows 1 in 3 children⁵ can now expect to have an unwelcome sexual experience online before they turn 18. Despite the bad and worsening risks of online sexual exploitation, 97% of children⁶ use social media and the internet every day, and 1 in 5 use it “almost constantly.” Parents often don't know the risks, feel unable to prevent their children from using social media, or don't know what steps they can take to make platforms safer to use.

ParentsTogether wanted to better understand the perceptions and experiences parents have with online sexual exploitation. To do so, we surveyed 1000 parents across the U.S. This report includes the results of that survey—all self-reported data from parents—and recommendations to fight online sexual exploitation of children while supporting parents.



1 in 3

children can now expect to have an unwelcome sexual experience online before they turn 18

97%

of children use social media and the internet every day

1 in 5

children use social media “almost constantly”

¹ Executive Summary: The Online Enticement of Children. National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. 2017.

² National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. 2023.

³ Milmo, Dan. 2021 was worst year on record for online child sexual abuse, says IWF. The Guardian. 2022.

⁴ FBI San Francisco. FBI San Francisco Warns of Increase in Sextortion Schemes Targeting Young Boys. 2022.

⁵ We Protect Global Alliance. Global Threat Assessment 2021. 2023.

⁶ Vogels, Emily, Risa Gelles-Watnick and Navid Massarat. Teens, Social Media and Technology 2022. Pew Research Center. 2022.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Children are being exposed to social media at a very young age, and early exposure is associated with more sexual exploitation online. According to parents, 1 in 3 children are first exposed to social media at 5 or younger. Kids are overwhelmingly being sexually harmed on platforms they are too young to use. Younger social media exposure correlates with more sexual harm online and peaks for kids who start using social media at 11-12 – the age around which most American children get their first smartphone.⁷

Sexual abuse and exploitation were reported on every major social media platform. The two most named platforms for exposure to inappropriate sexual content were YouTube and TikTok. Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat were the most named platforms for child sexually explicit requests and sextortion. Snapchat was the single most named platform where kids share sexual images of themselves.

Children with disabilities and special needs experience higher rates of online sexual harms. Parents of kids with disabilities reported 75% more sexually explicit requests and 2x the rate of kids sending sexual images than parents of kids without disabilities. Parents of kids with mental, emotional, or social special needs reported 2x the rate of sexually explicit requests and 3x the rate of kids sending sexual images than parents of children without special needs sending sexual images than parents of children without special needs.

LGBTQ+ children also experience higher rates of online sexual harms. Parents of transgender, nonbinary, or genderqueer kids reported 3x the rate of sexually explicit requests and 4x the rate of kids sending sexual images than parents of cisgender kids. Parents of gay, lesbian, bisexual, or queer kids reported 2x the rate of sexually explicit requests and 3x the rate of kids sending sexual images than parents of straight children.

Parents are afraid, uncertain, and overwhelmed trying to protect their kids online. 45% of parents are worried their kids have a secret social media account and 1 in 3 don't know if their kids would tell them about a bad sexual experience online. Parental controls are used unevenly, with 1 in 3 parents using them religiously, and another 1 in 3 who never use them or don't know. 42% of parents spend time every single day monitoring their kids' social media use.

Parents overwhelmingly support regulating social media and want platforms to do more to keep children safe. 95% of parents think social media companies should have stronger regulations and 93% say they aren't doing enough to protect children. At the top of parents' wishlist for social media companies are stronger and more accessible parental controls and age verification to use social media platforms.

⁷ Knorr, Caroline. [What's the right age to get my kid a phone?](#). Common Sense Media. 2019.



SURVEY METHODOLOGY

ParentsTogether surveyed 1000 parents via email, Facebook Messenger, SMS, and social media. Participating parents all had children who used at least one social media platform.

Parents report YouTube was the most popular social media platform, with 83% of parents saying their children used it. Other popular platforms included TikTok (58%), Roblox (44%), Snapchat (42%), and Instagram (40%). These parent-reported usage rates are slightly below recent teen-reported rates from Pew Research Center,⁸ which show teen social media usage rates as YouTube (95%), TikTok (67%), Instagram (62%), and Snapchat (59%). Pew's research only includes children ages 13-17, whereas ParentsTogether's survey includes parents of all children under 18, which may explain the slightly lower usage rates.

Parent respondents came from all over the United States. The majority (62%) identified as white, with the next largest racial identity groups being Black or African American (17%) and Hispanic or Latino (17%). A slightly higher proportion of respondents identified their children as Black or African American (20%) and Hispanic or Latino (19%). 10% of respondents say their child has a disability and 26% say their child has mental, emotional, or social special needs. Additionally, 10% of parents have a child who identifies as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or queer and 6% have a child who identifies as transgender, nonbinary, or genderqueer.



⁸ Vogels, Emily, Risa Gelles-Watnick and Navid Massarat. Teens, Social Media and Technology 2022. Pew Research Center. 2022.



PARENT DEMOGRAPHICS



62%

identified as white



17%

identified as Black or
African American



17%

identified as
Hispanic or Latino



10%

said their child has
a disability



26%

say their child has mental,
emotional, or social special needs



10%

have a child who identifies as
gay, lesbian, bisexual, or queer

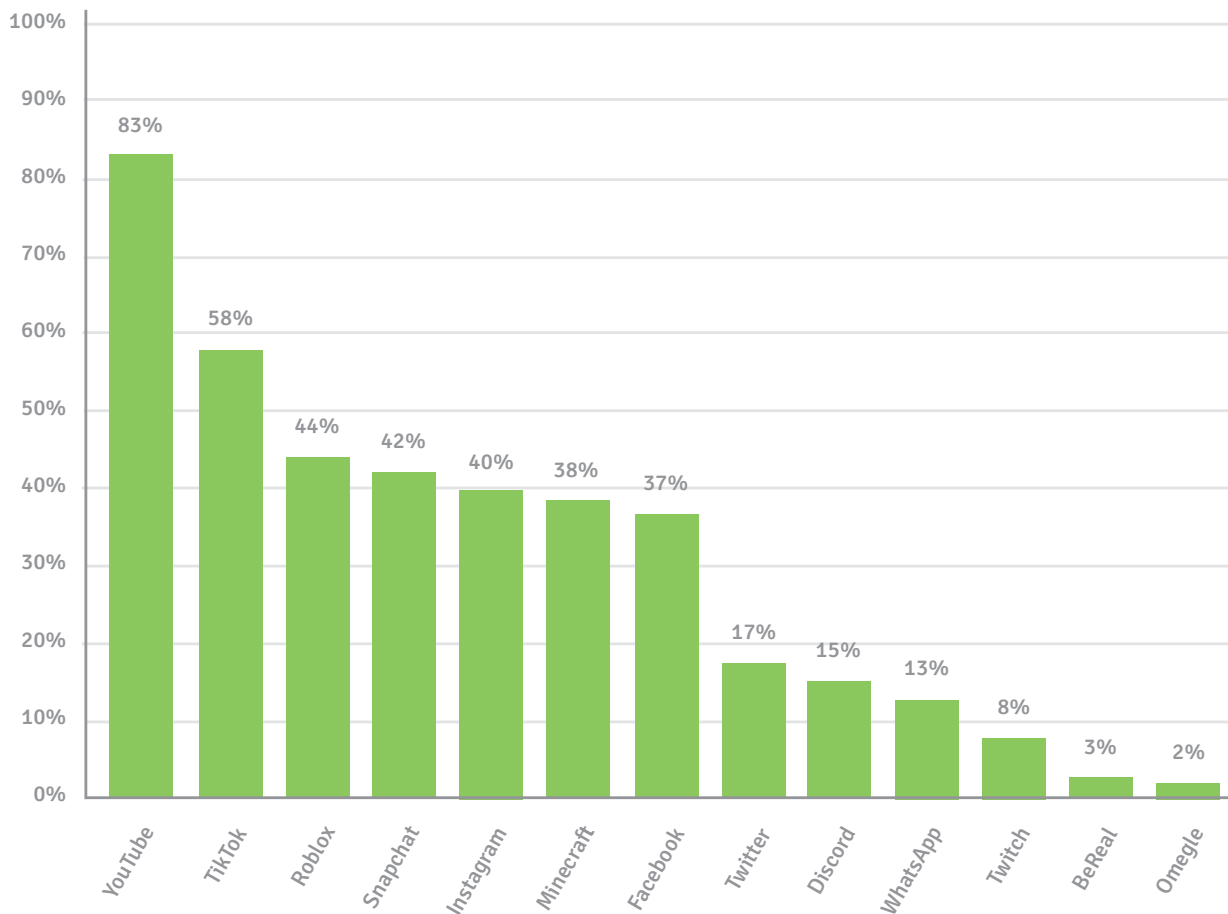


6%

have a child who identifies as
transgender, nonbinary, or
genderqueer



What social media platforms do your kids use? Check all that apply.





RISKS AND SAFETY

Age of Social Media Exposure and Use

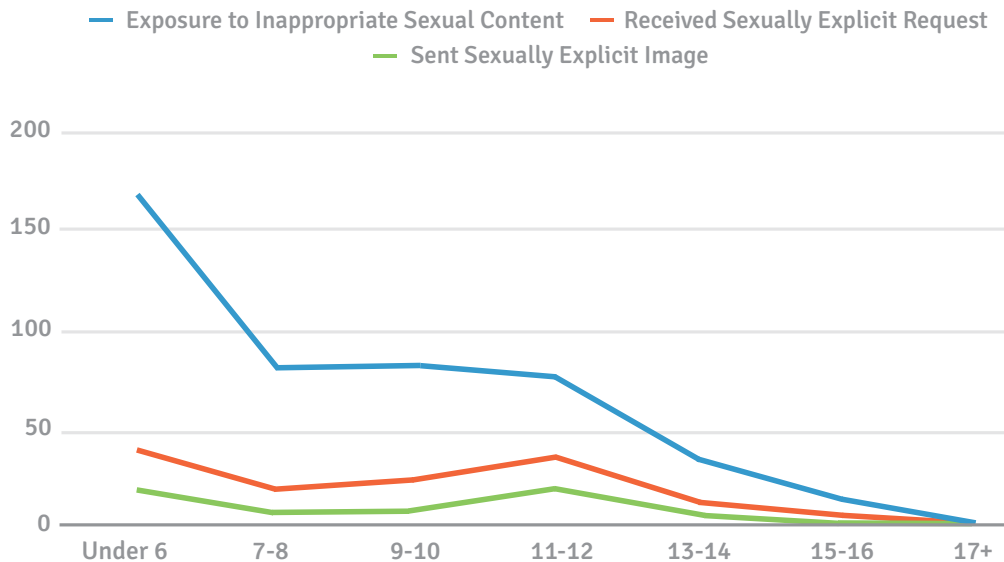
Parents reported overwhelmingly that their children were first exposed to social media at very young ages, well before the age requirements set by most platforms. 1 in 3 parents reported their children were first exposed to social media when they were 5 or younger. The vast majority of children (87%) were first exposed to social media before they were 13.

There is a clear relationship between online sexual harms and age of first exposure to social media. The prevalence of a child experiencing online sexual harm is higher for children exposed to social media at younger ages, and the prevalence peaks for kids who first started using social media at 11-12 – two of the most common ages⁹ for kids to get their first phone.

⁹ Knorr, Caroline. [What's the right age to get my kid a phone?](#). Common Sense Media. 2019.



Parent-Reported Online Sexual Harms by Age of First Social Media Exposure



1 in 3

children have been exposed to social media since age 5 or younger

Rate of online harms peaks when kids start using social media at

11-12

MINIMUM AGE TO CREATE AN ACCOUNT, AS STATED BY PLATFORMS

BeReal.

Minimum age 13

Discord

Minimum age 13

facebook

Minimum age 13

Instagram

Minimum age 13

MINECRAFT

No minimum age
(rated for 10+)

omegle

Minimum age 18

ROBLOX

No minimum age
(ratings for 9+ and 13+)

SnapChat

Minimum age 13

twitter

Minimum age 13

TikTok

Minimum age 13

Twitch

Minimum age 13

WhatsApp

Minimum age 13

YouTube

No minimum age if YouTube Kids or linked to parent account, 13 if a private account

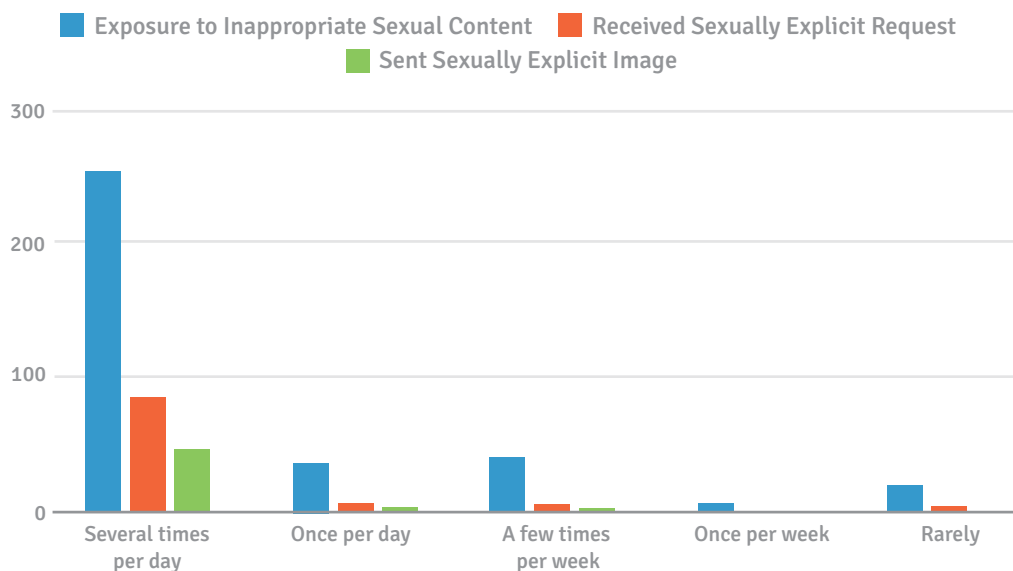


Frequency of Use

Parents report that social media is a significant and frequent part of their children's lives. They say most of their children (60%) use social media several times per day. Just 9% of parents report their children use social media once a week or less. Recent research from the Pew Research Center shows many of these sessions are long, with 35% of teens¹⁰ saying they use social media and 45% saying they use the internet "almost constantly."

Parents who report their kids use social media several times per day also report higher rates of exposure to sexually inappropriate content, sexually explicit requests, and sending sexual images than parents whose kids use social media less frequently. Rates for explicit requests and sending sexual images doubled for kids who use social media several times per day compared with those who use it rarely or once a week.

Parent-Reported Online Sexual Harms by Frequency of Social Media Use



60%

of parents say their children use social media several times per day

9%

of parents report their children use social media once a week or less

Parents' Fears and Concerns About Social Media Risks

Some parents report high levels of trust that their kids are safe on social media, while others have less trust or are unsure. Many parents (45%) are concerned their children have secret social media accounts. Those fears may be founded, as there is evidence¹¹ that 1 in 3 social media users has a fake account. Most parents (51%) think that their child would tell them about any bad sexual experiences online, but 1 in 3 don't know if their child would disclose online sexual harm.

¹⁰ Vogels, Emily, Risa Gelles-Watnick and Navid Massarat. Teens, Social Media and Technology 2022. Pew Research Center. 2022.

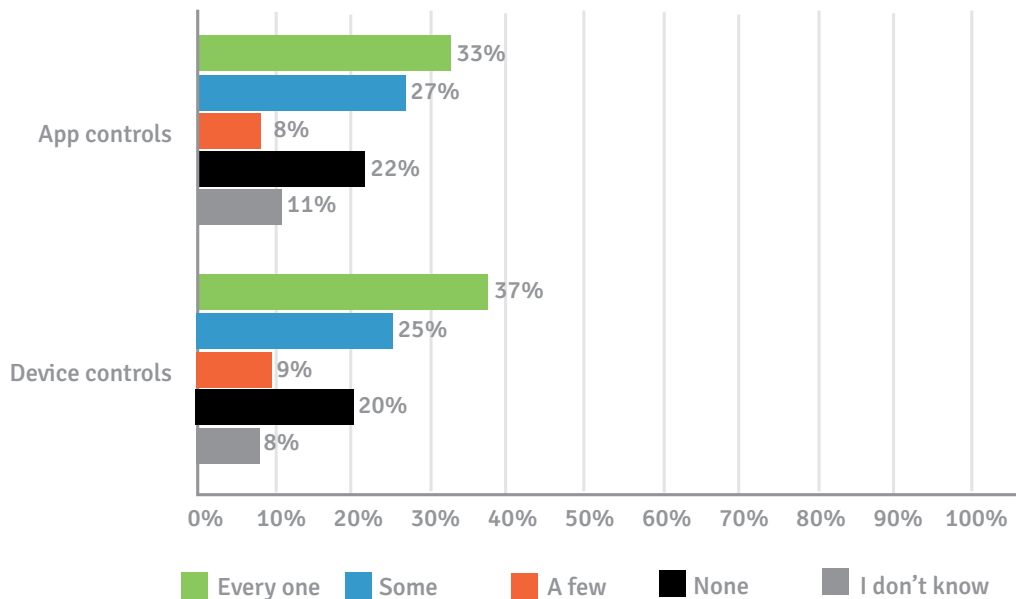
¹¹ Mello, John. A Third of US Social Media Users Creating Fake Accounts. Tech News World. 2022.

How Parents Try to Keep Kids Safe Online



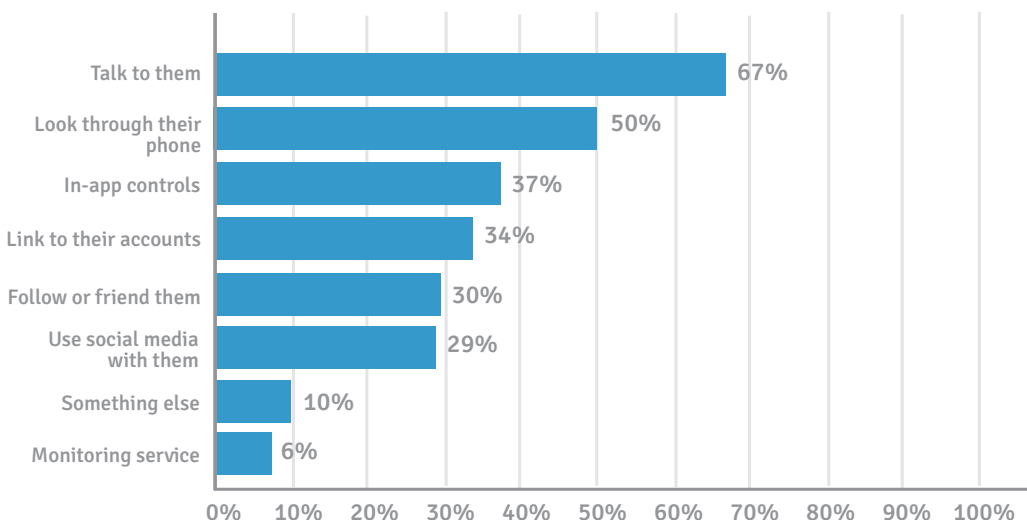
Parental controls are one of the most common tools parents have to keep kids safe online. Parent respondents use these controls unevenly – about 1 in 3 parents use parental controls on everything, and 1 in 3 parents either don't use parental controls at all or don't know.

How often do you use parental controls on your child's apps and devices?



Social media monitoring is a frequent and time-consuming activity for parents. Most parents (62%) monitor their kids' social media use at least once a week and 1 in 4 (28%) monitor social media several times a day. Talking with kids and looking through their phones are the most popular forms of monitoring.

How do you monitor your child's social media use? Check all that apply.





ONLINE SEXUAL HARMS

Access to Inappropriate Sexual Content

Sexually explicit content is pervasive and ubiquitous across the internet and social media platforms. Research has shown early exposure to pornography and sexually explicit content has been associated with risky sexual behavior,¹² misogyny, and sexual violence¹³ later in life. ParentsTogether wanted to understand how common exposure to sexually explicit content is online, and when and where children are most frequently exposed. About a third of parents surveyed (34%) say their children have seen sexually explicit content online, a third (32%) say their children have not been exposed to sexually explicit content online and a third (34%) say they don't know. Other data shows rates of exposure may be higher – 62% for tweens and 82% for teens¹⁴ – which may indicate parents often don't know when their kids are exposed to sexual content online.



1 in 3

parents say their children have seen sexually explicit content online

1 in 3

parents don't know if their children have seen sexually explicit content online

“YouTube continuous play ended up showing sexually explicit videos even on parental settings.”

**—
PARENT OF 10-YEAR-OLD
CHILD EXPOSED TO EXPLICIT
CONTENT ON YOUTUBE**

¹² Lin, Wen-Hsu et al. “Exposure to sexually explicit media in early adolescence is related to risky sexual behavior in emerging adulthood.” PLoS one vol. 15,4 e0230242. 2020.

¹³ Rostad, Whitney L et al. “The Association Between Exposure to Violent Pornography and Teen Dating Violence in Grade 10 High School Students.” Archives of sexual behavior vol. 48,7. 2019.

¹⁴ Bark Technologies. 2022 Annual Report. 2022.



#1 parent-reported platform
for exposure to inappropriate
sexual content



#2 parent-reported platform
for exposure to inappropriate
sexual content

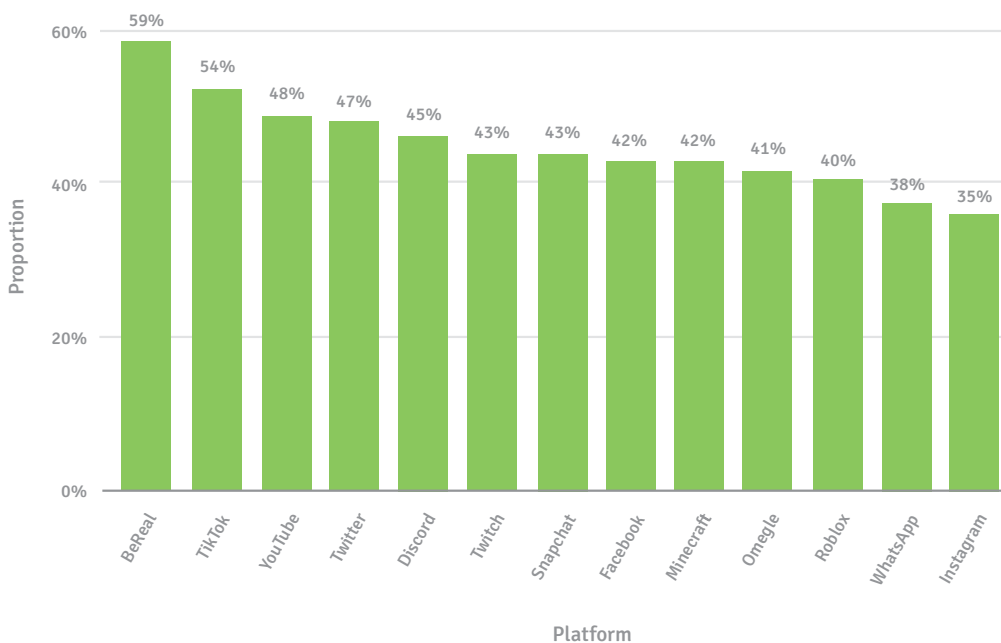


SnapChat



Using Roblox, Snapchat, and Minecraft also correlated with higher
rates of parent-reported exposure to inappropriate sexual content

Proportion of Users Exposed to Sexual Content by Platform



While the larger platforms like YouTube and TikTok have the most incidents of exposure to sexual content, some of the smaller platforms have the greatest proportion of users exposed to sexual content. Parents report 59% of BeReal users have been exposed to sexual content compared to 35% of Instagram users.



Who is Being Exposed to Sexually Explicit Content on Social Media

1 in 5 kids who have seen sexual content online were 9 or younger when their parents took the survey. 43% were 12 or younger. This indicates a significant number of children are being exposed to sexually explicit content on platforms they are too young to use.

Parents report white kids and kids of color have similar rates of exposure to sexual content online overall. Parents of Asian children reported the most exposure to sexual content and parents of Hispanic or Latino children reported the least. Parents who identified their children as having a disability reported 35% more exposure to sexual content online, and parents who identified their children as having mental, emotional, or social special needs reported 32% more exposure to sexual content online compared to parents of children without disabilities or special needs. Similarly, parents who identified their children as transgender, nonbinary, or genderqueer reported 15% more exposure to sexual content and parents who identified their children as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or queer reported 30% more exposure to sexual content compared to parents of cisgender or straight children.

43%

of kids exposed to inappropriate sexual content online were under 13

“Discord users share sexually explicit discussions and content, including videos on individual servers; PlayStation Network has sexually explicit “communities” users can join where sexual content, photos, videos and pornography are shared.”

—
PARENT OF 16-YEAR-OLD DISCORD AND PLAYSTATION USER





STRANGERS, SEXUAL PREDATION, AND SEXTORTION

The survey asked parents about different experiences associated with sexual predation online. Contact from a stranger on social media was a relatively common experience for survey respondents. 30% of parents say their child has been contacted by a stranger online, and another 24% don't know. Nearly half (47%) of children contacted by a stranger on social media were under 13 when their parents took the survey, indicating they were contacted by a stranger on social media platforms they were too young to use; 1 in 5 children contacted by a stranger online were 9 or younger.

"My daughter that's now 14 at the time was 11 and she was using Instagram. She got a message from a guy in his fifties wanting to be her sugar daddy."

—
**PARENT OF 11-YEAR-OLD
CONTACTED ON INSTAGRAM**



Some contact from a stranger online includes sexually explicit requests for photos, videos, conversation, or contact. 1 in 10 (10%) parents report someone has made sexually explicit requests of their child online, and another 24% don't know. According to other research, 1 in 4 (25%) 9-17 year-olds¹⁵ report having a sexual experience online with someone they believe is an adult, indicating actual rates may be higher than parents know. In addition to sexual abuse, parents most commonly cite requests for money and phishing scams as the reasons for inappropriate stranger contact.

Sextortion is when a person demands something and threatens to share explicit, embarrassing, or private images or information online if they don't get it. These predators may blackmail children for money or for more explicit images or sexual acts. Twenty parent respondents (2%) said their children had been victims of this serious crime, and the recent significant increase in reported sextortion may make this crime more prevalent.



“My daughter got onto Omegle without my knowledge and was groomed by several adult men, who exposed themselves and convinced her to take off her clothes.”

—
**PARENT OF 13-YEAR-OLD CHILD
WHO RECEIVED SEXUALLY EXPLICIT
REQUESTS ON OMEGLE**

3 in 10

parents say their child
has been contacted by
a stranger online

47%

of children contacted by
a stranger on social media
were under 13

“A man sent my daughter sexually explicit videos of himself playing with his manhood. She IMMEDIATELY gave me her phone. It was on Facebook Messenger. I had to do a lot of explaining.”

—
**PARENT OF 14-YEAR-OLD
SENT EXPLICIT IMAGES ON
FACEBOOK MESSENGER**

¹⁵ [Responding to Online Threats: Minors' Perspectives on Disclosing, Reporting, and Blocking](#). Thorn. 2021.



Where Sexually Explicit Requests Happen on Social Media



#1 parent-reported platform for sexually explicit requests from children



#2 parent-reported platform for sexually explicit requests from children



SnapChat

#3 parent-reported platform for sexually explicit requests from children



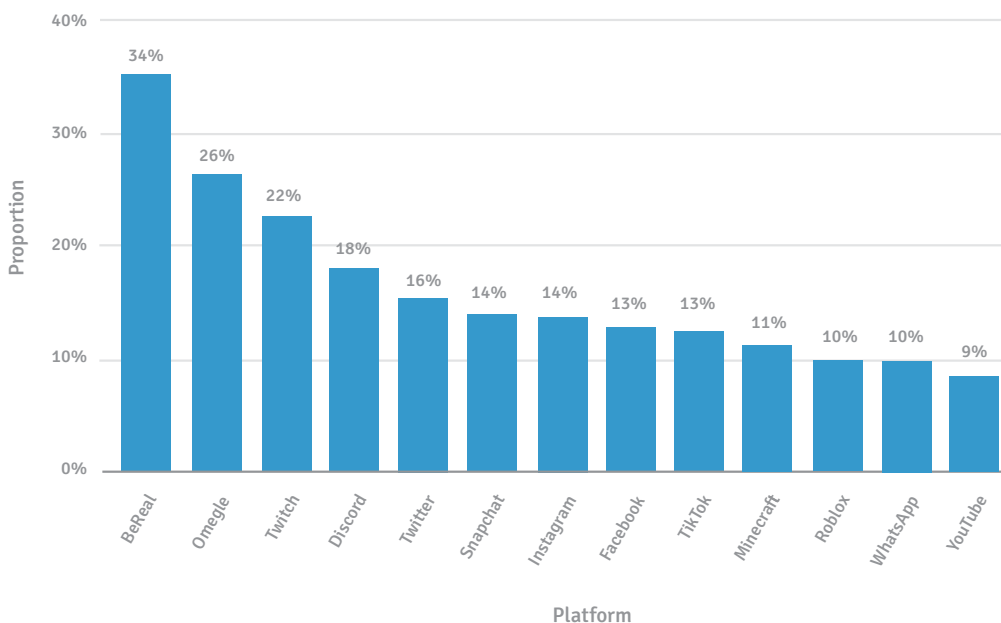
YouTube



TikTok

Using YouTube and TikTok also correlated with higher rates of parent-reported sexually explicit requests

Proportion of Platform Users Who Received Explicit Requests





Who is Receiving Sexually Explicit Requests on Social Media

Parents of white children and parents of children of color report similar rates of sexually explicit requests on social media. Parents who identified their children as having a disability reported a 75% increase in the rate of explicit requests, and parents who identified their children as having mental, emotional, or social special needs reported double the rate of explicit requests compared with children without disabilities or special needs. Parents who identified their children as transgender, nonbinary, or genderqueer reported three times the rate of sexually explicit requests, and parents who identified their children as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or queer reported double the rate of sexually explicit requests, compared to parents of straight children.

2x

Kids with mental, emotional, or social special needs are twice as likely to be asked for sexual images and acts as kids without special needs.

2-3x

LGBTQ+ kids are 2-3x as likely to be asked for sexual images and acts than straight and/or cisgender kids.





CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE MATERIAL (CSAM)

The amount of child sexual abuse material (CSAM) available on social media has been rapidly growing for the past two decades. In recent years, a new category – self-generated images of sexual abuse – has exploded. Self-generated images are explicit images produced by minors, and include both those intentionally made and shared by minors and those made and/or shared under coercion or duress or against the minor's will.

Only 1 in 20 parents report that their child has shared explicit images of themselves online. However, research¹⁶ shows that 1 in 6 children say they have shared explicit images of themselves online, and 1 in 4 kids say the practice is normal. This indicates there may be a significant knowledge gap between what kids are sharing online and what parents think they are sharing.

¹⁶ Self-Generated Child Sexual Abuse Material: Youth Attitudes and Experiences in 2021. Thorn. 2022.



Where CSAM Sharing Happens on Social Media



#1 parent-reported platform
children sharing sexual images
of themselves



#2 parent-reported platform
children sharing sexual images
of themselves

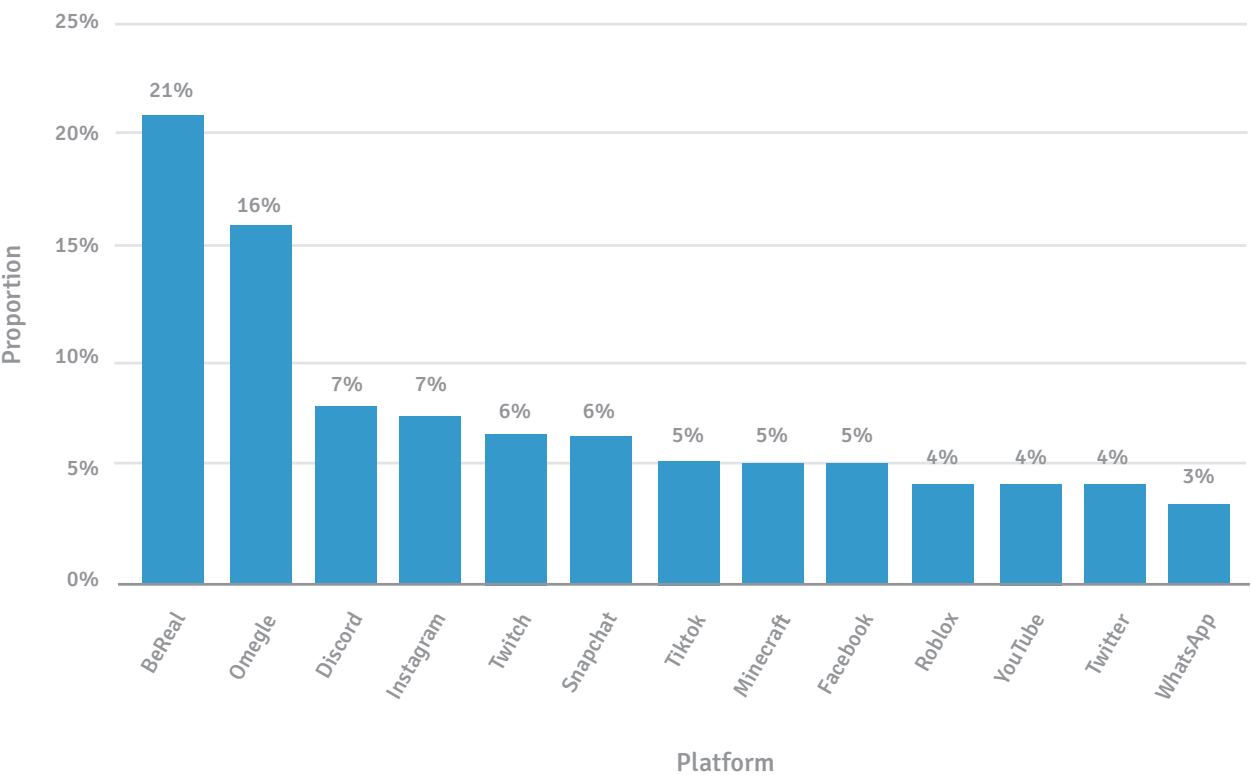


#3 parent-reported platform
children sharing sexual images
of themselves



Using Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok also correlated with higher rates of
parent-reported children sharing sexual images of themselves

Proportion of Platform Users Who Shared Explicit Images of Themselves





Who is Affected by CSAM Sharing

Parents who identified their children as having a disability reported their children shared sexual images of themselves at double the rate of kids without disabilities, and for parents who identified their children as having mental, emotional, or social special needs it was 3x the rate. Parents of transgender, nonbinary, or genderqueer kids reported four times the rate of sending sexual images than parents of cisgender kids, while parents of gay, lesbian, bisexual, or queer children reported three times the rate of sending sexual images than parents of straight children. There was no notable difference in the rates of sharing CSAM between white kids and kids of color. This indicates LGBTQ+ children and children with disabilities and special needs are especially vulnerable to the risks and harms associated with sharing intimate images on social media.

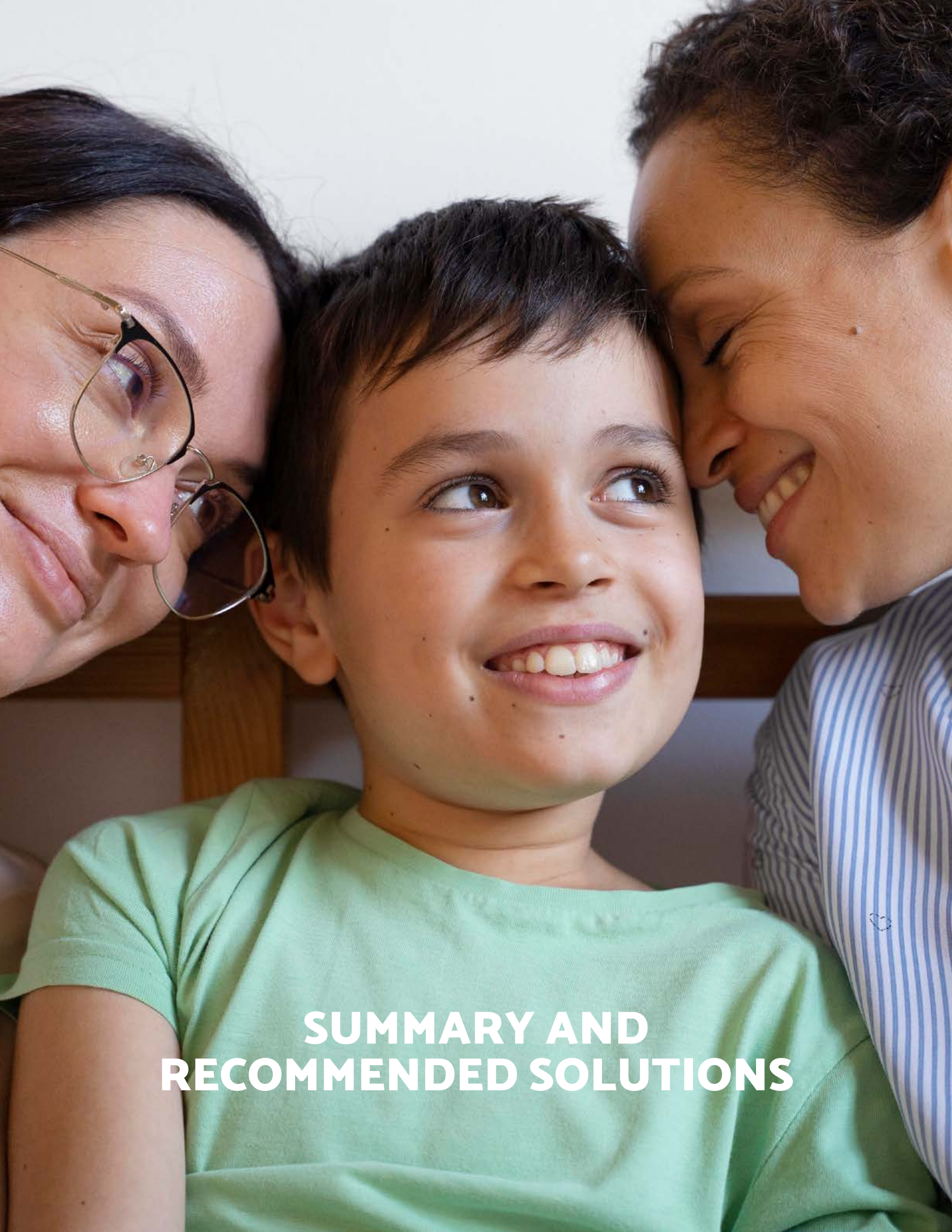
2-4x

Kids with disabilities or special needs and LGBTQ+ kids are 2x to 4x more likely to send explicit images of themselves than their peers.

“My daughter has sent and received nudes on Snapchat and Facebook Messenger.”

**—
PARENT OF 11-YEAR-OLD WHO EXCHANGED
SEXUAL IMAGES ON SNAPCHAT AND FACEBOOK**





SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDED SOLUTIONS



Parents have strong opinions about what will make kids safer online. The vast majority (93%) of parents think social media companies are not doing enough to keep kids safe from sexual exploitation or abuse online. The vast majority (95%) also support stronger laws to regulate social media companies and keep kids safe from sexual exploitation and abuse online.

Parents also had the opportunity to share what, specifically they wished social media companies would do differently to help keep kids safe from sexual exploitation online. The most common themes were a desire for stronger and more accessible parental controls and age verification to use social media. A notable number of parents also expressed significant anger at social media companies and wished they didn't exist.

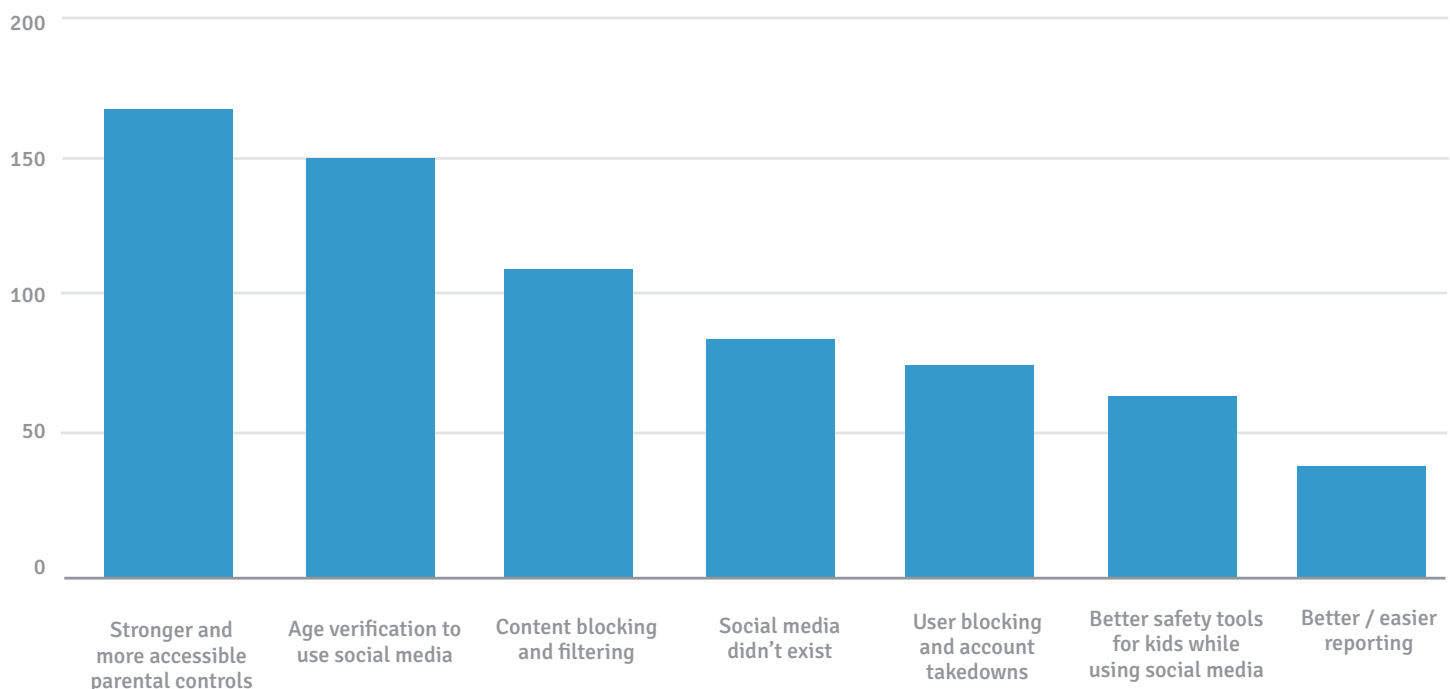
93%

of parents think social media companies are not doing enough to keep kids safe from sexual exploitation or abuse online

95%

of parents support stronger laws to regulate social media companies.

What do you wish social media companies would do differently?





SUMMARY

Parents are in a unique position to identify and diagnose the most serious and urgent social media harms affecting children. In this survey, parents identified these as some of the most urgent problems to solve:

Sexual abuse and exploitation of children is a pervasive, industry-wide problem across social media platforms. There was no major platform which parents did not identify as a source of exploitation, and there was no single platform that was the source of all or most exploitation. Online sexual exploitation of children is everyone's problem.

Parents are afraid, uncertain, and overwhelmed. They don't know how to keep up with what their kids are doing online, talk to them about online safety and sexual exploitation, or build a trusting and transparent relationship around these issues. They feel like they don't get enough support from tech companies or the government.

Children are regularly using platforms they should be prevented from using due to their age. A combination of non-existent gate-keeping from platforms, social pressure for kids and families, and poor parental monitoring tools has created an environment where children are regularly using platforms designed for older teens and adults, exposing them to a variety of harms.

Disabled and special needs children are especially vulnerable to abuse. They are more likely to be exposed to inappropriate content, sexually explicit requests, and share sexual images of themselves than their non-disabled or neurotypical peers.

LGBTQ+ children are also especially vulnerable to abuse. They are more likely to be exposed to inappropriate content, sexually explicit requests, and share sexual images of themselves than their straight or cisgender peers.





RECOMMENDED SOLUTIONS

Children need immediate action to address sexual exploitation and abuse online including, but not limited to the following:

Design social media with kids' health and safety in mind. Social media needs age-appropriate design codes like the ones recently passed in Europe and California to ensure tech companies must design products with kids' best interests in mind. These design codes should include special consideration for vulnerable populations of kids. More information about age-appropriate design codes can be found [here](#).

Pass legislation to regulate the tech industry. It is clear that industry self-regulation does not work and has only resulted in a massive crisis of online sexual abuse and exploitation of children. It gets worse every year. Congress and state legislatures must act urgently to keep kids safe.

Social media companies must prioritize technical and human solutions to online sexual exploitation. Some platforms voluntarily engage in some prevention and reporting of some types of online sexual harms. However policies, practices, and tools are inconsistent across the industry. Platforms must invest in both human and technical solutions to children accessing inappropriate sexual content, sexual exploitation, and the spread of CSAM and innovate to protect both children's safety and privacy.

Social media needs effective, non-invasive age gating. Parents shouldn't be the only thing standing between kids and platforms they are too young to use. Industry, government, and advocates should work together to prevent young children from using age-inappropriate platforms, without reporting to invasive data collection.

Platforms should make better, more accessible parental controls. Parents need more control over their kids' online experience, and the tools that give them that control should be comprehensive and easy to find and use.

Parents should have access to resources and support to help manage their children's social media. Parents often have no recourse and no resources to help them deal with problems on the platforms. Parents of children who are often targets of abuse on social media need access to specific tools and resources to help keep their families safe.





ParentsTogether

WEBSITE: parentstogetheraction.org | INSTAGRAM: [@parentstogether](https://www.instagram.com/parentstogether)