.YONDER

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VSP Parental Guidance Research: Summary Report

PREPARED FOR: OFCOM

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Contents

Executive Summary – VSP Parental Guidance Research

Introduction

The VSP Parental Guidance Research was undertaken by Yonder Consulting on behalf of the VSP team in Ofcom. The main objective of this study was to understand how parents, guardians or carers with children aged 6-17 (throughout this report, the research participants will be referred to as parents) engage with guidance, measures and tools designed to keep their children safe online.The focus of this research did not extend to age limits on video-sharing platforms and/or parental/familial engagement with them. All views expressed in this report are those of these participants rather than of Ofcom.

The insights drawn from this research among parents will inform relevant aspects of Ofcom's future work on the protection of children. The research will also help guide Ofcom's engagement with platforms regarding the efficacy of their protection measures and media literacy tools. The concerns and measures discussed with parents as part of this research go beyond the scope of the harms and measures in the VSP legislation and the research includes VSPs who are not currently regulated by Ofcom as notified VSPs but still provides important context for understanding how parents interact with VSPs, their protection measures, and related guidance.

Methodology

The **VSP Parental Guidance Research** was a mixed-method quantitative and qualitative study, conducted with a sample of UK parents of children aged 6-17. The quantitative phase was conducted via an online survey which took place between 7th and 17th June 2022, amongst a sample of 1,013 parents, The qualitative phase ran concurrently from 13th to 24th June, consisting of online depth interviews with 18 parents of children aged 10- 17 to explore their engagement with online safety measures and guidance in greater detail. This report combines the findings from both the qualitative and quantitative phases of research.

In the quantitative research, in cases where parents had more than one child aged 6-17, one child was selected to be the subject of the survey, and a statistical design within the survey software was used to ensure an even spread of child ages and genders. In the qualitative research, participant recruitment was monitored to ensure a good spread of school years, genders, and household set up across the sample.

Qualitative research participants were invited to take part in a pre-task ahead of their interview. During this written pre-task, they were asked about their awareness and usage of safety tools and guidance. They were also shown safety communications for three VSPs popular with under-18s: TikTok, Snapchat, and Twitch. The aim of the pre-task was to familiarise participants with topics that were to be discussed during their interview, in order to elicit fuller and more considered responses.

For a detailed breakdown of the sample design, weighting, net definitions and overall methodology please refer to the accompanying technical report[1].

[1] Technical report can be viewed here [LINK WHEN FINALISED]

Key Insights
Parents' attitudes towards children's online behaviour

On average, parents approximate that their children spend around 17 hours a week online.

- Perceived usage increases with age, with parents of children aged 6-7 estimating that they spend, on average, around 13 hours a week online, while parents of 16–17-year-olds believe their children are online for about 21 hours a week. (Figure 1)

Figure 1: Parents' estimate of the number of hours children spend online weekly for personal activities
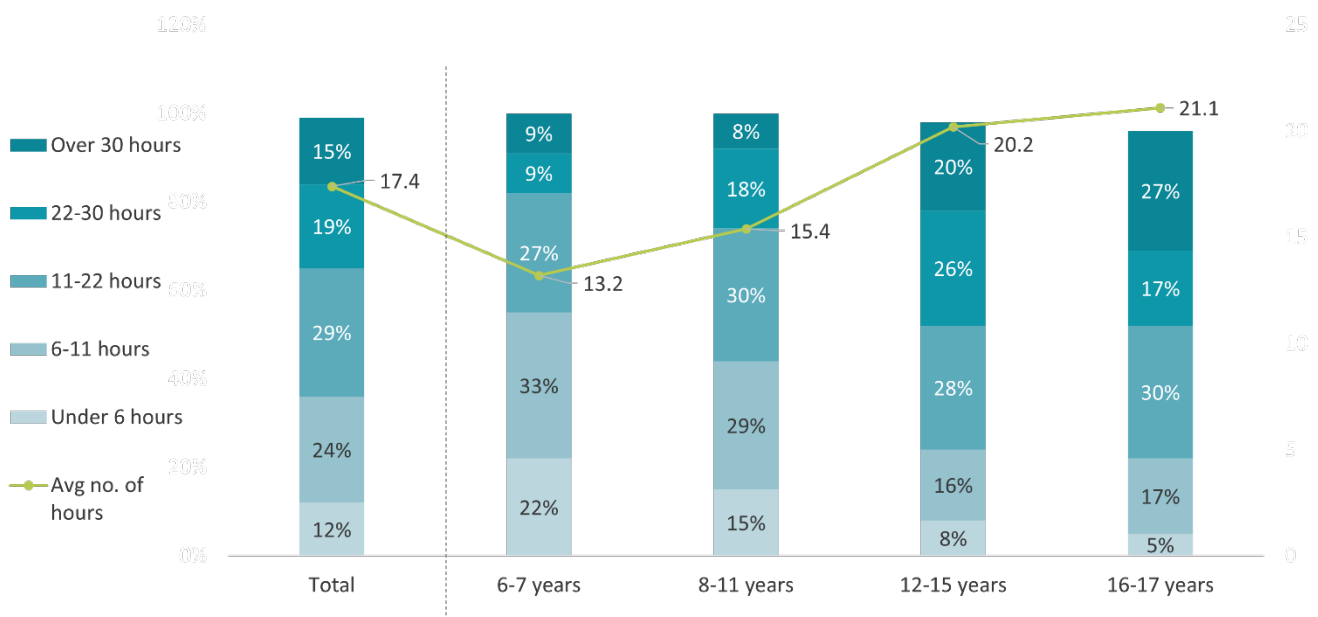
Source: VSP Parental Guidance Research
Q1. Please think about how much of their personal time your child spends online across a typical week.
Base: All respondents (1,013), Aged 6-7 (134), Aged 8-11 (325), Aged 12-15 (355), Aged 16-17 (199)

- In parents' minds, the pandemic has played a large part in terms of the amount of time they believe their children spend online. Qualitatively, parents feel that their children's online usage increased during the pandemic, as they had more free time on their hands. Parents have since found it hard to re-enforce limits on online usage because the pandemic set a precedent for future use.

  'He literally always wants to be online… a bit too much.' Parent of child in Y8, England

  'Liked to restrict their time online but because of Covid (they were) online more as means to keep them sane.' Parent of child in Y10, England

  'He's currently in primary school. I'm worried that when he goes to secondary school there will be a lot of peer pressure as he will look up to older children.' Parent of child in Y7, Northern Ireland

The majority of parents (85%) feel confident that they know what their child is doing online.

- Parents' confidence in knowing what their child is doing online decreases as their child gets older, and parents of children in primary school feel most confident (90%). Parents of older children in sixth form/further education tend to feel the least confident comparatively at 75%. (Figure 2)

- Parents' feelings of control and confidence decrease particularly when the child transitions from primary to secondary school. Our qualitative research identified that increased access to a mobile phone and social media, and growing peer influence at this stage means parents have less visibility and influence over what their child is doing online.

Figure 2: How confident parents feel that they know what their child does online
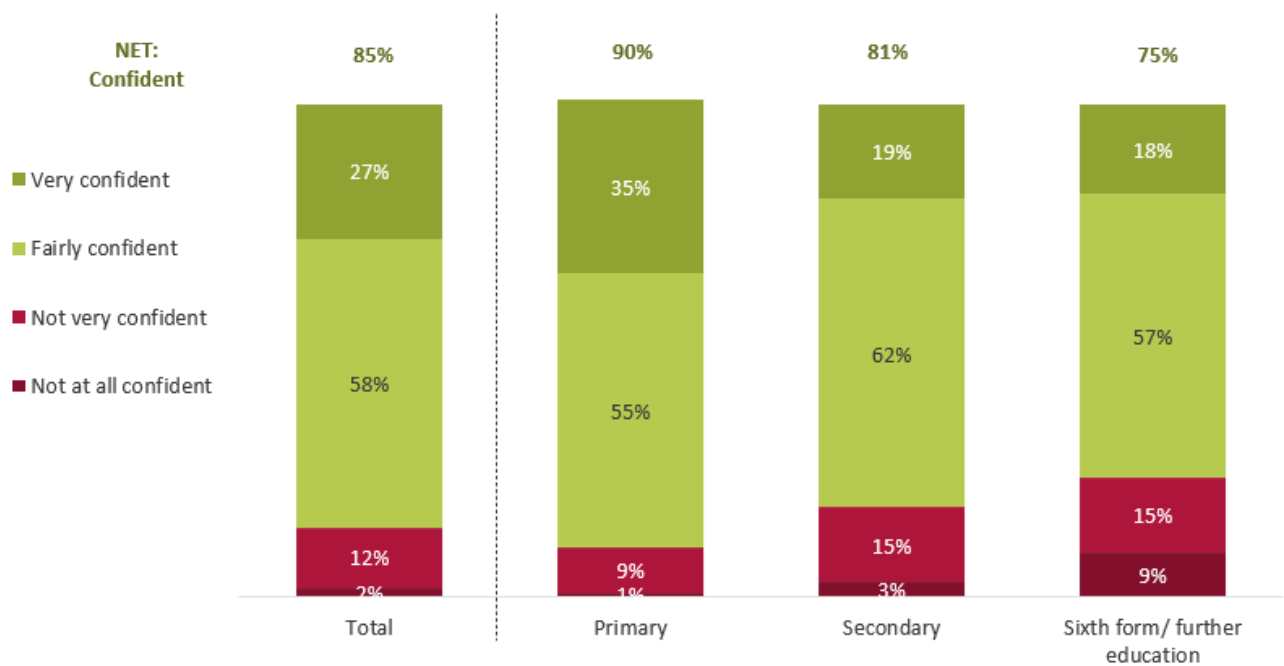
Source: VSP Parental Guidance Research
Q4. How confident are you overall as a parent/carer that you know what your [Child selected] does online?
Base: All respondents (1,013), Primary (433), Secondary (434), Sixth form/further education (79)

The qualitative research revealed that parents largely feel comfortable with what their children are doing online. However, some parents had concerns about potential social interactions with strangers, or the possibility that their child may come across inappropriate content.

- Parents are concerned that their child could come across inappropriate content such as porn, violence, material which relates to suicidal subjects, or material that relates to unrealistic body image.

- Parents feel comfortable with their children being online for gaming, entertainment, and communicating with their friends. However, when there is a potential for interaction with strangers, this piques parental concerns.

- Parents also worry about a range of these social interactions, from grooming to cyberbullying to adults masquerading as children.

'I'm comfortable she's not doing crazy stuff… it's the [other] people that are worrying online.' Parent of child in Y8, England

The perceived nature of VSPs triggers concerns in parents, as they believe it allows access to inappropriate content and strangers online.

- Parents tended to perceive VSPs as having a constant and unregulated stream of content. Additionally, parents believed VSPs allow access to any number of online communities, thus increasing the possibility of interacting with strangers.

Awareness, use and experience of safety measures

Parents tend to use a range of strategies to keep their child safe online, including safety controls, family rules, and guidance from the platform.

- From our qualitative research with parents, safety controls used include tangible tools parents put in place to keep their children safe online such as content filters on a browser, content filters on the home broadband, privacy settings on a VSP, and screen time limits.

- Family rules in place include monitoring their child's usage, guiding their child on safe internet use, and setting rules for usage. Some parents also trust that their child would tell them if they came across something inappropriate.

- Parents also look to platforms for initial guidance on what may be appropriate for their child by referring to the platform's minimum age recommendations.

- When children are younger, parents use a combination of safety tools, monitoring their usage, and guidance to keep their child safe. As children become older (around 15 years old), parents prefer a more guidance-based approach to online safety as they recognise the child's need for privacy and independence as they transition into a young adult.

  'There's only so much you can do…. I talk to them about the dangers and then hope they would navigate this themselves.' Parent of child in Y10, England

  'Do not use safety controls, use conversations and trust' Parent of child in Y11, England

Awareness

The majority of parents claim to know at least a little about various online platform safety tools/controls when shown a list; however, most cannot spontaneously recall any tools or controls.

- When prompted, 76% of parents say they know at least a little about parental controls on individual apps that restrict and monitor usage. (Figure 3)

- Additionally, when prompted 61% say they know about apps that can be installed on a child's phone that monitors which apps they use and for how long. (Figure 3)

Figure 3: Parents' knowledge of tools/controls that protect children online

Legend: ■ Not heard of this ■ Have heard of but don't know anything ■ I know a little ■ I know a lot   **NET: Know a little/lot**

Tool/control	Not heard of this	Have heard of but don't know anything	I know a little	I know a lot	NET: Know a little/lot
Parental controls or settings on individual apps to restrict or monitor a child's use of that specific app	7%	17%	51%	25%	76%
Settings on search engines or websites to restrict online access	7%	19%	50%	24%	74%
Parent controls built into the device software by the manufacturer	9%	18%	50%	23%	73%
Content filters provided by your internet service provider	12%	19%	45%	24%	69%
Parent control software you can set up on a particular device	10%	21%	49%	21%	69%
Content filters provided by your mobile network operator	15%	20%	45%	20%	65%
Apps that can be installed on a child's device to actively restrict access to content/manage their use	13%	24%	45%	18%	62%
Apps that can be installed on a child's phone which monitor the apps they use and for how long	13%	26%	42%	19%	61%

Source: VSP Parental Guidance Research
Q10. How much do you know about the following types of tools or controls that help protect your child when online (whether you use them or not)? Base: All respondents (1,013)

- These findings were reflected in the qualitative research, where most parents were unable to spontaneously recall any specific safety tools/controls, but when prompted, recalled features such as content filters provided by their broadband provider, content filters provided by the mobile, and settings on search engines. Indeed, some parents remembered that they had implemented these in the past but forgotten about them.

  [Upon prompting] *'I know content filters for mobile, settings on search engines, apps to install, parental controls on individual apps… they had discussed this in lockdown information from the school. I MAY have some of these running as a blur in the background.'* Parent of children in S2 and S5, Scotland

Likewise, while most parents know and assume that VSPs have parental controls, there is little knowledge about the specific controls on each VSP.

- In the qualitative research most parents' knowledge of parental controls on apps was limited to privacy settings i.e., setting their child's profile to private.

- When in the qualitative research parents were shown specific parental controls on VSPs, for example 'Family Pairing' on TikTok, most were unaware these sort of controls existed.

  'I make sure the children have private social media accounts, though I'm not too confident about other resources…' Parent of child in Y7 and Y12, England.

Use

Based on their current understanding and the information available to them, six in ten (58%) parents say they do not use parental controls on the VSPs that their child uses; among those who are not using parental controls, half say this is because their child does not need them, as shown in figures 4 and 5**.**

- This attitude towards parental controls increases as the child gets older. Around 2 in 10 parents (22%) of 6–7-year-olds who do not use controls on the VSP their child uses feel their child does not need parental controls, while this increases to 7 in 10 parents (70%) of 16-17-year-olds. (Figure 4)

Figure 4: Proportion of parents that feel their child does not need parental controls on the VSPs their child uses
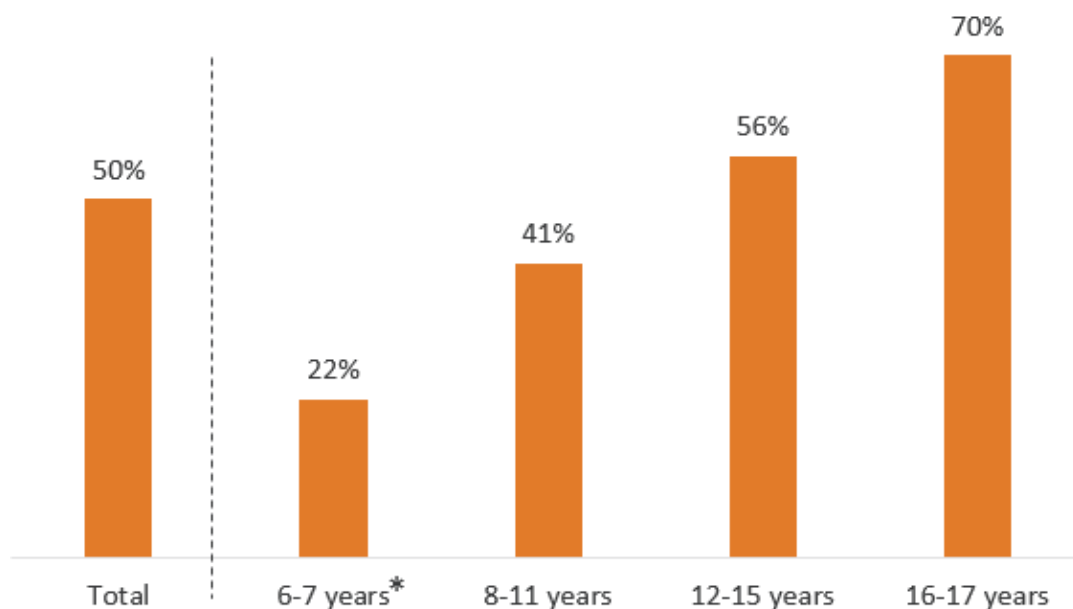
Source: VSP Parental Guidance Research
Q13. Why do you not use these sort of controls or settings for your [Child selected]? Q11. And, thinking about your [Child selected], which, if any, do you currently use or have you used in the past for this child?
Base: All respondents not using parental controls on apps (465); ***Children 6-7 (45*) *CAUTION – Low base size, figures are indicative only***, *8-11 (133); 12-15 (178); 16-27 (109)*

- During the qualitative research, the most frequently cited reasons by parents for not tending to use parental controls were that they monitor their children's usage themselves, they trust their children, and that they feel their children are savvy enough to take care of themselves online.

  'We do not really need to use them [parental controls] because we sit with her and monitor her usage.' Grandparent of child in Y1, England

  'I feel quite confident that he can take care of himself, they've been taught about online safety at school. He's also taken a computing course where there is a module on child safety.' Parent of child in S5, Scotland

Some parents also do not use parental controls on VSPs because they do not know how to use them (20%), or do not understand how they work (17%). (Figure 5)

Figure 5: Reasons parents aren't using parental controls on VSPs
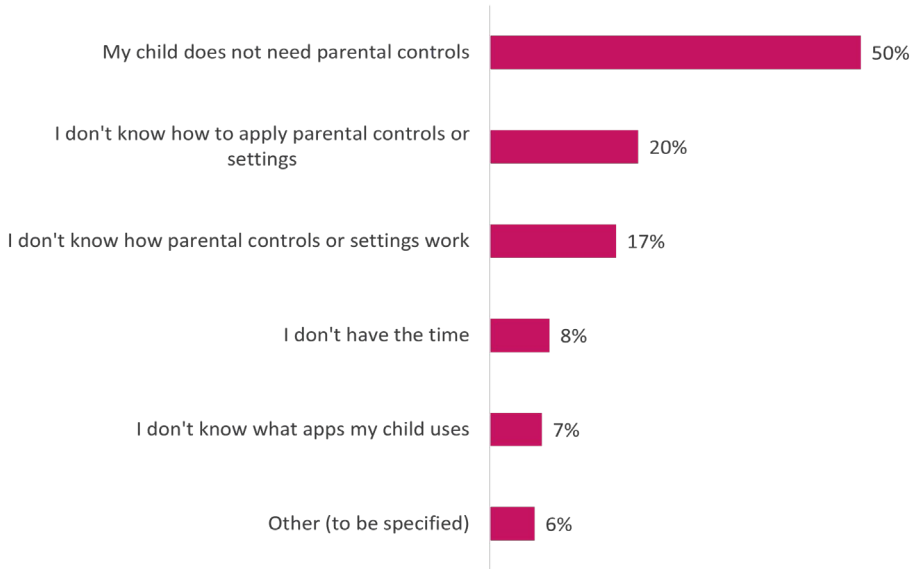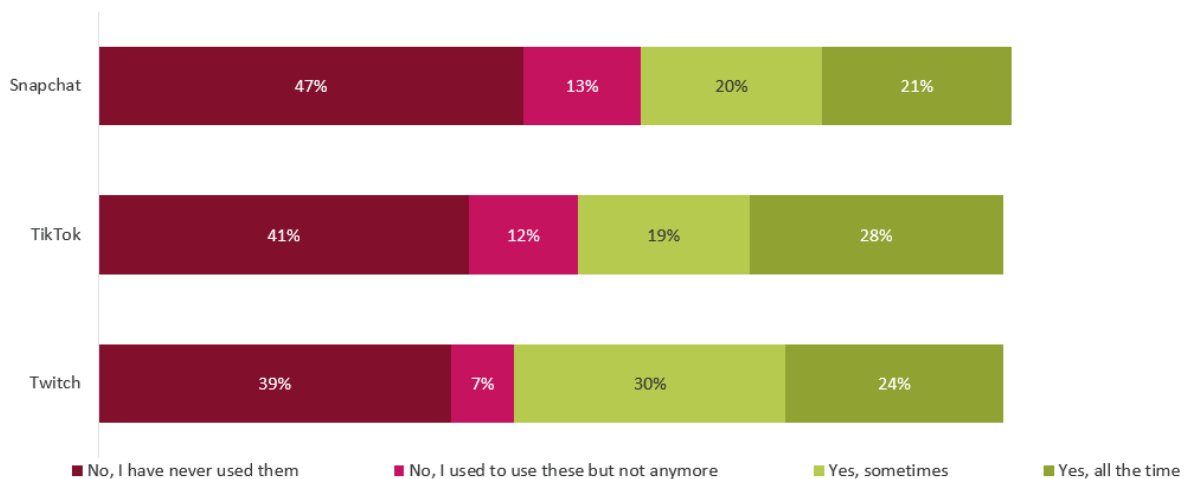

Source: VSP Parental Guidance Research
Q13. Why do you not use these sort of controls or settings for your [Child selected]? Base: All respondents who do not currently use parental controls on apps (465)

- Out of Snapchat, TikTok and Twitch, current use of parental controls/settings is lowest on Snapchat (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Use of parental controls/settings on specific VSPs

VSP Parental Guidance Research
Q17. And thinking of the apps that you say your [Child selected] uses, do you currently use any of these controls or settings on any of these?
Base: All respondents that know at least a little about parental controls on apps (766); All respondents that know about parental controls on apps and whose child uses… Snapchat (400); TikTok (602); Twitch (125). Parents were also asked

about their use of controls or settings on Vimeo, Fruitlab, Recast and The Sponsor Hub. Due to very low base sizes these VSPs were excluded from the analysis.

- Our qualitative research found that, compared to the online platforms that they use themselves, parents tended to be less familiar with the VSPs that their children use.

  'I do not know TikTok or Snapchat, the ones I use are mainly Facebook so I find the ones they use [TikTok/Snapchat] hard to understand.' Parent of child in Y10, Wales

  'I'm most comfortable with YouTube… with the others I have such a lack of knowledge I do not even know what to do.' Parent of children in Y6, Y8 and Y11, England

Experience

Among parents who were using parental controls on Snapchat, Twitch and TikTok, when prompted around 9 in 10 (86% - 93%) said they found them easy to implement and use. However, as our qualitative research indicates, parents' knowledge of parental controls is limited, so this may be in relation to privacy settings on these apps.

- Some parents believe that other parental controls are deliberately hidden away as they have never come across these before. There was a call in the qualitative interviews for these to be made easier to find and use.

  'I feel like these parental controls are hidden away… it sometimes feels a bit deliberate. You have to jump through a lot of hoops to find the settings.' Parent of child in Y6, Wales
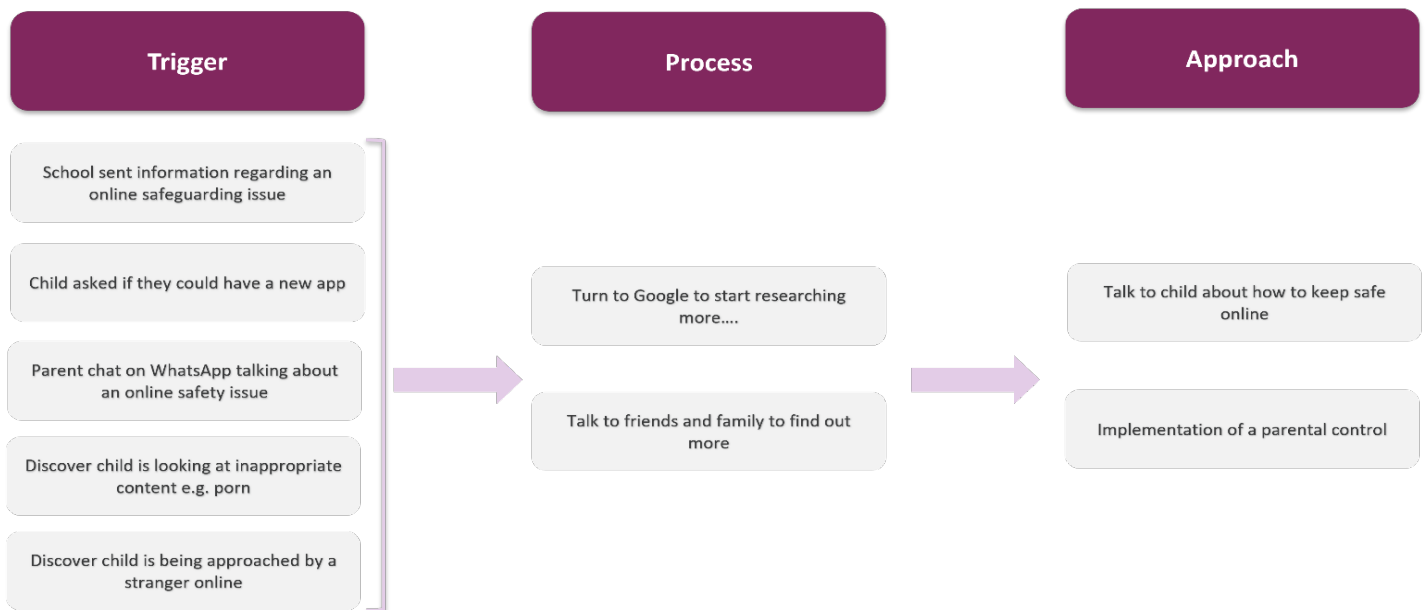
Process of finding safety information

In the qualitative research we found that, for many, trying to find information on internet safety was overwhelming. As a result, parents only tend to look for information when prompted by a specific incident.

- Examples of these prompts include discovering their child looking at inappropriate content, an alert from the school about a potential safeguarding issue, or a request from their child about signing up to a new website / app. This piece of research was in itself another prompt for a lot of parents. (Figure 7)

  'When I [received safety information] from school I realised it was something important. Using the internet I knew how to protect myself, but didn't realise I needed to do something for my child.' Parent of child in Y6, England

- For many parents using search engines or talking to friends and family are the key starting points to find out more information. (Figure 7)

- For most parents, once information has been found, the next step is to talk to their child and/or install any relevant parental tools/controls. (Figure 7)

Figure 7: Process of finding safety information

Trigger	Process	Approach
School sent information regarding an online safeguarding issue		
Child asked if they could have a new app	Turn to Google to start researching more….	Talk to child about how to keep safe online
Parent chat on WhatsApp talking about an online safety issue		
Discover child is looking at inappropriate content e.g. porn	Talk to friends and family to find out more	Implementation of a parental control
Discover child is being approached by a stranger online		

Source: VSP Parental Guidance Research

Parents feel that there is no single go-to source for information; instead they tend to gather information from many different sources.

- The qualitative research showed that most parents are not aware who regulates or is responsible for internet safety, which is another reason for them using multiple sources.

  'So many sources of information…no bible…no one guru on safety online like there is for personal finance: you know to go to Money Saving Expert' Parent of child in Y11, England

- Some parents seek specific sources, such as tech experts, while others rely on other parents or user forums, and some are less structured in their approach.

- The most trusted sources for information are schools, charities such as the NSPCC, and government websites. This was because these institutions were perceived to have the time, money and resources to research the topic, resulting in well-rounded information.

Sources of online safety information

Just over half of parents (52%) remember seeing/receiving guidance on how to keep their child safe online.

Figure 8: Proportion of parents who have received guidance on keeping their child safe online

Yes   No   Can't remember
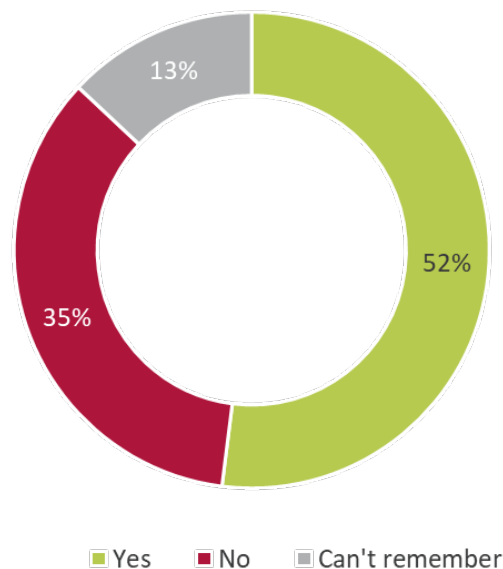
Source: VSP Parental Guidance Research
Q20. Have you seen or received any general information or guidance about keeping your child/children safe online?? Base: All respondents (1,013)

- However, over a third (35%) did not see or receive guidance from any source. (Figure 8)

When prompted with a list of potential sources, parents say they are most likely to have been provided information or guidance by their child's school.

- Just under half (46%) of parents have received information or guidance about keeping their child safe online from their child's school, while a fifth (20%) looked for it via a search engine and under a fifth (16%) encountered it while on social media.

Parents are most likely to have received information in written format, although video and audio formats are considered most helpful.

- Parents received guidance primarily in the form of information leaflets (46%) or direct messages, such as emails or letters (39%). Video content was a less common way of receiving guidance (20%) as was audio content (9%).

- However, they are most likely to find video or audio formats the most useful way of receiving information/guidance (54% and 53% respectively found video or audio formats a 'very useful' way of receiving information, the highest of any of the formats provided).

  'I find it easier to look up a video for things to stick in my mind.' Parent of child in S5, Scotland

Parents' evaluation of VSP communication and themes[2]

Parents are appreciative of internet safety guidance from VSPs that is clear, relevant, accessible, and easy to understand.

- Before the pre-task most parents believed that the VSPs had no safety measures in place and were therefore pleasantly surprised by the safety features and guidance offered. This made some parents more comfortable with their child using the VSPs.

  'This is going to sound stupid but before this I thought TikTok didn't have any controls… it felt like TikTok was highly unregulated, as well as Snapchat.' Parent of child in Y7, Northern Ireland

- When provided with examples of existing online safety guidance, parents responded well to the short videos, as well as the simple layout, which made the information more digestible and quicker to read: both attractive qualities as parents are often time poor.

- VSP guidance which included information explained from a teenager's point of view was felt to be comprehensive and relevant.

  '…content was very good and slick…clear headline and (I liked) the teen guide…as it is the users speaking (they) are the key demographic who use TikTok' Parent of a child in Y6, England

- Some of the VSPs tested in the pre-task featured accessibility features such as the ability to change text for dyslexic readers which resonated well amongst parents as the information felt inclusive.

Figure 9. Ideal communications parents want from VSPs:
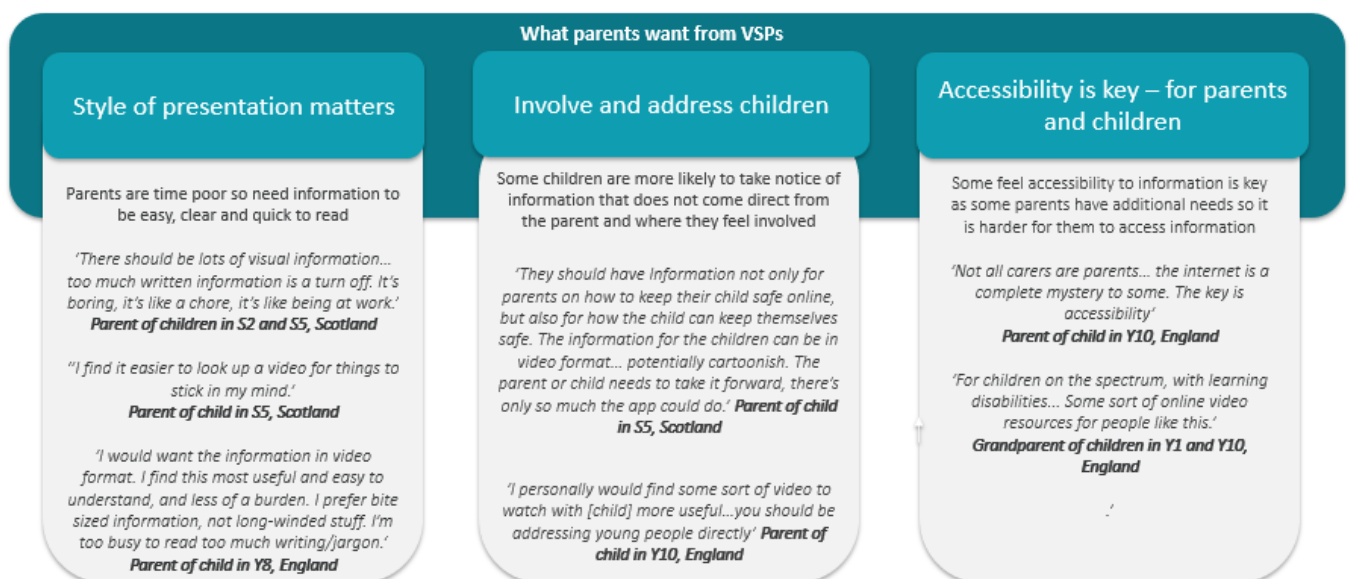
Source: VSP Parental Guidance Research

- Parents also struggle to keep up with safety guidance and controls as they feel these are constantly changing. Therefore, they want to be regularly notified when something has changed.

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[2] *Participants in the qualitative study were asked to complete a pre-task before their interview. During the pre-task, they were provided with links to safety communications for TikTok, Snapchat, and Twitch.*

'Things are constantly changing… I want regular information on things to look out for and I want them [VSPs] to make people aware of this.' Parent of child in Y8, England

- Given that VSPs vary in their functions and features, parents want a common set of guidelines and functions across VSPs. This includes common age verification processes, and notifications when the child is trying to access inappropriate content.

- Parents want information in a quick, digestible format, for example, in the form of short videos.

  'I would want the information in video format. I find this most useful and easy to understand, and less of a burden. I prefer bite sized information, not long-winded stuff. I'm too busy to read too much writing/jargon.' Parent of child in Y8, England

- Finally, some parents also showed a desire to be involved in the design and development of parental/safety controls on apps, given that they are the end users.

Parents responded well to being presented potential dangers around internet safety, and to seeing transparency around this information by VSPs.

- Snapchat provided a case study which highlighted potential dangers while using the app. Parents liked that this guidance was being honest about the possible dangers and provided tangible solutions to this.

- Most were also unaware of the parental controls on each VSP that were outlined in the safety information, therefore, this was new (and welcome) information for them.

  'Found all 3 helpful, learnt something from them all.' Parent of a child in Y7, Wales

Although helpful, the format and tone of the information can also come across as overwhelming

- On the other hand, a few parents in the sample felt the Snapchat guidance was too wordy and dense and could have benefitted from some videos.

- A few parents also found the tone of the Snapchat guidance more scaremongering than helpful, as it made them worry about their child using the app.

- Most parents missed the hyperlink (Twitch guidance) with key information on how to stay safe on the app, although those who saw it found the information relevant and clear.

- Some parents also felt as though the information in the Twitch guidance was not actionable and that the next steps were unclear.