

Savanta:

Understanding Online Communications Among Children

Research Report

2026

savanta.com

Make Better Decisions

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Background, Objectives and Methodology

Background

The Online Safety Act (OSA) imposes duties on providers of online services to protect children online. As the UK online safety regulator, Ofcom is responsible for producing codes and guidance to support compliance with these duties, and for enforcing the Act.

As part of Ofcom's work, it is important to understand how children use the internet and build an evidence base on the prevalence of harms online.

This research primarily focuses on pathways to online grooming and the sharing of Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM). This is followed by a section on inappropriate behaviour, sexualisation and gender-based harms. Finally, later in the report, there are also sections relating to children's experiences of illegal harms, including content relating to terrorism, drugs and weapons.

These findings add to our evidence base on adults' experiences of these harms in our [Online Experiences Tracker](#), and children's experiences of other content under the OSA in our [Children's Online Safety Tracker](#).

Objectives

- 01 Understand how children build their online networks, and how safely they do this, to better understand potential pathways and vulnerabilities surrounding online grooming.
- 02 Understand the scale of children's **potentially uncomfortable encounters** when messaging which relate to risk of grooming or the generation or sharing of Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM), such as unwanted friend requests, catfishing, and requests to share nude images.
- 03 Understand the scale of children's exposure to **inappropriate behaviour, sexualisation and gender-based harms**, such as sexualised comments and harassment.
- 04 Understand the scale of children's exposure to content relating to **drugs, weapons and terrorism**.
- 05 For the above three areas, to understand how frequently these occur, on which platforms, and which groups of children are more impacted than others.

Methodology



Savanta surveyed 4,097 children aged 11-17 in the UK between 13th February and 19th March 2026.

How children were recruited to the survey:

Fieldwork was conducted online, with respondents recruited via panel invitations. Two recruitment approaches were used:

- Parent-routed recruitment:** Parents/guardians answered household demographic questions before handing over to the 11–17-year-olds (94% of sample).
- Direct recruitment:** 16-17-year-olds surveyed directly - no involvement of a parent/guardian (6% of the sample).



Quotas were set to ensure a representative sample of the UK population aged 11-17. **Results weighted** by age, gender, nation, region, ethnicity and socio-economic grade.

This report follows on from a **similar study in 2023**, which also covered children’s online communications. However, there are key methodological differences between the two studies, including changes to the platforms covered, question wording and the time gap between the data sets. As a result, any comparisons with 2023 should be viewed as **indicative** rather than evidence of trends over time. More detail on the methodology used this year, and in 2023, can be found in the [technical report](#).

Unweighted sample breakdown (Total = 4,097)			
Gender			
Boys		2,006	
Girls		1,972	
Age			
11 years old	484	15 years old	645
12 years old	582	16 years old	509
13 years old	798	17 years old	507
14 years old	572		
Region			
East Midlands	300	South West	331
East of England	388	West Midlands	380
London	518	Yorkshire	363
North East	169	Wales	192
North West	446	Scotland	290
South East	617	Northern Ireland	103

Definitions

To support clarity and consistency, the following definitions apply throughout this report:

- **“Potentially uncomfortable encounters”** (slides 31-43) refers to online experiences that may be unwanted, upsetting or inappropriate, but are not necessarily illegal, such as unwanted friend requests, children being added to a group video call with people they do not know, or receiving nasty or abusive messages.
- **“Inappropriate behaviour, sexualisation and gender-based harms”** (slides 44-50) refers to a range of ten potentially harmful online experiences including sexualised comments, AI-generated images and harassment.
- **“Content relating to drugs, weapons and terrorism”** (slides 51-58) refers to content seen relating to illegal drugs or vapes, knives and other weapons, and terrorism.

The next slide explores the legislative context under the OSA for the relevant harms areas. It is worth noting that while some children’s experiences discussed in this report may relate to offences under the OSA or other laws, these experiences are self-reported by children aged 11-17, and some may not reach the threshold for an offence.

- For the purposes of this report, **“platforms”** refers to social media platforms, messaging platforms, video-sharing platforms and dating platforms, but excludes gaming platforms.
- The definition of platforms included in this report are without prejudice to any future Ofcom decisions in relation to regulatory scope under the OSA. The full list of platforms we specifically asked respondents about were: Facebook/Facebook Messenger, Instagram, WhatsApp, TikTok, Snapchat, X, Reddit, Discord, Kik, Twitch/Live.Me, Threads, Pinterest, Telegram, Text/iMessage/Google Messages, Tumblr and Dating Sites/Apps. These were chosen based on their usage numbers among 11-17 year olds according to a combination of Ofcom's Children and Parents' Media Literacy Tracker and Children's Passive Online Measurement and also on their relevant functionalities for this research such as messaging. Gaming platforms were not included in the scope of this research due to the complexity of this sector in relation to how children communicate, which was not feasible to include in this study alongside the other platforms within a single questionnaire of child-appropriate length. In the 2023 study, a similar decision was made and gaming was covered separately in a piece of qualitative research. Following the publication of this report, Ofcom aim to cover topics such as how children build their online networks on gaming in a separate study.

Relevant harms under the Online Safety Act

For reference, below are summaries of the relevant harms under the OSA which may relate to some, but not all, of the experiences referenced by children throughout the report.

Relevant harms	Offences
Child sexual exploitation and abuse (slides 29-40)	Offences relating to the making, showing, distributing or possessing of an indecent image or film of a child
	An offence of possession of a prohibited image of a child
	Offences concerning the sexual exploitation of children and young people aged 17 or younger
	'Arranging' together with 'assisting', 'encouraging' and 'conspiring' offences which could take place between adults and/or children (potential victim(s) under 16)
Harassment, stalking, threats and abuse (slides 41-47)	Offences relating to threats
	Offences relating to abuse and insults
	Other content likely to amount to harassment offences (including stalking)
Intimate image abuse (slides 41-47)	Offences relating to non-consensual disclosure of intimate images

Relevant harms	Offences
Terrorism (slides 48-55)	A series of offences relating to proscribed organisations
	Offences relating to information likely to be of use to a terrorist
	Offences relating to training for terrorism
	Other offences involving encouraging terrorism or disseminating terrorist materials
Drugs and psychoactive substances (slides 48-55)	The unlawful supply, offer to supply, of controlled drugs, articles for administering or preparing controlled drugs, or psychoactive substances
	Inciting any offence under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971
Firearms and other weapons (slides 48-55)	Offences relating to firearms, their parts, ammunition, including air guns and shotguns
	Offences relating to 3D printing instructions for guns and gun parts
	Knives, 'offensive' weapons and imitation firearms offences

Notes on the interpreting the findings from this research

Participants' views and responses in relation to platforms and their experiences on them should not be taken as evidence of their technical feasibility, proportionality, or effectiveness. The report does not seek to verify whether participants' perceptions accurately reflect the functionalities or safety measures implemented by the platforms referenced.

References to specific online platforms are included to illustrate participants' experiences and perspectives. These references should not be understood as indicating the prevalence or origin of particular types of content on those platforms, but rather as reflecting the platforms used by participants and their individual experiences.

Any findings or observations presented in this report are based on the perceptions of those who participated in the research and do not represent the views of Ofcom or Savanta.

This research and its findings should not be interpreted as a decision by Ofcom as online safety regulator.

Significance Testing: Results are tested to a 95% confidence level. Where relevant, statistically significant differences are shown in data tables using directional arrows ▲ ▼. Only differences marked with directional arrows are significant at the 95% confidence level; unmarked differences may be due to sample variation.

Executive Summary

Executive summary (1)

01

How children build online networks

- **Children are more confident communicating online than in person:** 79% feel confident communicating online, compared to 65% in person.
- **Over a third of children (36%) have friends/followers they don't know personally:** 6% of children are mainly connected with people they don't know, 64% are connected mainly with people they know, while the remaining 30% have a mix of both.
- **Around two thirds (64%) of children receive weekly friend requests from people they haven't spoken to before:** 14% say this happens every day.
- **Around 4 in 10 children (39%) would accept a friend request from someone because they have mutual friends online:** 27% would accept based on the user's age, and 25% based on the kinds of things the other user posts.

02

Children's potentially uncomfortable encounters online

- **Around 8 in 10 (79%) children have encountered at least one of the ten potentially uncomfortable types of contact:** this includes 14% of children being asked to share nude or semi-nude images, while 16% have received nude or semi-nude images from others.
- **The majority of children felt uncomfortable about all ten experiences we asked about:** with the highest levels of discomfort from requests for personal information (76%), receiving nude or semi-nude images (72%) and receiving nasty or abusive messages (72%).

Executive summary (2)

03

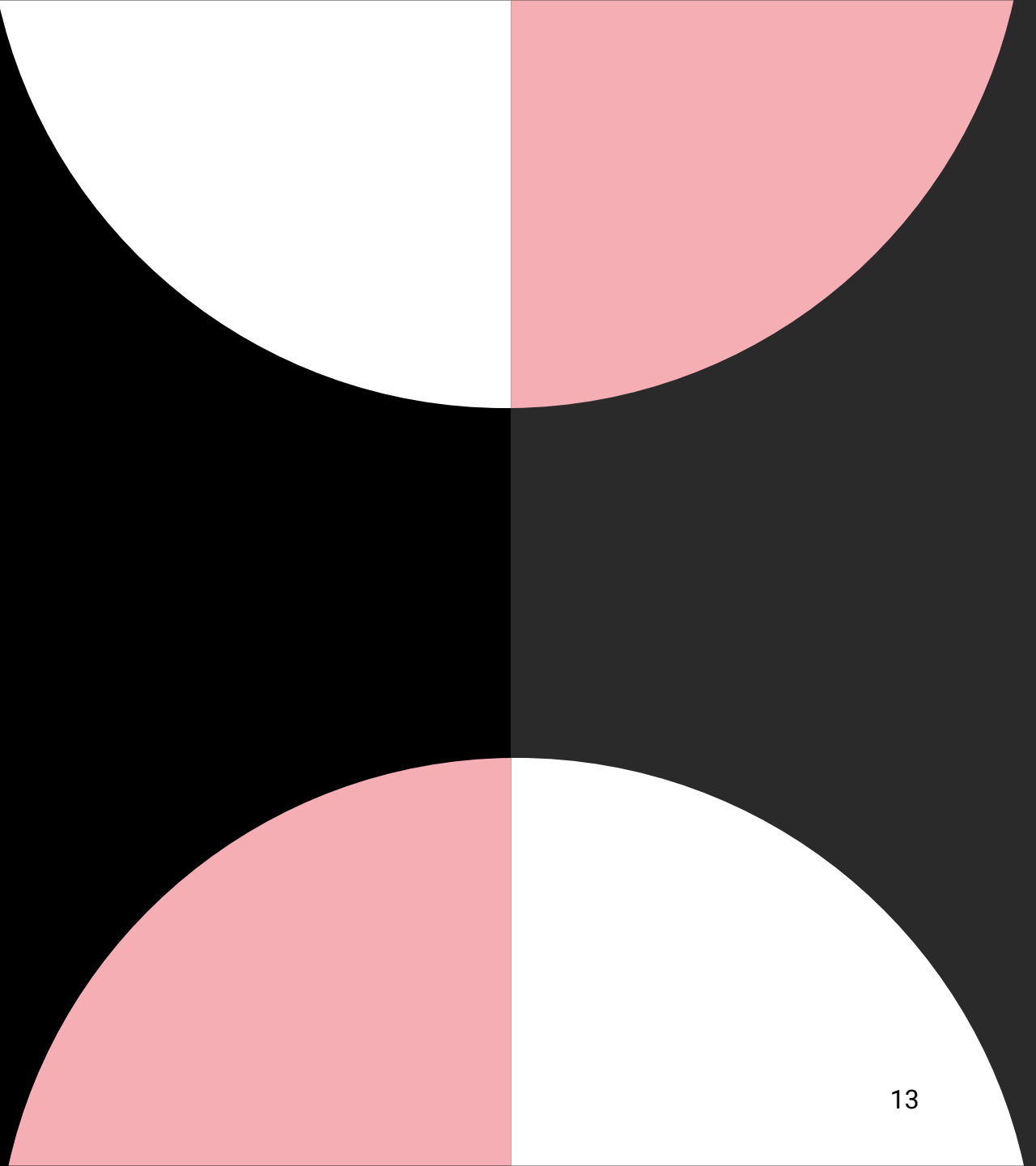
Inappropriate behaviour, sexualisation and gender-based harms

- **Around 7 in 10 children (69%) said they had encountered at least one of the inappropriate, sexualised or gender-based harms online that we asked about:** this includes 32% of children seeing posts that made fun of someone's body or looks, 26% seeing mean or rude messages about girls or women, and 15% seeing someone stalked or harassed.
- **Among those children who had encountered at least one of these harms, 7 in 10 had been the victim themselves:** including 13% having unsolicited sexual messages sent to them and 13% having AI-generated or edited images made of them.
- **Girls aged 16-17 were more likely than boys and those in other age groups to experience five of the ten harms than average:** including posts that made fun of their appearance (25%), someone stalking or harassing them online (27%), and receiving unsolicited sexual messages (18%).

04

Content relating to drugs, weapons and terrorism

- **3 in 10 (31%) children have seen videos, posts or messages about illegal drugs or vaping:** while 22% have seen posts about terrorism, and 20% have seen posts about knives or weapons.
- **All four illegal harms we asked about were more likely to be encountered by boys than girls:** this includes 36% of boys having seen posts about illegal drugs compared to only 27% of girls.
- **When seeing posts about illegal drugs, the most likely response from children was ignoring it (33%),** but some took more proactive measures such as clicking a 'hide' or 'not interested' button (17%) or blocking the user who sent or posted it (13%).



SECTION 1: Online Communication Behaviours

Platforms used, frequency, types of
communication and cross-platform insights

At a glance: How children communicate online

More children report feeling confident communicating online than in person

- **79% of children feel confident communicating online**, compared to 65% in person; 20% are shy/ reserved online (vs 35% in person).
- **Main apps & platforms used** by children:
 - WhatsApp (74%)
 - TikTok (65%)
 - Snapchat (65%)
 - Instagram (62%)

Many children connect beyond people they know well – especially specific groups.

- **30% of children communicate with both known and unknown contacts online** (Minority ethnic children [36%] are significantly more likely to communicate with both than white ethnic children [28%]).
- **Children mainly use platforms to stay in touch with people they already know**, though some also use them to **meet new people** and **connect around shared interests**.

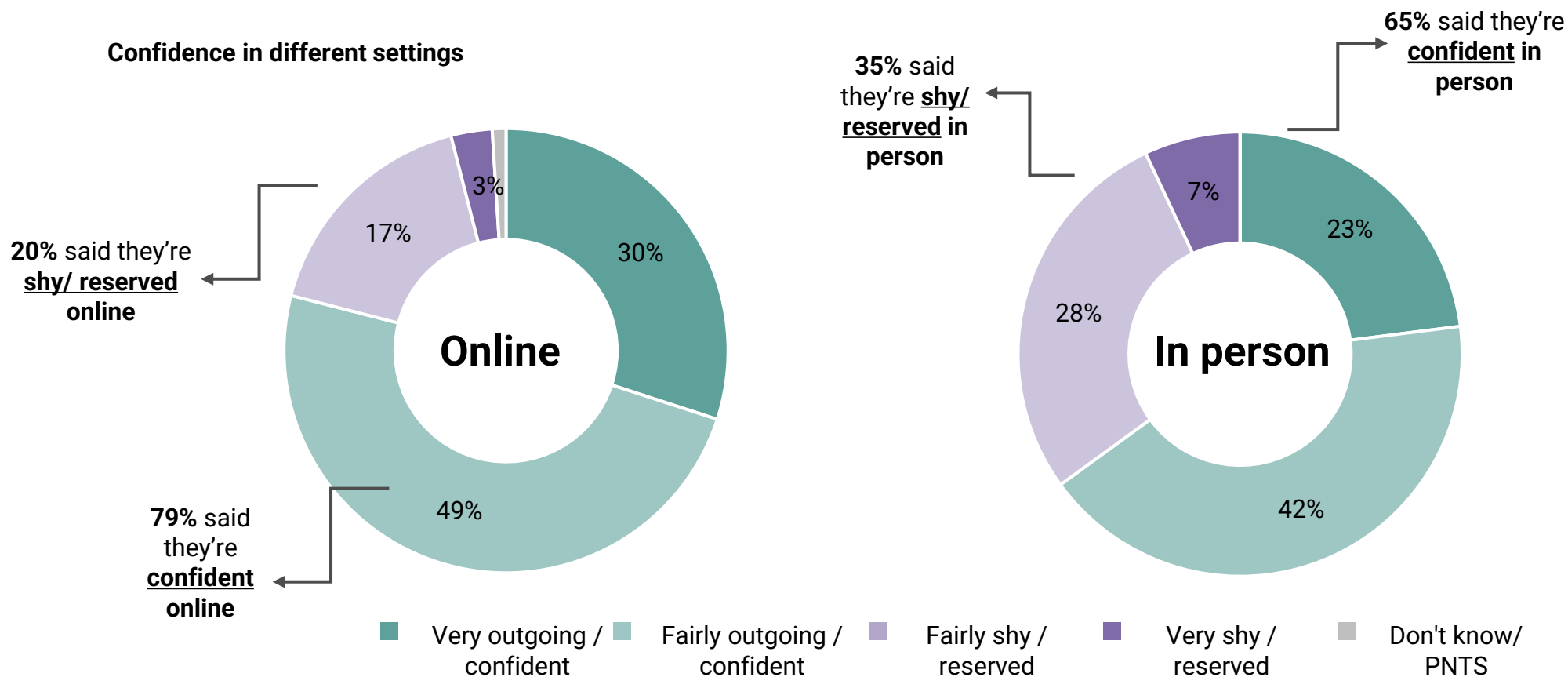
Communication styles differ by platform

- **67% use one-to-one direct messaging; 59% join group chats; 45% share digital content.**
- **Video calls, voice notes, and active participation in comment sections are also popular**, especially on community-driven platforms.
- **69% chat with existing friends; 26% use platforms to meet new people** or connect around interests; **63% watch video/livestreams.**

Children feel more confident communicating online than in person

79% feel confident communicating online, compared to 65% in person; 20% are shy/ reserved online, rising to 34% in person.

Confidence in different settings



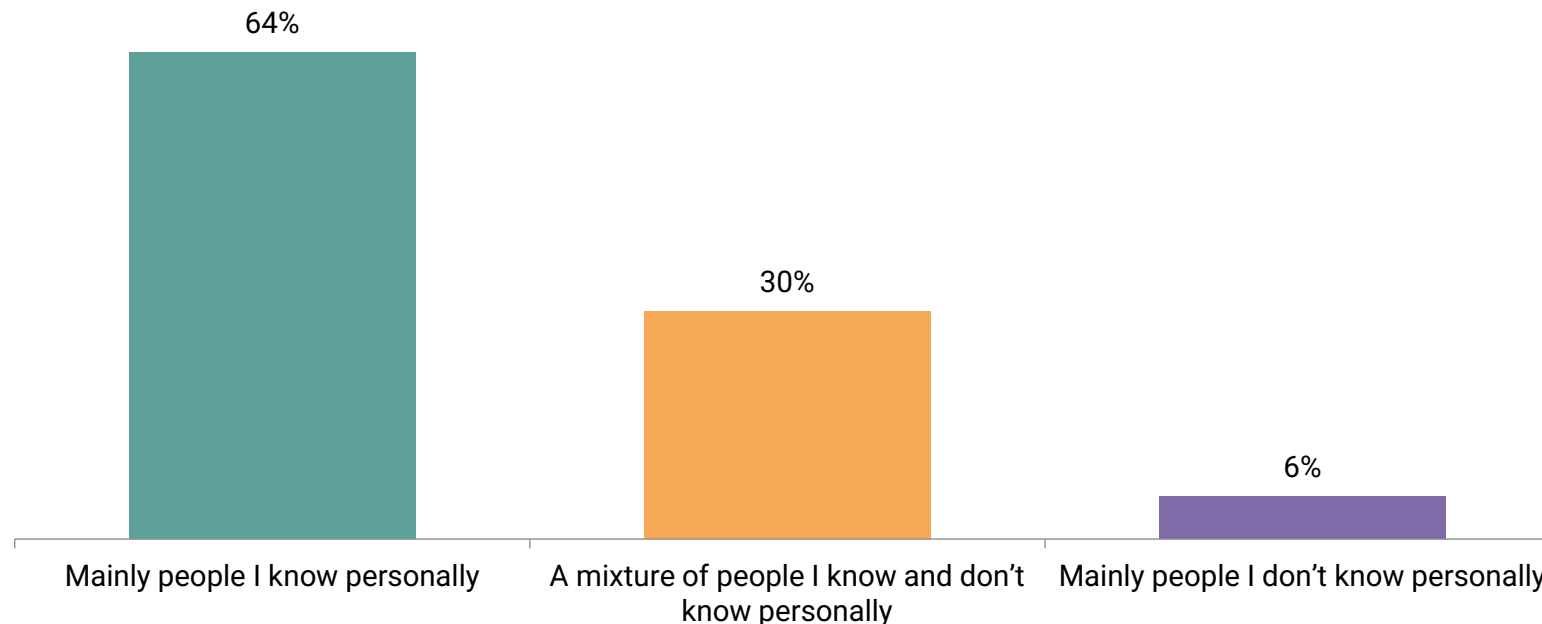
Confidence for subgroups online vs in-person:

- **Boys:**
Online 81% | In-person 66%
- **Girls:**
Online 75% | In-person 63%
- **11-13-year-olds**
Online 78% | In-person 65%
- **14-15-year-olds**
Online 79% | In-person 60%
- **16-17-year-olds**
Online 79% | In-person 70%
- **LGBTQ+:**
Online 67% | In-person 49%
- **Heterosexual/straight:**
Online 80% | In-person 66%
- **Ethnic minorities:**
Online 82% | In-person 73%

Most children connect online with people they know, while a minority also connect with people beyond their personal networks

30% of children connect with a mix of people they know and don't know personally, while 6% are connected mainly with people they don't know personally.

Who children are connected with

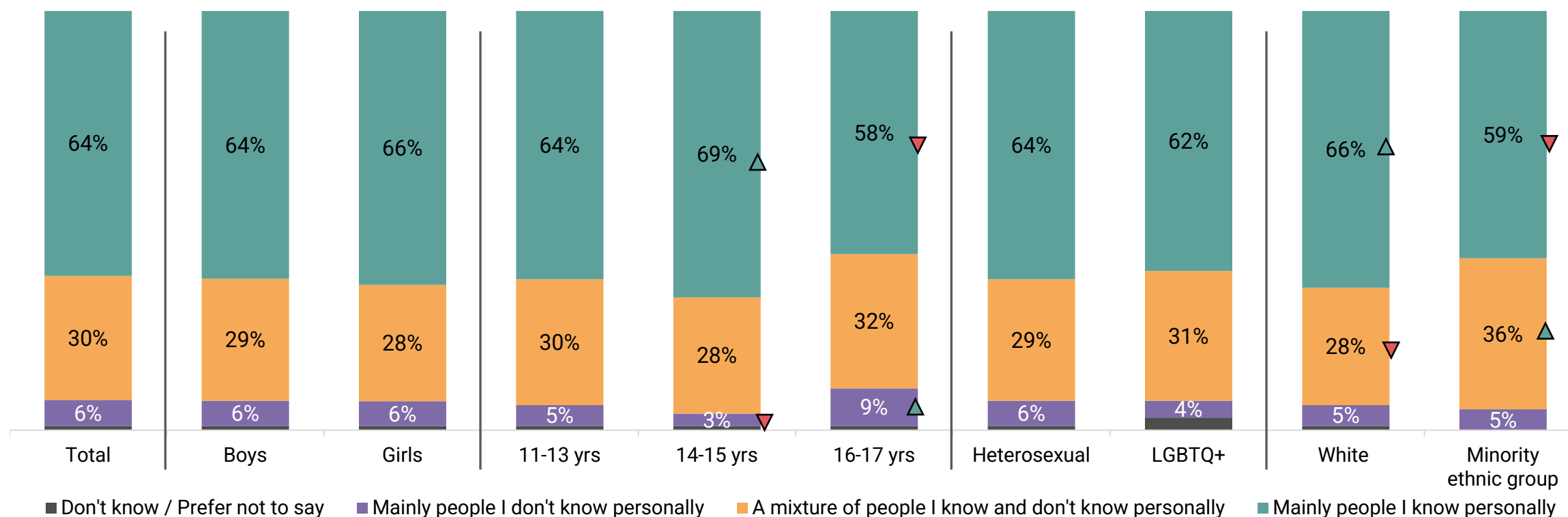


- Connecting with a **mixture of people they know and don't know personally** is more common among **16–17-year-olds** than 14–15-year-olds (32% vs. 28%). It is also more prevalent among those from **Black ethnic backgrounds** (46%) than among those from White (28%), Mixed (30%), or Asian (34%) ethnic backgrounds.

Older teens are more likely to connect beyond their immediate circles

9% of older teens (16–17) mainly connect with people they don't know personally, significantly more than younger age groups. Ethnic minority children are more likely than white children to connect with a mixture of people they know and don't know (36% vs 28%).

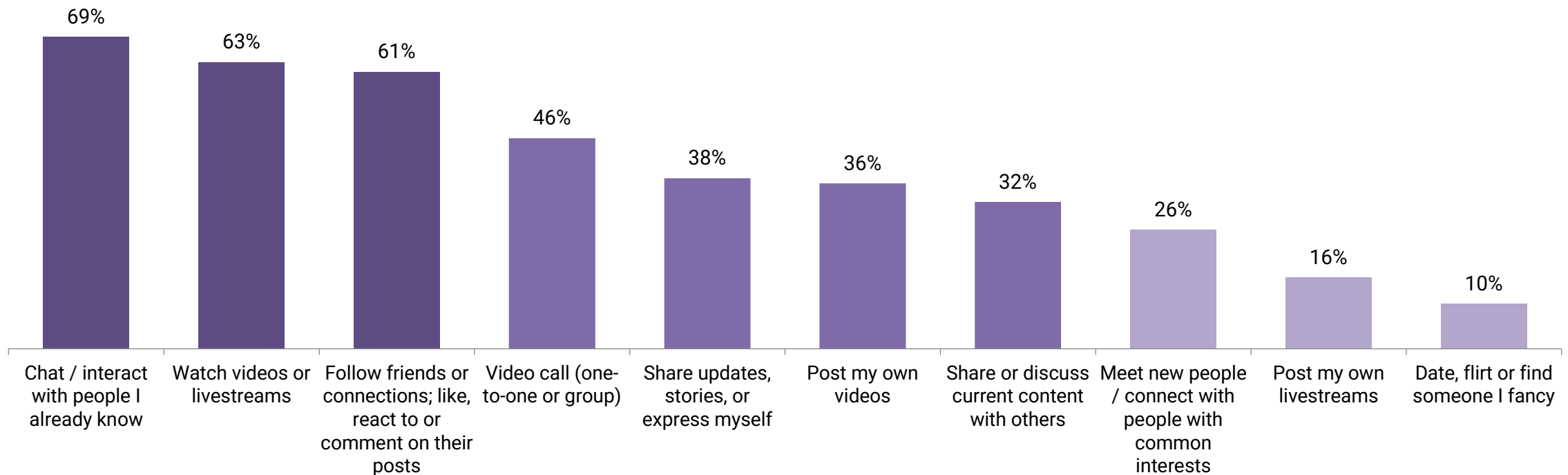
Who children are connected with



Children mainly use platforms to stay in touch with people they already know, while also using them for entertainment, self-expression and meeting new people

69% chat with people they already know, while 63% watch videos/livestream and 61% follow friends' posts; a quarter (26%) use platforms to meet new people or connect around shared interests

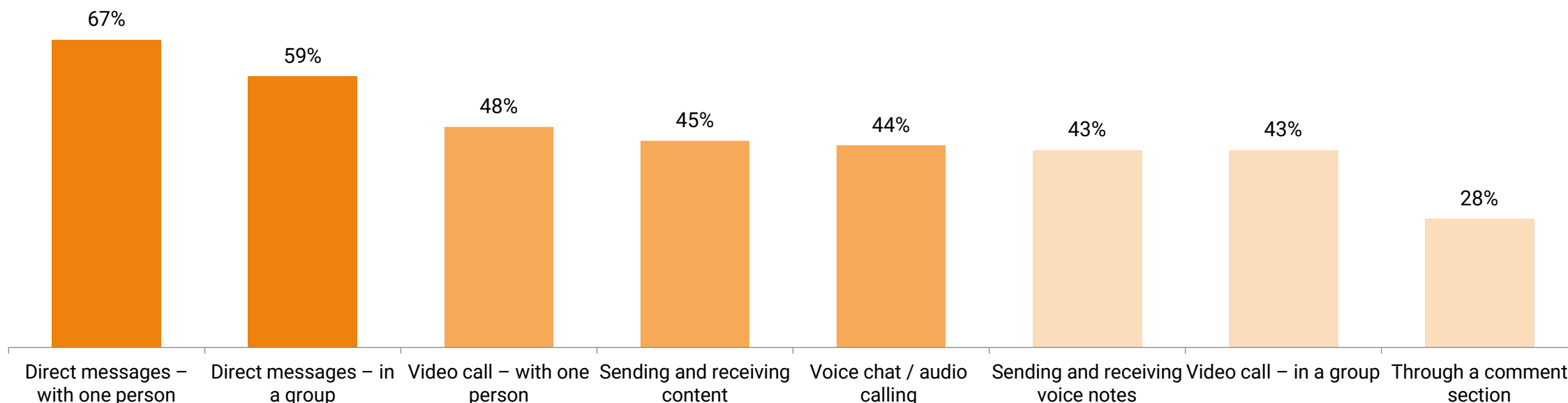
Why children connect with other people on platforms

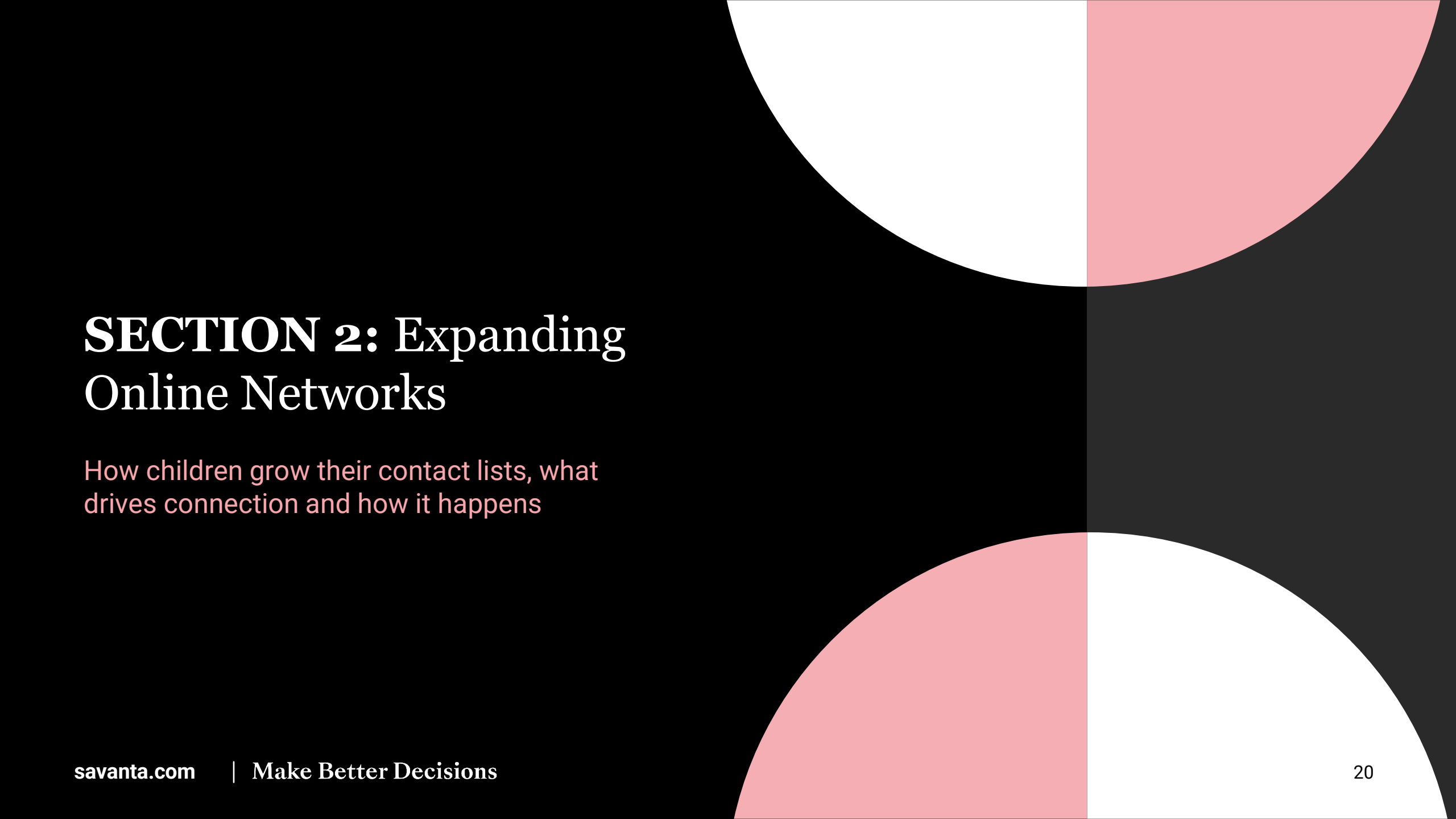


Children report most commonly communicating online through direct messages – both one-on-one and within groups

One-to-one direct messages (67%) and group direct messages (59%) are the most common forms of online communication, ahead of video calls, voice chat and sharing content.

How do you children communicate with others online





SECTION 2: Expanding Online Networks

How children grow their contact lists, what
drives connection and how it happens

At a glance: Expanding online networks

Friends-of-friends and shared interests fuel most network growth

- **Most children expand their online networks each week** by connecting with friends-of-friends (72%) and people who share their interests (69%).
- Both sending (48%) and accepting (54%) friend requests are common, with **nearly two-thirds receiving requests from people they haven't spoken to, at least weekly (64%)**.
- **Adding through mutual friends (40%) and searching for contacts by username or phone number (33%)** are also frequent routes.

Algorithms & platform features also drive connections

- Platform tools like **'Friend suggestions'** and **'Recommended for you' personalised feed** are used by around a quarter – especially for **Reddit and X**, where over a third of children add connections via these features.
- **Direct connections from strangers are frequent**: 62% report receiving friend/quick adds, 58% follow requests, and 55% direct messages from people they've never spoken to.
- **Boys, older teens (16–17s), and minority ethnic groups are notably more open to replying to new contacts** – for example, 40% of 16–17-year-olds are likely to reply, compared to 29% of 14–15-year-olds.

But trust and real-world ties remain key to acceptance

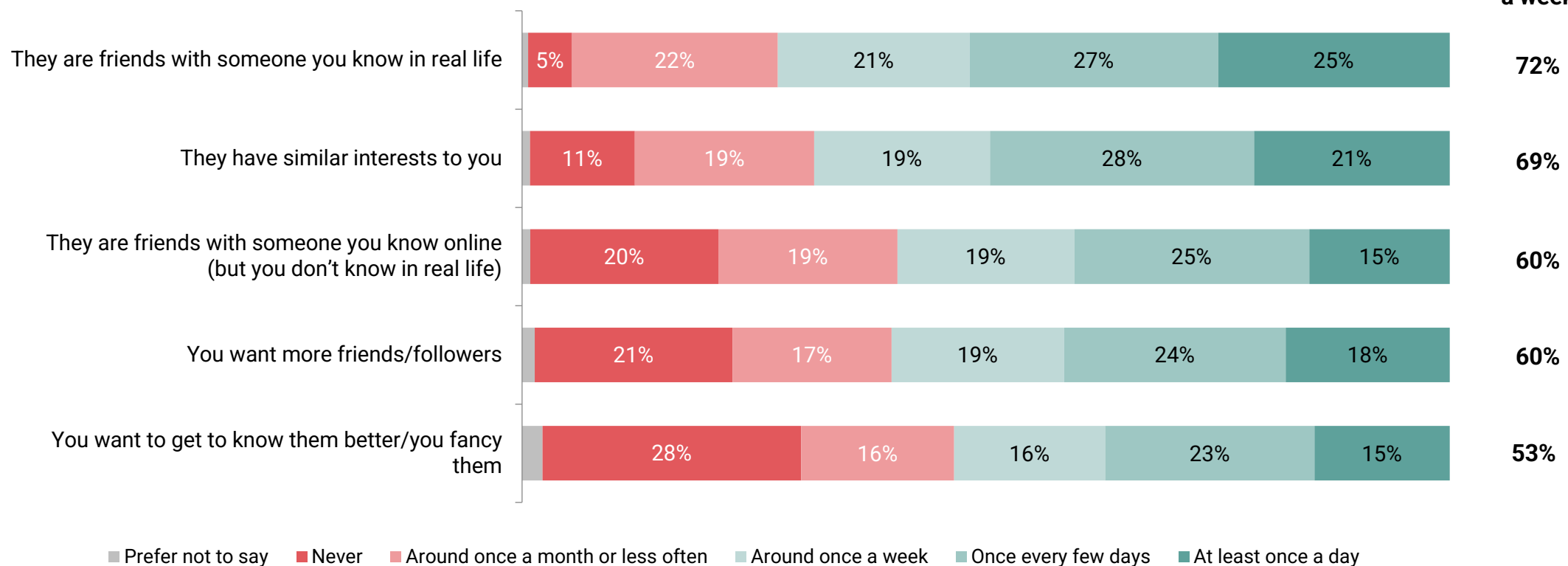
- Requests from people known in real life (51%) or with mutual close friends (47%) are far more likely to be accepted; 15% said they appearance or follower count important.
- **The main reason children stated for not replying to a message includes not knowing the sender (13%)**, alongside worries about suspicious accounts (6%) or parental guidance (3%).

Most new connections are driven by existing relationships or shared interests

72% connect at least weekly with friends-of-friends from real life, 69% with those who share similar interests, and 60% to grow their network or connect with friends-of-friends from online interactions

How often do children form new connections with other people on platforms because...

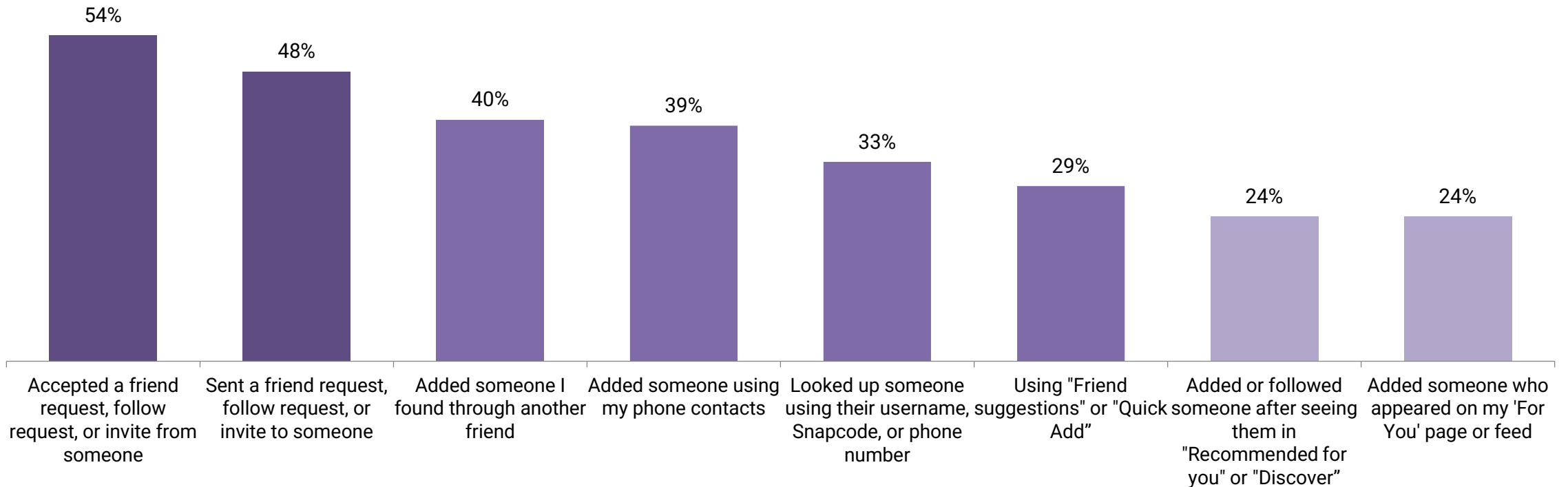
NET: At least once a week



Around a quarter of children add people through their personal feed

54% said they had accepted friend or follow requests this year, while 48% sent one themselves. 39% have added someone through phone contacts, while 33% have added someone based on their username. 24% have added someone who appeared on their 'for you' page.

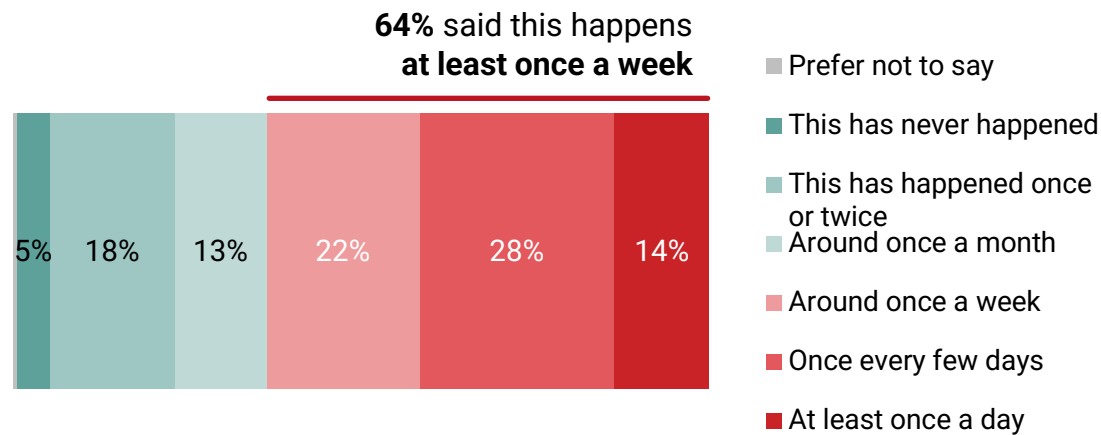
How do children add/connect with other people on platforms



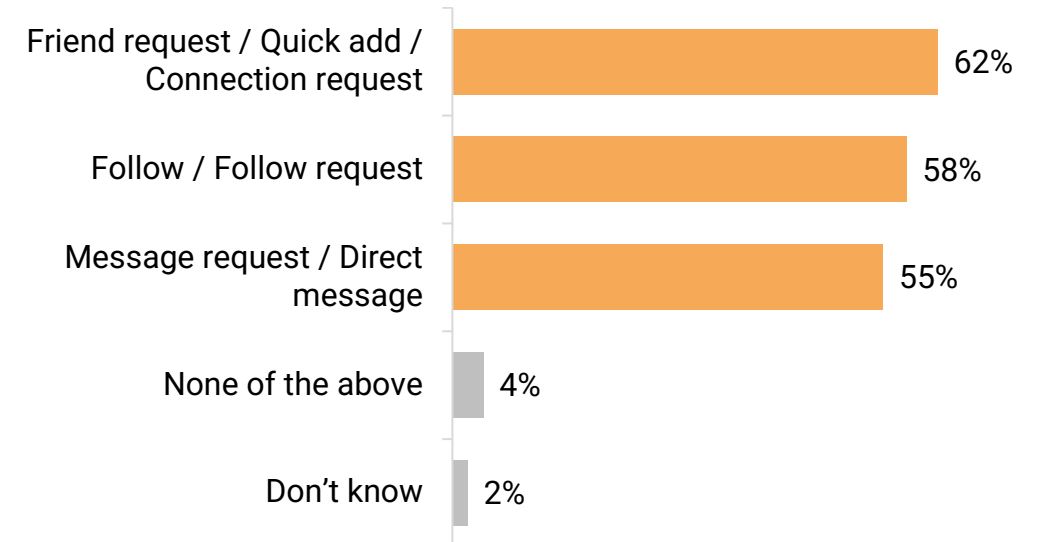
Children report frequently receiving friend/follow requests from people they haven't spoken to before

64% receive friend/follow requests at least weekly from someone they haven't messaged or spoken to before; these connections are mostly initiated through friend/quick add (62%), follow requests (58%), or direct messages (55%).

Frequency of receiving friend/follow requests from someone you haven't messaged or spoken to before



How someone you haven't messaged or spoken to before connected with you?

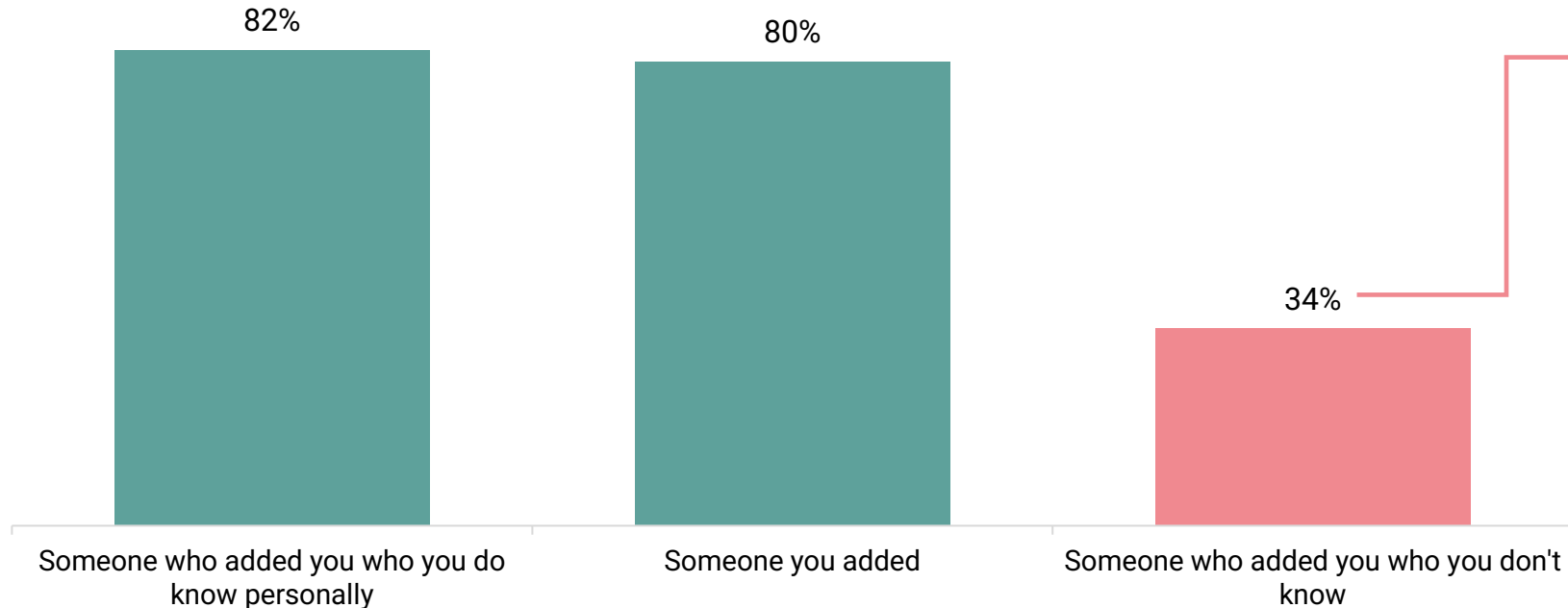


Around a third of children are open to engaging with strangers on platforms.

This openness is more common among certain groups

34% are likely to reply to messages from someone they don't know who added them, with boys (36%), older teens (16-17) (40%), and minority ethnic groups (37%) more likely to say they would respond

Likelihood of replying to messages (% very or fairly likely)



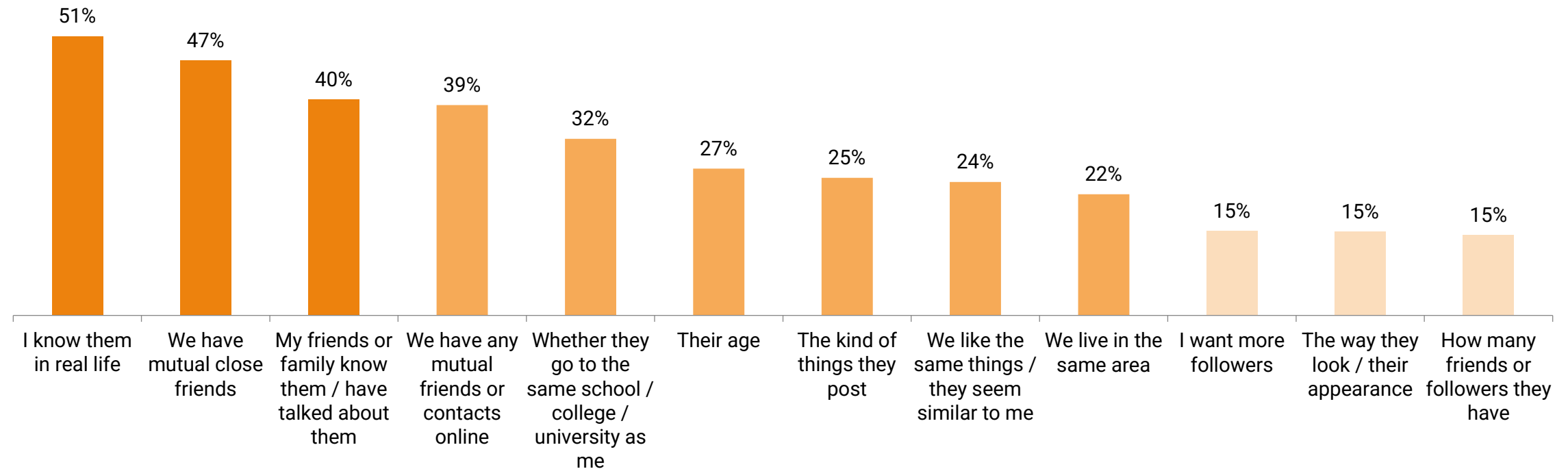
Each of the groups highlighted in **red** are **more likely** than those shown in **blue** to respond to a message from someone who added them whom they didn't know:

- **Boys** (36%) vs. **girls** (29%)
- **16-17-year-olds** (40%) & **11-13-year-olds** (34%) vs. **14-15-year-olds** (29%)
- **Ethnic minority respondents** (37%) vs. **white respondents** (33%)
- **Heterosexual / straight respondents** (34%) vs. **LGBTQ+ respondents** (24%)

Requests are usually accepted based on real-world ties, though many also connect because of mutual friends or being of similar age

51% say they accept requests if they know the person in real life, 47% if they have mutual close friends, and 40% if friends or family know them – while factors like appearance or follower count are far less important (15%).

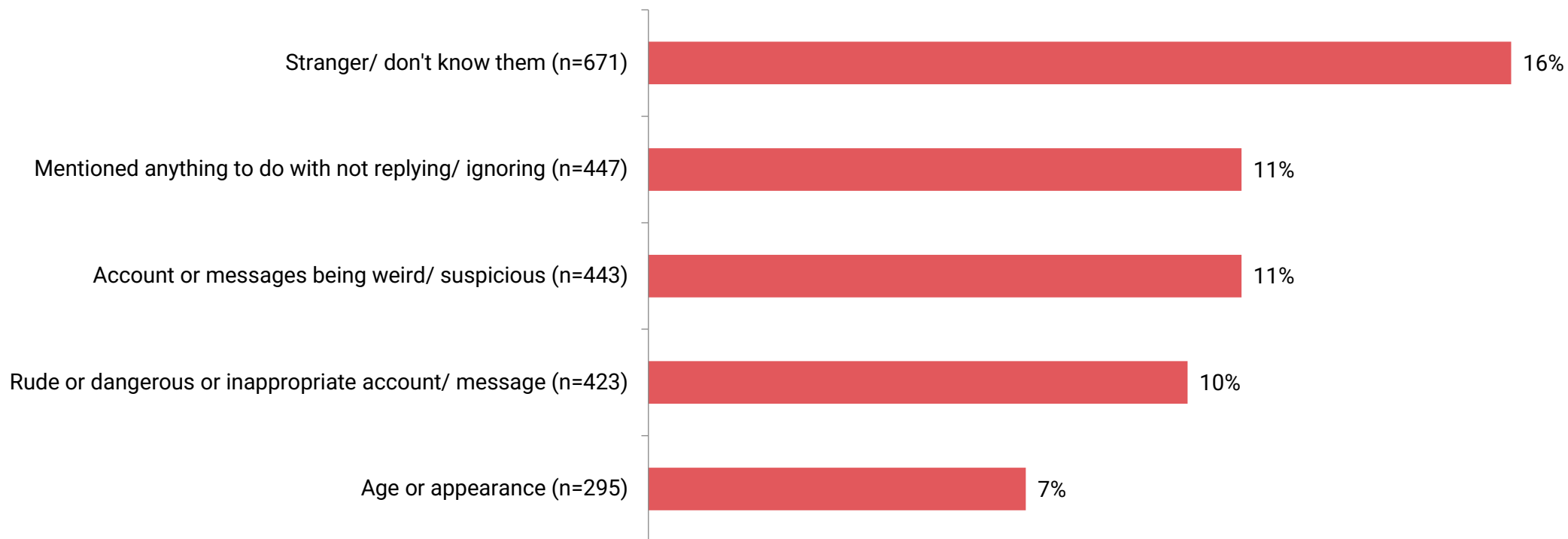
Factors influencing the decision to accept a friend request from someone on a platform, who they haven't messaged or spoken to before

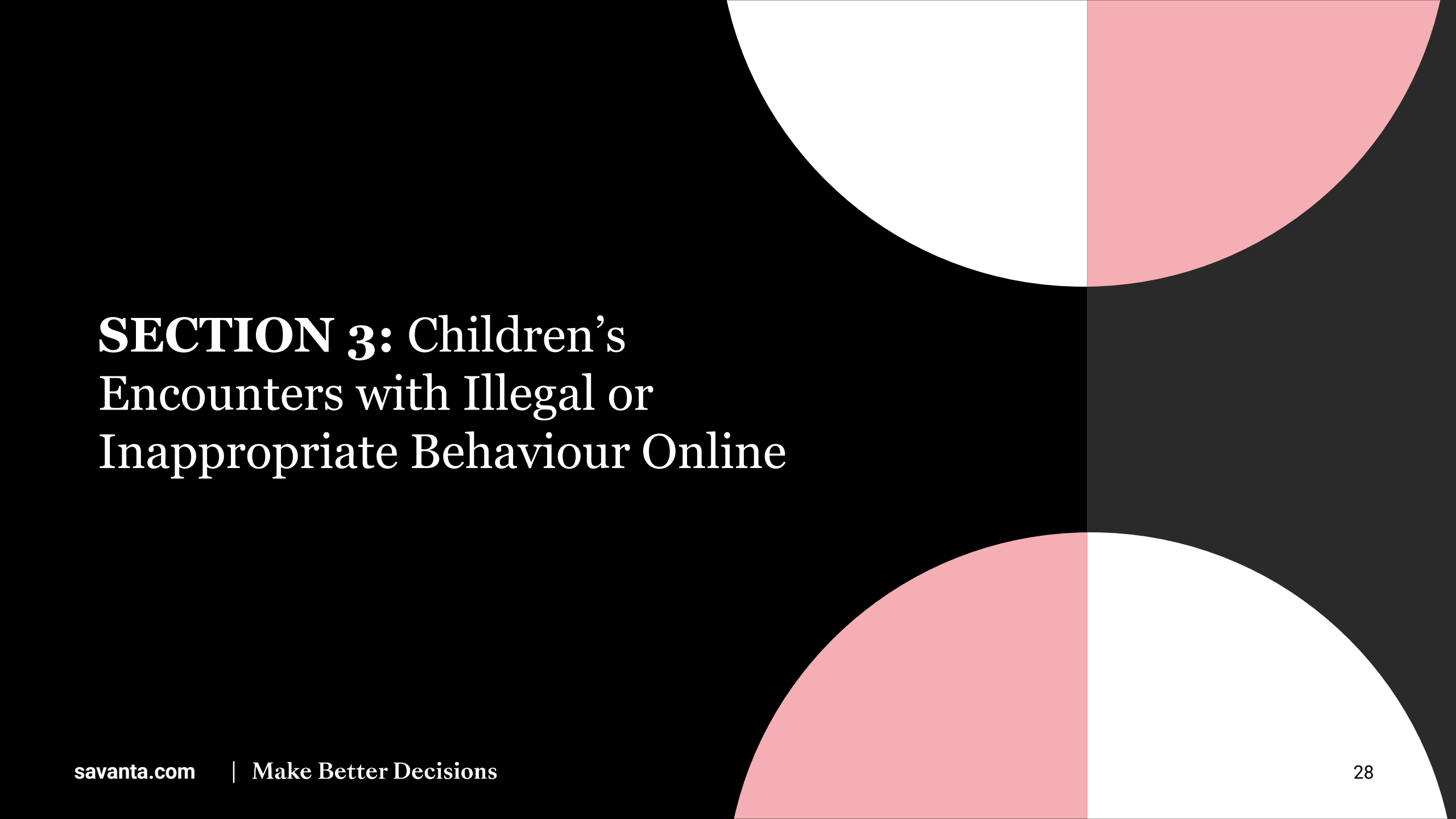


Familiarity is the strongest factor children use when deciding not to reply to strangers online

Coded responses show that children are most likely to avoid replying when the sender is someone they do not know (16%). Secondary reasons relate more to signs of risk in the interaction itself — such as suspicious accounts or messages (11%), ignoring the message (11%), and rude, dangerous or inappropriate content (10%)

Factors influencing decisions not to reply to someone you have not spoken to before online, unprompted responses (NETs)





SECTION 3: Children's Encounters with Illegal or Inappropriate Behaviour Online

SECTION 3: Children's Encounters with Illegal or Inappropriate Behaviour Online

PART 1: Potentially uncomfortable encounters

At a glance: potentially uncomfortable encounters

Uncomfortable encounters are common and often occur early in children's contact with someone

- **Unwanted contacts are common:** 39% have received unwanted friend/follow requests, 25% have received abusive or nasty messages and 14% have been asked to share nude or semi-nude images.
- **Many harms occur within their first or early interactions** with a new person they connect with online.
 - **16% of children who received sexual image requests had this as their first contact with someone, while 26% report this happening within a day.**

The emotional impact is high – most children feel uncomfortable during these experiences.

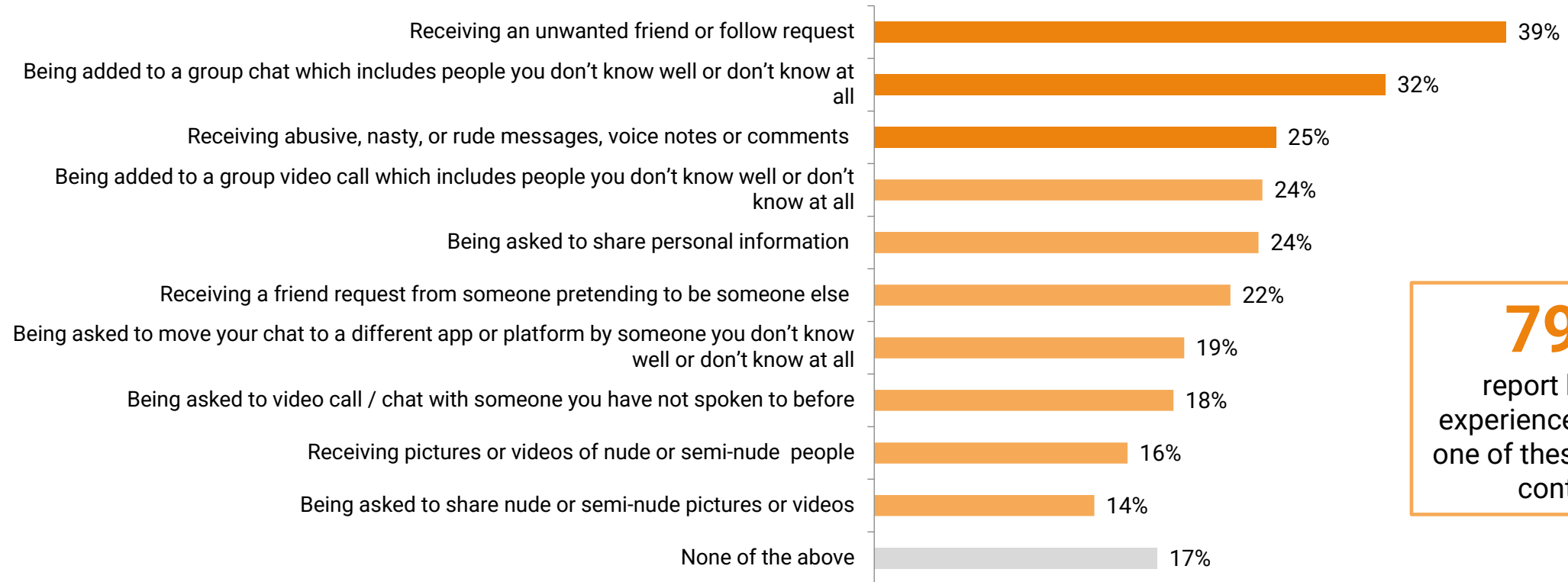
- **72% felt uncomfortable receiving nude/abusive content; 76% felt uncomfortable when asked for personal information.**
- **Most likely to make children feel uncomfortable:**
 - Being asked to share personal information (76%)
 - Receiving abusive, nasty, or rude messages, voice notes or comments (72%)
 - Receiving pictures or videos of nude or semi-nude people (72%)

Risk levels vary by platform: Potentially uncomfortable encounters were more commonly reported on Snapchat and Instagram than on other platforms. Some were also reported more often than average on WhatsApp, TikTok and Facebook/Messenger.

The majority of children report having experienced uncomfortable online contact

79% of children reported having experienced at least one type of uncomfortable contact – most commonly unwanted friend/follow requests (39%), being added to group chats with unfamiliar people (32%), or receiving abusive messages (25%).

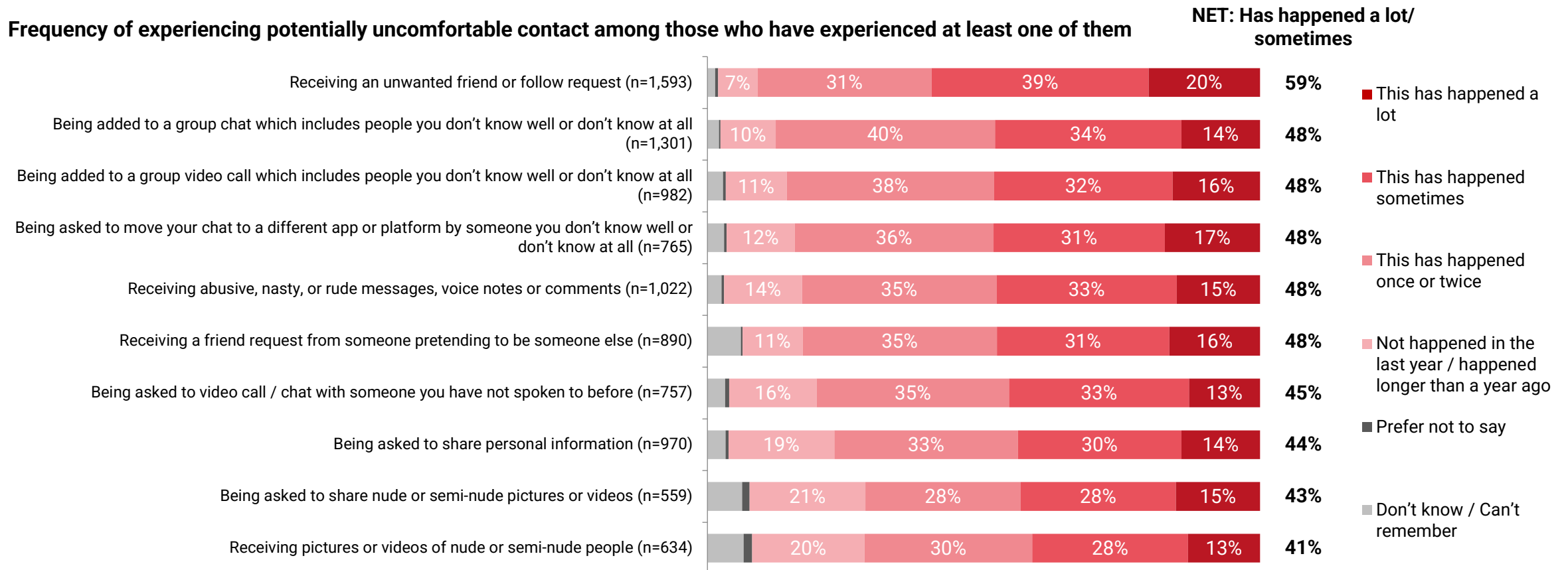
Experience of potentially uncomfortable contact (% who have ever experienced)



79%
report having
experienced at least
one of these types of
contact

Uncomfortable online contact is rarely a one-off

Among children who have experienced these behaviours, many report that they were not one-off incidents. Receiving unwanted friend requests is particularly likely to have happened sometimes/a lot (59%), while for requests to share nudes it was 43%.



Risk of uncomfortable contact online varies by age, gender, and identity

Girls often report higher levels of unwanted contact than boys, with 14–15-year-old girls facing high levels of intrusive asks (e.g. unwanted friend requests, being added to group chats) and 16–17-year-old girls more likely to be subjected to sexualised approaches (requests to share nude or semi-nude content and receiving nude or semi-nude images or videos).

Experiences of potentially uncomfortable contact, comparing by age and gender

Experience of potentially uncomfortable contact	Total	11-13-year-olds		14-15-year-olds		16-17-year-olds	
		Boys (n=851)	Girls (n=887)	Boys (n=628)	Girls (n=583)	Boys (n=509)	Girls (n=488)
An unwanted friend or follow request	39%	41%	42%	43%	49%▲	31%▼	33%▼
Added to a group chat which includes people you don't know well or don't know at all	32%	36%▲	34%	33%	36%	26%▼	25%▼
Received abusive, nasty, or rude messages, voice note or comments	25%	25%	26%	24%	28%	22%	28%
Asked to share personal information, like where I live or how old I am	24%	25%	23%	24%	27%	19%▼	26%
Added to a group video call which includes people you don't know well or don't know at all	24%	26%	25%	22%	26%	23%	24%
A friend request from someone pretending to be someone else	22%	19%	22%	24%	22%	25%	25%
Asked to move your chat to a different app or platform by someone you don't know well or don't know at all	19%	16%	19%	19%	16%	24%▲	25%▲
Asked to video call/chat with someone you have not spoken to before	18%	16%	18%	20%	22%▲	16%	23%▲
Receiving pictures or videos of nude or semi-nude people	16%	13%	14%	16%	15%	18%	23%▲
Asked to share nude or semi-nude pictures or videos	14%	11%	12%	13%	15%	14%	21%▲

- **LGBTQ+:** More likely to experience most behaviours including being asked to share naked or half-dressed pictures or videos (21% vs. 16% average).
- **Children that live with impacting or limiting conditions:** More likely to experience most behaviours including being asked to share naked or half-dressed photos or videos (19% vs. 14% average).
- **Children who live in London:** More likely to receive naked or half-dressed photos or videos (19% vs. 16% average).

Requests to move chats off-platform are relatively common among children, especially older teens

Among those whose chat moved, the most common reasons were that the other platform was easier/better (43%), more private (36%), or had preferred features (35%).

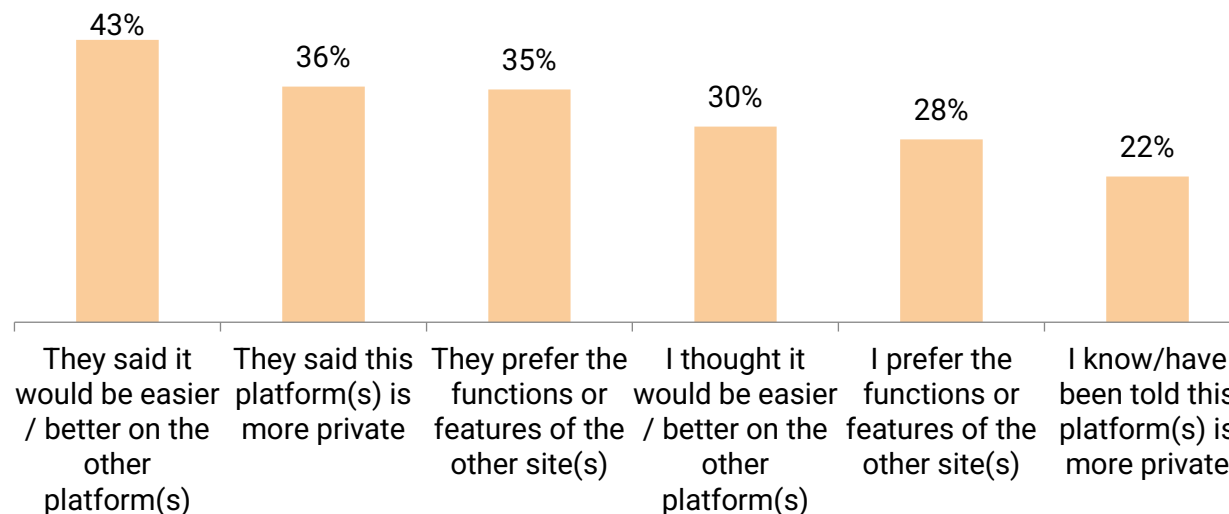
19%

of all children said they have **been asked to move a chat to a different app or platform** by someone they don't know well or don't know at all

25%

of **16–17-year-olds** have been asked to move a chat, significantly higher than other age groups (17% 11–13, 18% 14–15)

Reason(s) why chat with someone they do not know well or at all moved to a different app or platform



Note: Multi-choice format means respondents could select options that suggest both they and the other person(s) initiated the move.

The risk of experiencing potentially uncomfortable encounters varies by platform

Harms experienced by platform

% of users of each platform who have experienced these things on in the last year	Total	Receiving an unwanted friend or follow request (n=1,450)	Being asked to share nude or semi-nude pictures or videos (n=398)	Being asked to share personal information (n=748)	Receiving a friend request from someone pretending to be someone else (n=736)	Receiving pictures or videos of nude or semi-nude people (n=451)	Receiving abusive, nasty, or rude messages, voice notes or comments (n=845)	Being asked to video call / chat with someone you have not spoken to before (n=605)	Being asked to move your chat to a different app or platform by someone you don't know well or don't know at all (n=642)	Being added to a group chat which includes people you don't know well or don't know at all (n=1,142)	Being added to a group video call which includes people you don't know well or don't know at all (n=838)
Snapchat	43%	49% ▲	46%	41%	43%	47%	42%	46%	37% ▼	40%	41%
Instagram	34%	41% ▲	40% ▲	37%	43% ▲	34%	31%	34%	43% ▲	20% ▼	26% ▼
WhatsApp	32%	18% ▼	29%	28% ▼	19% ▼	29%	35%	36%	27% ▼	51% ▲	50% ▲
Facebook / Messenger	24%	29% ▲	28%	27%	32% ▲	22%	22%	24%	26%	16% ▼	17% ▼
TikTok	29%	39% ▲	28%	35% ▲	33% ▲	21% ▼	34% ▲	25% ▼	30%	18% ▼	17% ▼
Discord	8%	7%	7%	12%	7%	10%	9%	8%	11%	7%	7%
X (Formerly Twitter)	5%	4%	6%	7% ▲	5%	7%	7% ▲	4%	6%	3% ▼	3%

There are also differences in which platform children were most likely to *first* experience potentially uncomfortable encounters

Which platform harms first occurred on

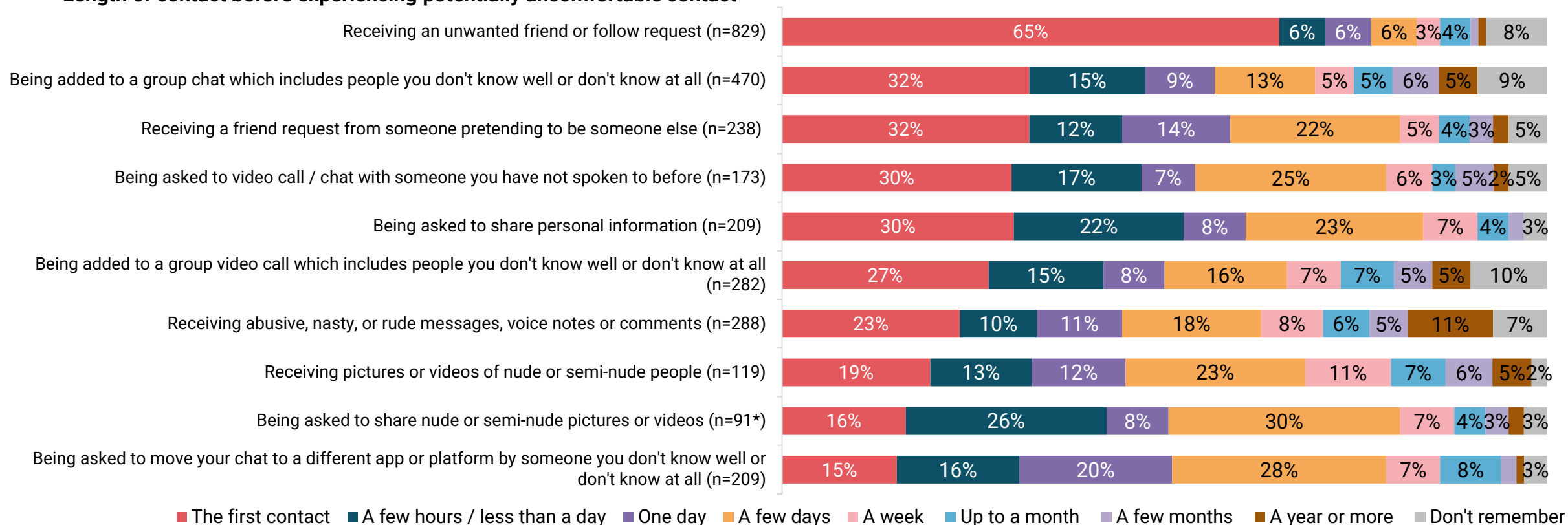
Experiences of potentially uncomfortable contact by platform on which it first occurred**	Total (any type of contact)	Receiving an unwanted friend or follow request (n=829)	Being asked to share nude or semi-nude pictures or videos (n=91*)	Being asked to share personal information (n=209)	Receiving a friend request from someone pretending to be someone else (n=238)	Receiving pictures or videos of nude or semi-nude people (n=119)	Receiving abusive, nasty, or rude messages, voice notes or comments (n=288)	Being asked to video call / chat with someone you have not spoken to before (n=173)	Being asked to move your chat to a different app or platform by someone you don't know well or don't know at all (n=209)	Being added to a group chat which includes people you don't know well or don't know at all (n=470)	Being added to a group video call which includes people you don't know well or don't know at all (n=282)
Snapchat	23%	▲ 27%	18%	18%	17% ▼	21%	22%	22%	11% ▼	▲ 30%	22%
Instagram	18%	19%	20%	15%	▲ 29%	20%	14%	23%	▲ 27%	11%	16%
WhatsApp	15%	5% ▼	8% ▼	10%	9% ▼	9%	17%	13%	12%	▲ 31%	▲ 31%
Facebook / Messenger	14%	▲ 19%	19%	▲ 22%	13%	16%	12%	14%	10%	9% ▼	9% ▼
TikTok	14%	▲ 19%	15%	10%	16%	13%	18%	11%	16%	6% ▼	7% ▼

**Please note other platforms are not included in the table as they were all 4% or less

Many uncomfortable online contacts happen immediately or within days of first contact

Over 30% of children experience most uncomfortable encounters either as their first contact with someone, or on the first day of contact. For sexual image requests, 16% of children face them immediately and a further 26% within a day of being connected online.

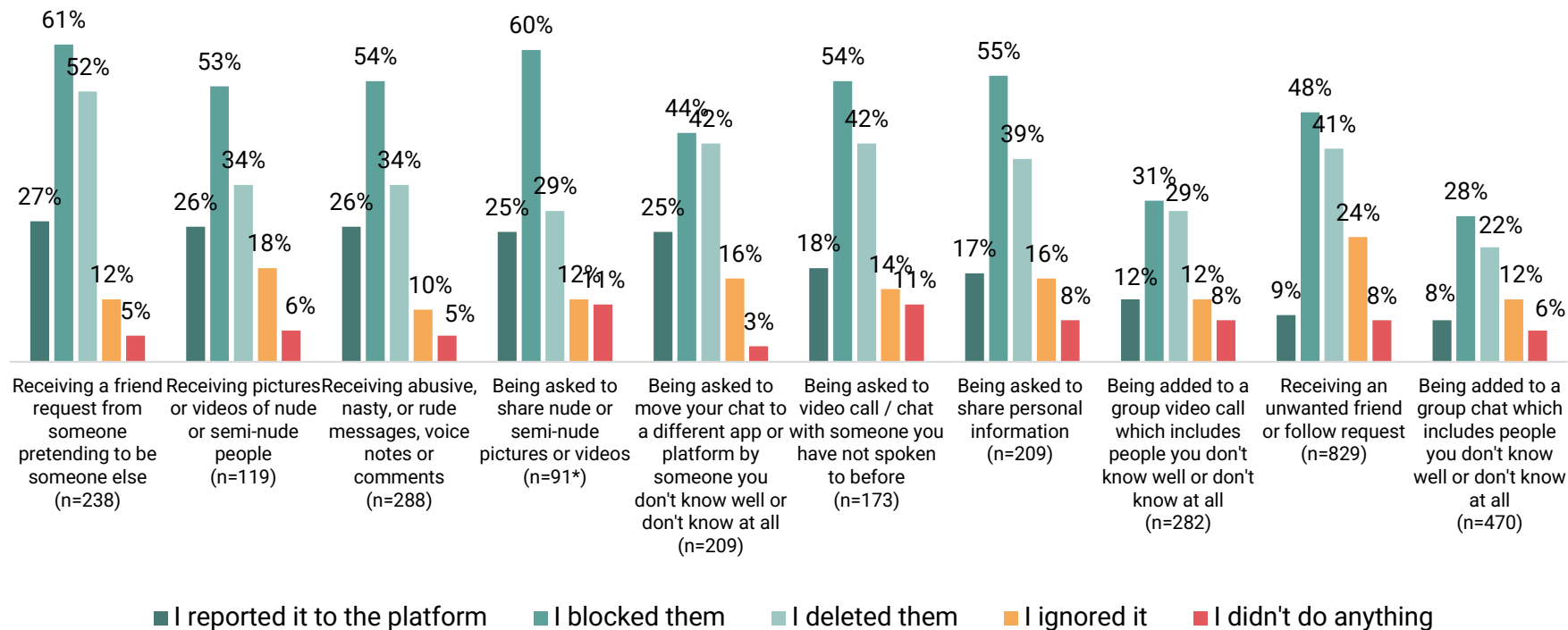
Length of contact before experiencing potentially uncomfortable contact



Blocking is the most common response to uncomfortable contact

Children who experience potentially uncomfortable encounters are most likely to say they block someone upon receiving a friend request from someone pretending to be someone else (61%) or being asked to share nude or semi-nude pictures (60%); fewer take this step when added to group chats (28%) or group video calls (31%).

Reactions/response to potentially uncomfortable contact



Selected summary of riskier responses:

Being asked to share nude or semi-nude pictures or videos: **15% replied and sent pictures/videos**, 21% replied but did not send pictures/videos

Being asked to share personal information: **7% replied and sent information**, 16% replied but did not send information

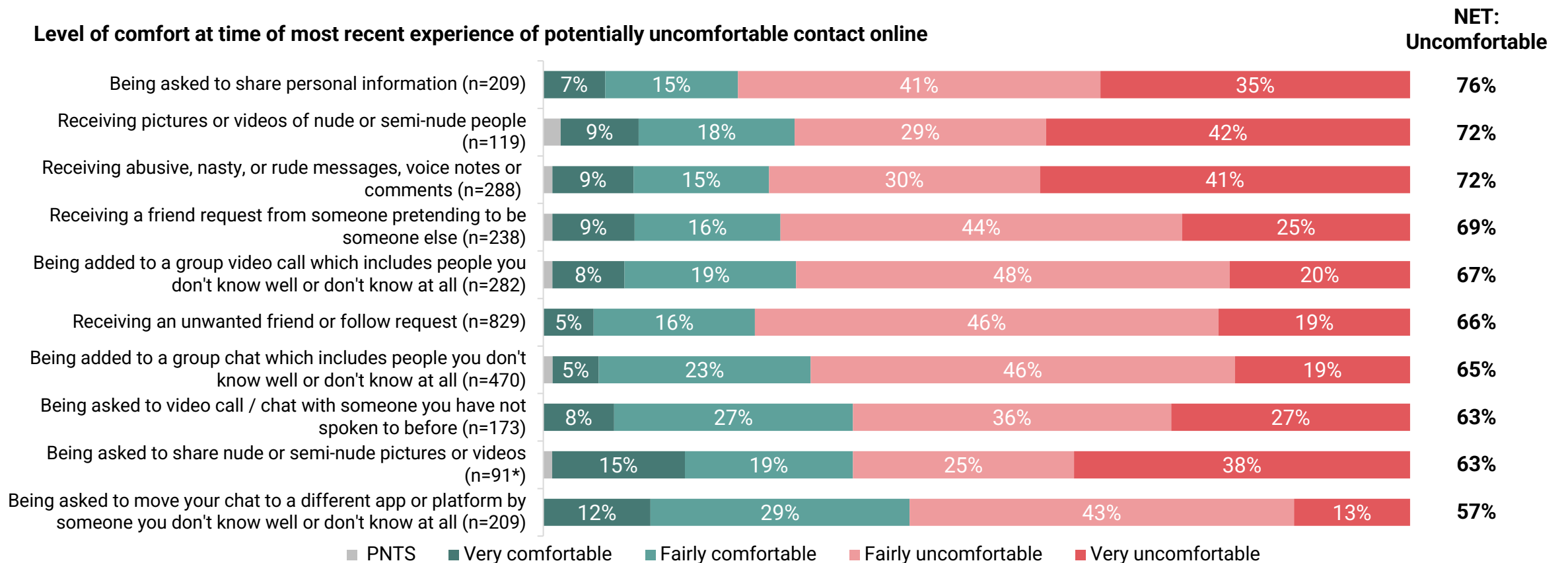
Receiving a friend request from someone pretending to be someone else: **10% accepted the friend request**

Receiving pictures or videos of nude or semi-nude people: **14% replied to them**

Being asked to move your chat onto another platform: **21% continued chatting on a new platform**

Most uncomfortable contacts online leave children feeling uneasy, especially with sexual or abusive messages

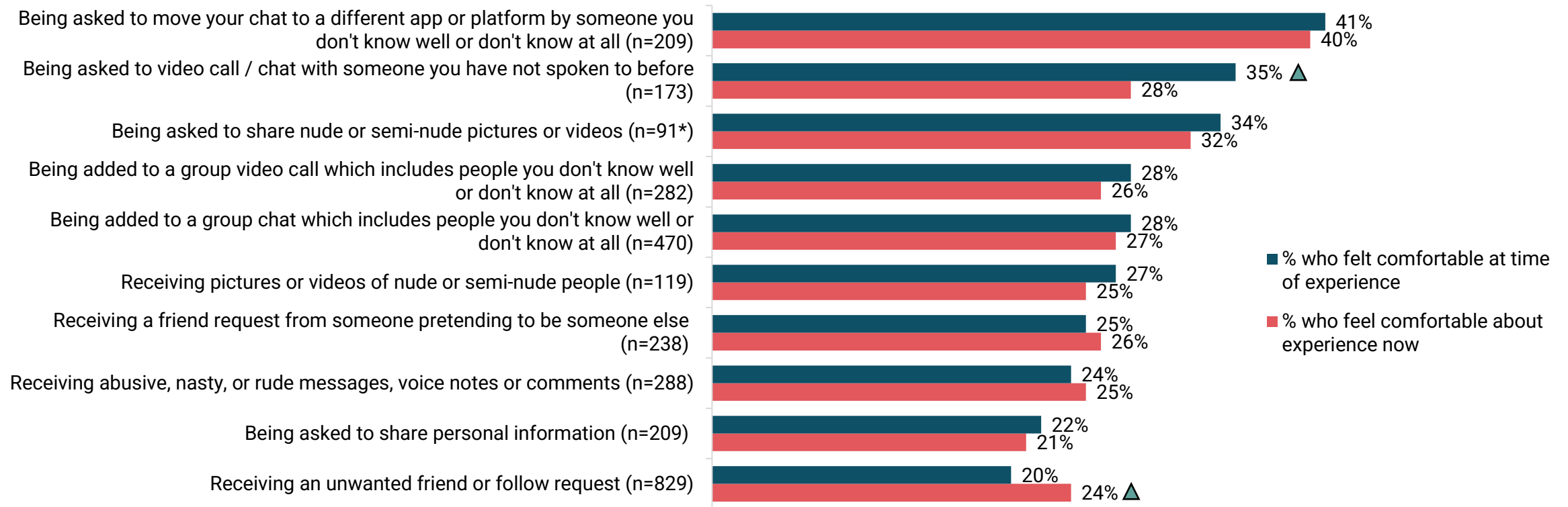
72% of children who received nude or abusive content were uncomfortable at the time it occurred and 76% were uncomfortable when asked to share personal information.



Children's feelings about uncomfortable encounters tend to remain similar over time

Across most types of potentially uncomfortable encounters, the proportion of children who feel comfortable now is similar to the proportion who felt comfortable at the time of the experience.

Feelings at the time of, and now, after their most recent experience of potentially uncomfortable contact



SECTION 3: Children's Encounters with Illegal or Inappropriate Behaviour Online

PART 2: Inappropriate behaviour,
sexualisation and gender-based harms

At a glance: Inappropriate behaviour, sexualisation and gender-based harms

“Inappropriate behaviour, sexualisation and gender-based harms” refers to experiences directly or indirectly relating to girls’ safety online, including sexualised comments, AI-generated images and harassment. These relate to several offences under the OSA, summaries are available on Slide 8.

Inappropriate behaviour, sexualisation and gender-based harms are fairly widespread

- **69%** of children have **encountered** at least one of these harmful online behaviours, and **70%** of those encountering them have **personally experienced** at least one.
- **Body shaming is the most common of these harms:** **32%** have encountered posts mocking someone’s body, while **20%** have experienced these posts directly.
- **Gendered abuse is also prominent:** **26%** of girls report receiving mean or rude messages because they are a girl.

Often these behaviours are not just one-offs

- Many serious harms are **repeated frequently**, not just one-offs. Among those who have experienced them, **67%** say threats to share private pictures happen **at least weekly**, alongside **64%** for rude or sexual comments on photos, **63%** for account takeover, **63%** for deepfakes/fake images, and **61%** for unsolicited sexual messages.

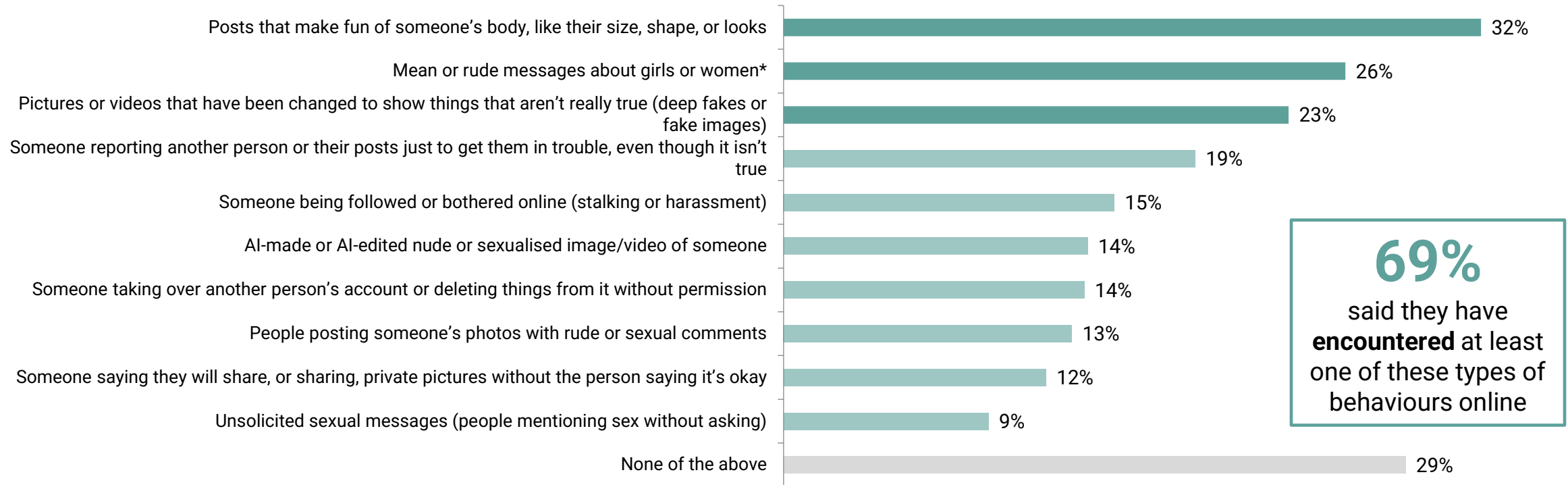
Children reported different likelihoods of experiencing these harms on different platforms

- When children reported which platforms they had experienced these harms, Snapchat and Instagram were the two apps to be significantly higher than other platforms for at least one harm – however, this only applied to three of the ten harms we asked about.
- In general, compared to the potentially uncomfortable encounters in the previous section, there were fewer differences in experience by platform.

Around 7 in 10 children have encountered inappropriate behaviour, sexualisation or gender-based harms in the last year

The most common include posts making fun of someone's appearance (32%), misogynistic messages (26%), and manipulated or fake images/videos (23%).

Inappropriate behaviour, sexualisation and gender-based harms encountered (% who have encountered)



For many children, these harms are something they experience directly, not just witness

70% report personally experiencing at least one of these behaviours in the past year, with the most common being misogynistic messages (26%), posts making fun of someone's appearance (20%), and stalking or harassment (19%).

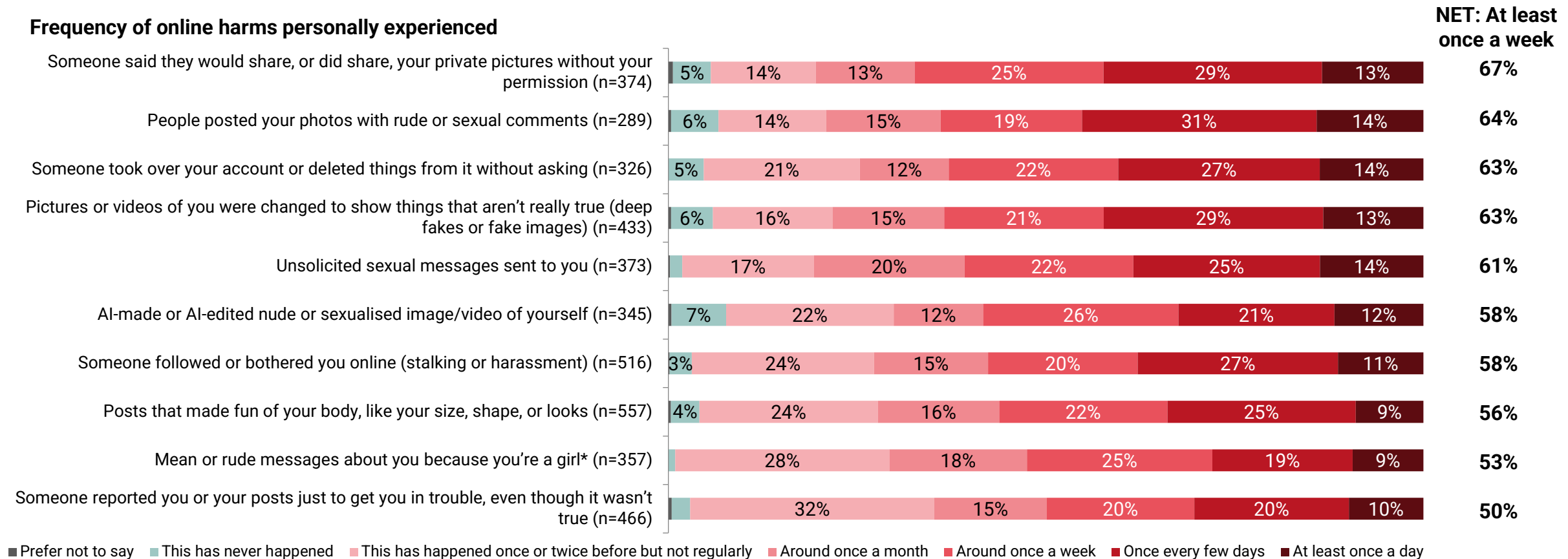
Online harms personally experienced (% who have experienced)



These harms are often repeated, with many children experiencing them at least weekly

67% of children who have experienced these harms say threats to share private pictures happen at least weekly, alongside 64% for rude or sexual comments on their photos, 63% for account takeover and deepfakes or fake images, and 61% for unsolicited sexual messages.

Frequency of online harms personally experienced



Girls aged 16-17 are more likely to encounter five of the ten harms

27% of girls aged 16-17 have said someone harassed them online and 25% have had body shaming posts targeted at them. 16–17-year-old girls are also more likely to have been sent unsolicited sexual messages or have sexualized comments on their photos.

Personal experience of potentially uncomfortable contact, comparing by age and gender

Experience of potentially uncomfortable contact	Total	11-13-year-olds		14-15-year-olds		16-17-year-olds	
		Boys (n=559)	Girls (n=628)	Boys (n=406)	Girls (n=397)	Boys (n=400)	Girls (n=384)
Mean or rude messages about you because you're a girl*	26%	-	27%	-	23%	-	27%
Posts that made fun of your , like your size, shape, or looks	20%	18%	23%	15%	18%	23%	▲25%
Someone followed or bothered you online (stalking or harassment)	19%	19%	19%	13%	17%	18%	▲27%
Someone reported you or your posts just to get you in trouble, even though it wasn't true	17%	▲21%	14%	15%	14%	18%	21%
Pictures or videos of you were changed to show things that aren't really true (deep fakes or fake images)	16%	16%	14%	14%	11%	▲22%	18%
Someone said they would share, or did share, your private pictures without your permission	14%	8%	15%	12%	8%	▲24%	18%
Unsolicited sexual messages sent to you	13%	11%	10%	12%	13%	17%	▲18%
AI-made or AI-edited nude or sexualised image/video of yourself	13%	9%	15%	9%	8%	17%	▲18%
Someone took over your account or deleted things from it without asking	12%	15%	10%	8%	7%	▲18%	15%
People posted your photos with rude or sexual comments	11%	8%	10%	7%	8%	▲15%	▲15%
None of the above	29%	33%	28%	▲44%	▲38%	15%	▼16%

- **Non-white children:** More likely to experience most behaviours including posts that made fun of your (25% vs 19% of White ethnic background children) and someone following or bothering them online (28% vs 16% of White ethnic background children)
- **Children that live with impacting or limiting conditions:** More likely to experience several harms including posts that made fun of their body (23% vs 20% average).
- **Children who live in Scotland:** More likely to have personally experienced AI-made or AI-edited nude or sexualised image/video of themselves (28% vs 13% average).

Children reported that the likelihood of each harm occurring differed by platform

In the last year which online platforms/ apps have you <u>experienced</u> these things on?	Posts that make fun of someone's body, like their size, shape, or looks (n=909)	Mean or rude messages about girls or women (n=655)	Pictures or videos that have been changed to show things that aren't true (deep fakes/fake images) (n=728)	Someone reporting another person or their posts just to get them in trouble, even though it isn't true (n=714)	Someone being followed or bothered online (stalking or harassment) (n=858)	Someone taking over another person's account or deleting things from it without permission (n=563)	AI-made or AI-edited nude or sexualised image/video of someone (n=274)	People posting someone's photos with rude or sexual comments (n=493)	Someone saying they will share, or sharing, private pictures without the person saying it's okay (n=673)	Unsolicited sexual messages (n=828)
Facebook /Messenger	46%	48%	44%	47%	56%	46%	49%	44%	44%	40%
Instagram	61%	53%	45%	56%	60%	65% ▲	66% ▲	57%	57%	52%
WhatsApp	31%	30%	38%	30%	28%	33%	41%	38%	40%	31%
TikTok	49%	48%	52%	53%	45%	44%	49%	50%	41%	47%
Snapchat	55%	62% ▲	47%	42%	49%	45%	46%	45%	57%	58%
X (Formerly Twitter)	23%	16% ▼	35%	25%	24%	26%	40%	23%	25%	33%
Reddit	24%	38%	21% ▼	29%	24%	25%	33%	17%	21%	20%
Discord	30%	35%	37%	35%	38%	51%	39%	32%	38%	31%

SECTION 3: Children's Encounters with Illegal or Inappropriate Behaviour Online

PART 3: Knives or Weapons, Illegal Drugs
or Vaping, and Terrorism

At a glance: Knives or weapons, illegal drugs or vaping, and terrorism

The Online Safety Act includes offences relating to terrorism, drugs and psychoactive substances and weapons. For a full summary of relevant offences, please reference Slide 8.

Children report regular exposure to content related to weapons, drugs/vaping and terrorism

- **Almost a third (31%) reported seeing content about illegal drugs or vaping**, while **22% saw content about terrorism or extremism**, and **20% saw content showing knives or weapons** being used to threaten or hurt someone.
- **Boys are significantly more likely to see or be sent risky content:** for example, 36% of boys vs. 27% of girls saw drugs/vaping content, and boys were around twice as likely as girls to see attempts to sell weapons.

For many, exposure is frequent – and content is sometimes sent directly.

- 63% of children who reported **seeing content trying to sell weapons** said they saw it at least weekly
- **One in six (17%) have directly received content about illegal drugs or vaping**, with boys again at higher risk.

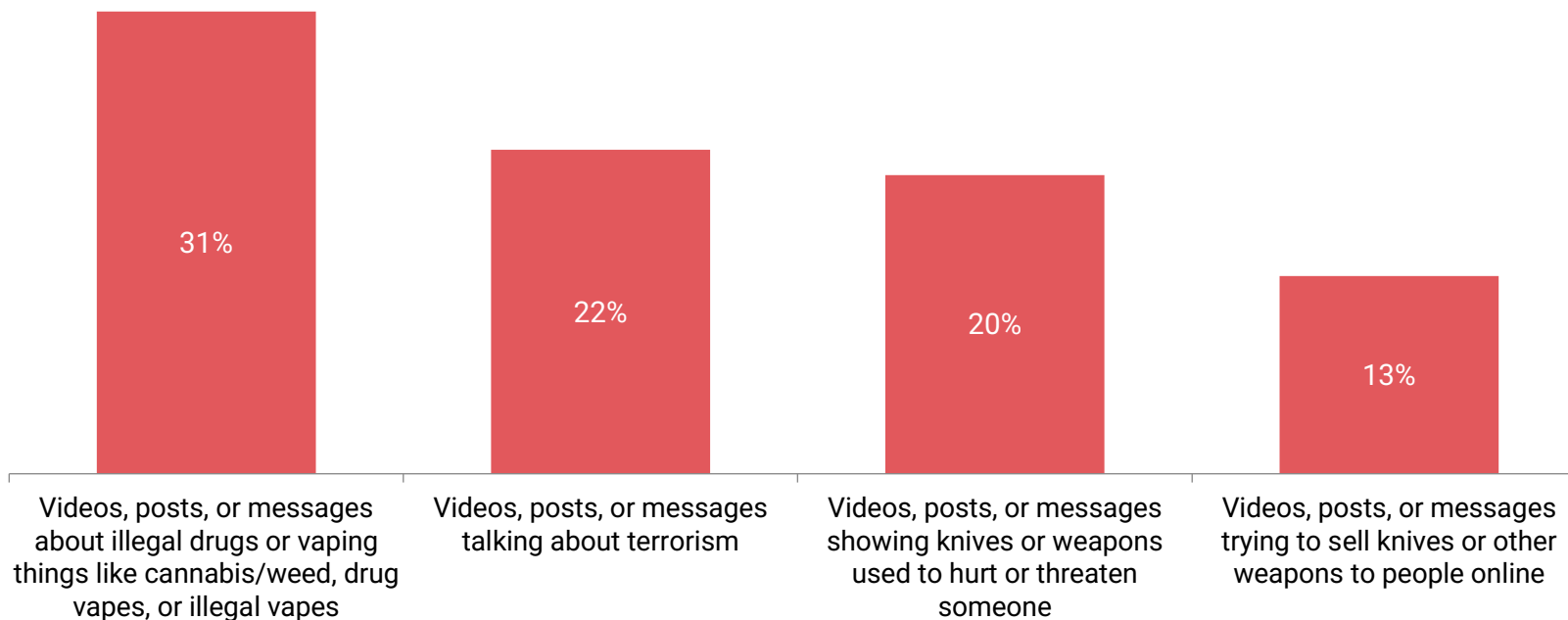
The emotional and behavioural impact is notable, but most children don't take protective action.

- Roughly **half (49%) of children exposed to weapon-related content reported feeling less safe in their school or neighbourhood.**
- Despite high reported exposure, **the most common response is to ignore, scroll past, or do nothing:** few report harmful content, and even fewer seek help or guidance.
- **Most children (74%) say they would know what to do if online content made them uncomfortable**, but nearly one in five (18%) would not.

A minority of children are exposed to online content related to illegal drugs, terrorism, knives and weapons, with boys more likely than girls to encounter it

Around 1 in 3 children have seen online content about illegal drugs or vaping (31%), 22% about terrorism, and 20% about knives and weapons. Boys are significantly more likely than girls to see this content across all categories (e.g. drugs/vaping: 36% boys vs. 27% girls).

Online content seen in the past year (% Have seen or heard of the below)



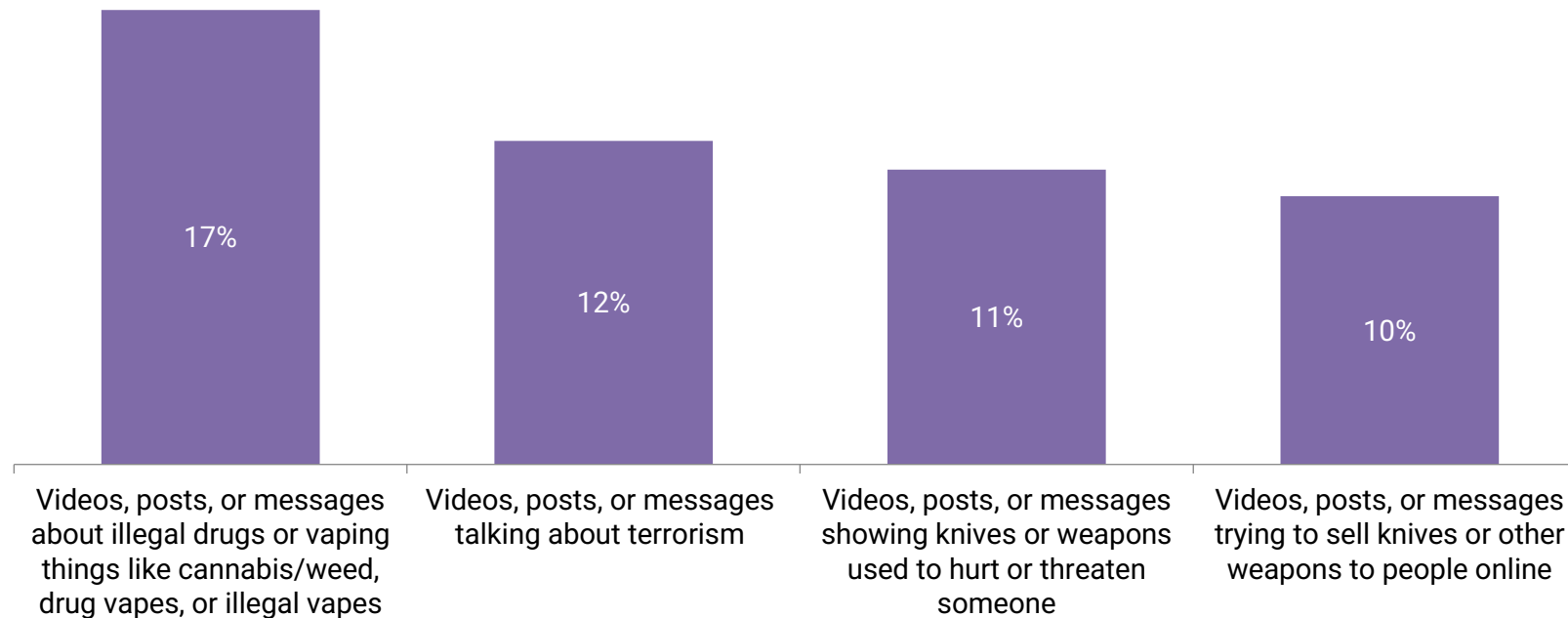
Boys are significantly more likely than girls to say they have seen or heard about:

- **Illegal drugs or vaping:**
Boys 36% | Girls 27%
- **Terrorism/extremism content:**
Boys 25% | Girls 19%
- **Knives or weapons shown:**
Boys 24% | Girls 16%
- **Attempts to sell weapons:**
Boys 17% | Girls 9%

Fewer children report being directly sent content relating to drugs, weapons or terrorism than report being exposed to such content online.

17% have been sent content about illegal drugs or vaping, 12% about terrorism, and 11% about knives or weapons. Boys are significantly more likely to receive all these types of content (e.g. drugs/vaping: 21% boys vs. 14% girls).

Online content received directly in the past year

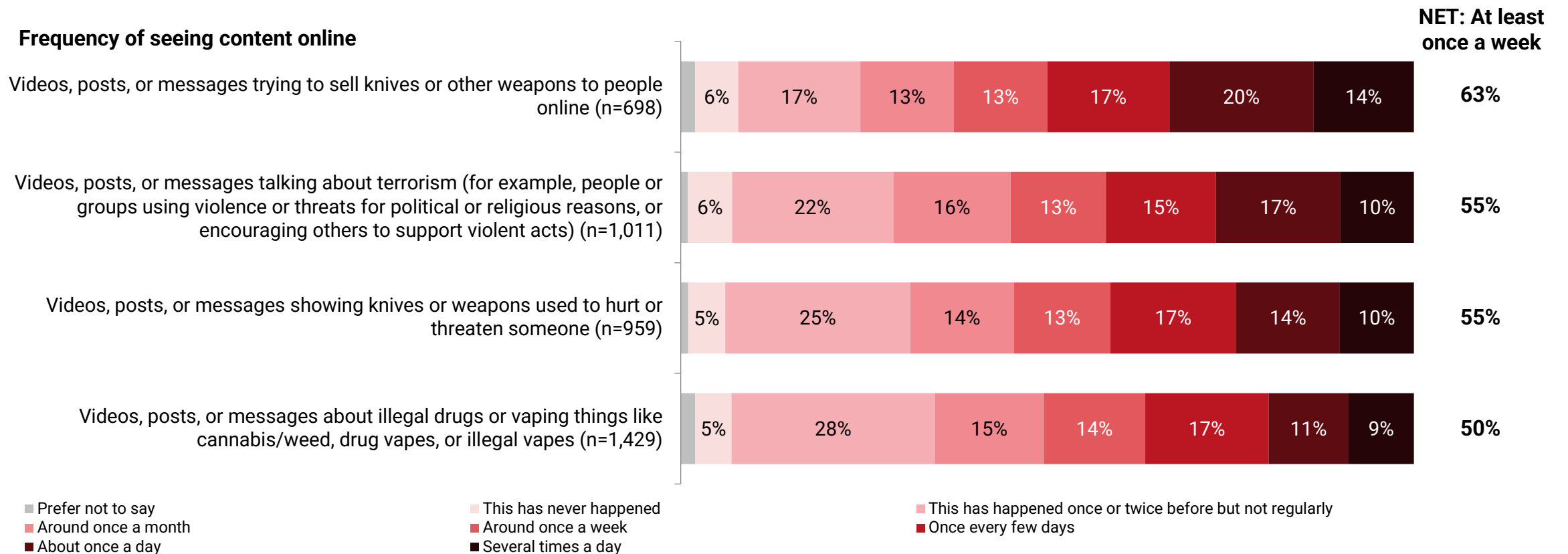


Boys are significantly more likely than girls to say they have been sent content about:

- **Illegal drugs or vaping:**
Boys 21% | Girls 14%
- **Terrorism/extremism content:**
Boys 16% | Girls 9%
- **Knives or weapons shown:**
Boys 15% | Girls 8%
- **Attempts to sell weapons:**
Boys 14% | Girls 7%

Of children that have seen drugs, weapons or terrorism content online, the majority report encountering them at least once a week

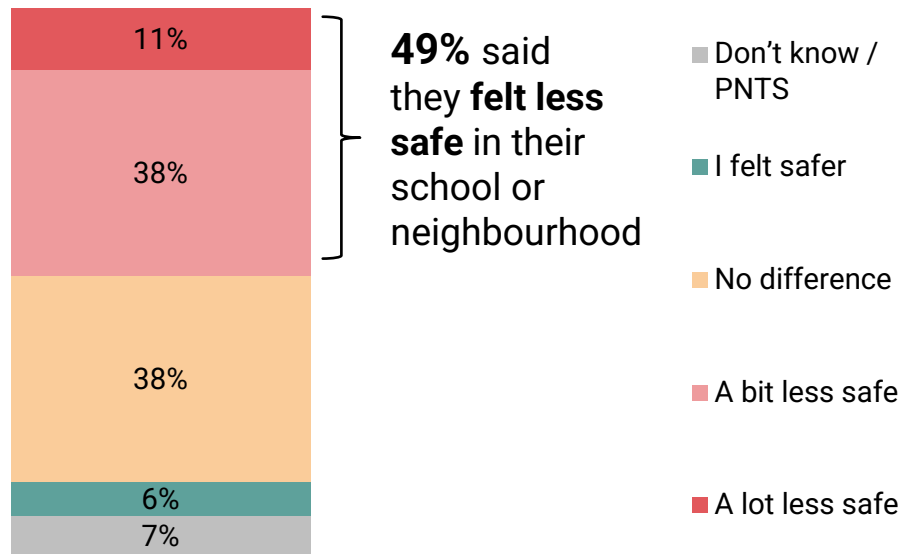
63% of children who have seen weapons sales posts claim to see them at least once a week, compared with 55% who see terrorism/extremism or weapon-use content this often and 50% see illegal drug or vaping content this often.



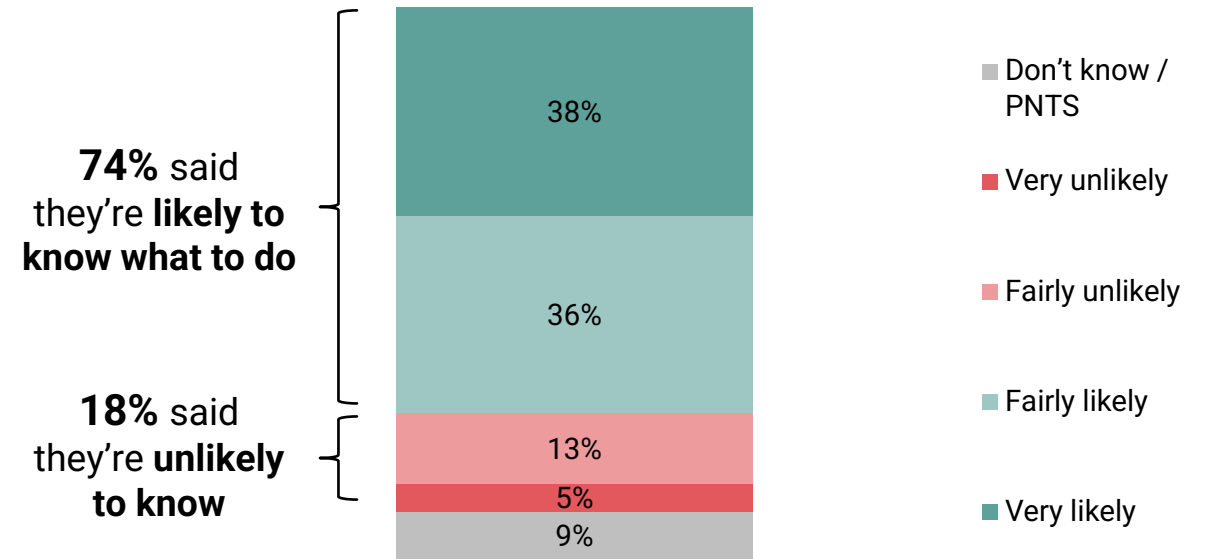
Of children who have been exposed to weapon-related content online, nearly half report feeling less safe in their school or neighbourhood as a result

49% said seeing knives or weapons made them feel less safe. While 74% said they're likely to know what to do or who to tell if they felt uncomfortable, 18% indicated they're unlikely to know.

Impact of content showing knives or weapons



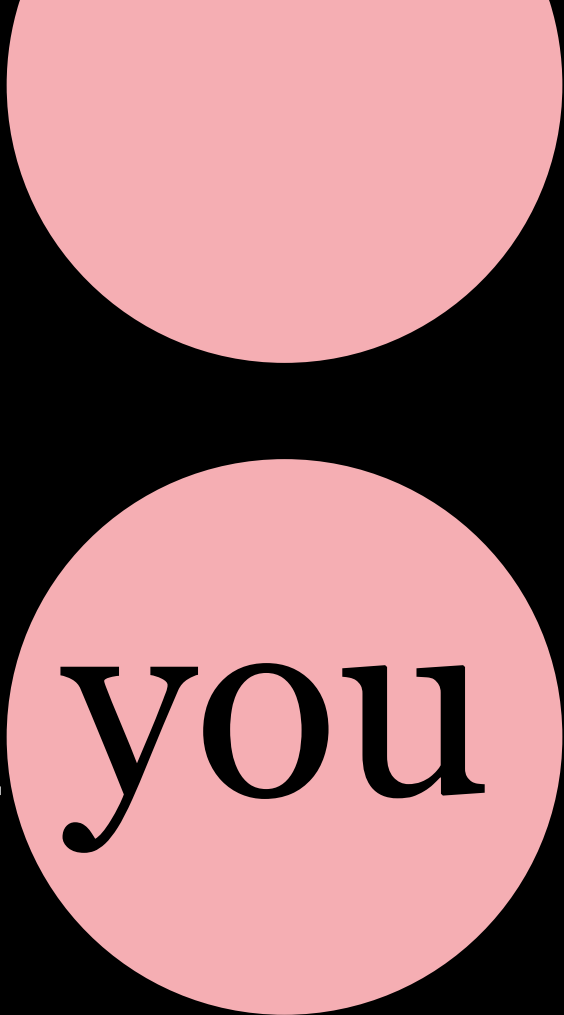
Would children know what to do if uncomfortable?



Ignoring or scrolling past content relating to drugs, weapons and terrorism is the most common action reported by children who encounter it online

A third (33%) ignore illegal drugs/vaping content, and a quarter ignore content related to weapons (25%) or terrorism (26%); few report these issues on the platform, with very few seeking help or guidance.

What do children do when they see...	Videos, posts, or messages about illegal drugs or vaping things like cannabis/weed, drug vapes, or illegal vapes (n=1,429)	Videos, posts, or messages showing knives or weapons used to hurt or threaten someone (n=959)	Videos, posts, or messages trying to sell knives or other weapons to people online (n=698)	Videos, posts, or messages talking about terrorism (n=1,011)
I ignored it	33% ▲	25%	24%	26%
I clicked the 'not interested', 'dislike', 'hide' or 'show me less' button	17%	18%	16%	17%
I deleted the message	14%	14%	19% ▲	15%
I didn't want to see it, so I scrolled past it	18%	17%	12%	15%
I blocked the person who put it up / or the person who sent it to me	13%	15%	15%	14%
I left the group chat	10% ▼	14%	15%	13%
I told a grown up like a parent or teacher	12%	13%	15%	12%
I reported it on the app, website or game	11%	13%	13%	12%
I unfollowed the person who put it up / or the person who sent it to me	9%	13%	11%	10%
I left the livestream	9%	10%	12%	12%
I muted the person who put it up/ or the person who sent it to me	7%	8%	11%	8%
I left the game	6%	9%	11%	8%
I told the person who put it up to take it down	6%	6%	8%	6%
I stopped using the app, website or game	4% ▼	7%	7%	7%
I shared it online with others	4%	6%	9% ▲	5%
I looked for help online	4%	6%	6%	5%



Thank you