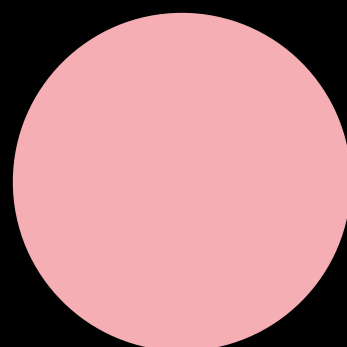
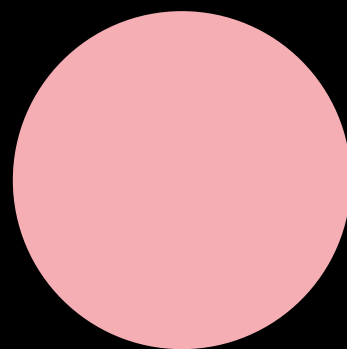

Ofcom – Understanding Online Communications Among Children



Technical report

Contents

1. Background and objectives.....	2
1.1 Background	2
2. Approach.....	2
3. Sample design	3
3.1 Fieldwork.....	4
3.2 Quotas	4
4. Questionnaire	7
4.1 Cognitive testing.....	7
4.2 Least-fill approach.....	8
4.3 Questionnaire content	9
5. Data Processing.....	11
5.1 Quality control	11
5.2 Weighting	11
6. Reporting	13

1. Background and objectives

1.1 Background

Ofcom has duties to protect children online under the Online Safety Act (OSA). 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). There are also sections relating to children's experiences encountering content relating to terrorism, drugs, weapons and several measures relating to women and girls online such as stalking and harassment. This adds to Ofcom's evidence base on adults' experiences of these harms in the [Online Experiences Tracker](#), and children's experiences of other content under the OSA in the [Children's Online Safety Tracker](#).

This report follows on from a [similar study in 2023](#) which also explored how children go about making new connections online.

1.2 Objectives

1. Understand how children build their online networks, and how safely they do this.
2. Understand the scale of children's uncomfortable encounters while messaging, and some other illegal harms online.
3. With these uncomfortable encounters and illegal harms – understand which demographics are more susceptible, and which platforms these are more likely to be encountered on.

2. Approach

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

1. **Parent-routed recruitment:** Children aged 11 to 17 were recruited by inviting a parent or guardian to participate initially. The parent or guardian completed the household demographic questions before passing the survey to the child to complete the remaining sections.

2. **Direct recruitment:** Some respondents aged 16 to 17 were recruited directly, as they were considered sufficiently mature to provide their own informed consent to participate, in accordance with MRS guidelines.

Savanta interviewed 4,097 children aged between 11 and 17 across the United Kingdom. Each interview took approximately 15 minutes to complete.

Recruitment approach	Number of completes	Proportion of sample
Parent-routed	3,817	93%
Direct	280	7%

Completes	Via parents	Direct
11–13-year-olds	1,817	0
14–15-year-olds	1,138	0
16–17-year-olds	862	280

Quotas were set to ensure the sample was representative by age, gender and socio-economic group (SEG). Following fieldwork, weights were applied to ensure the final sample was representative of the UK population by age, gender, SEG, region and ethnicity. Further details of the sampling frame, research methodology, weighting procedures and reporting are outlined in the following pages.

Participants were recruited using a blended panel approach, using the Savanta Hub API from multiple MRS-member and/or ESOMAR-accredited online panel providers. This approach was used to secure a broad and diverse sample of children aged 8–17 across the UK.

The use of multiple sample sources was intended to enhance sample quality, coverage and speed of delivery. By recruiting across a range of panel providers, the study reduced the potential for recruitment biases associated with reliance on a single source. This approach also increased available sample capacity and supported quota fulfilment in instances where supply from any individual panel was constrained.

3. Sample design

Fieldwork was conducted via the two online approaches outlined above, amounting to a total of 4,097 completed interviews.

3.1 Fieldwork

Fieldwork took place between 13 February and 19 March 2026, using the MRS-member and/or ESOMAR-accredited panel providers referenced in Section 2. Quotas (see Section 3.2) were monitored on a daily basis, and invitations were issued in line with quota requirements.

The survey was initially soft launched to achieve 200 completes. Following this soft launch, quality assurance checks were conducted on the initial data to verify questionnaire routing, confirm the achieved interview length, and identify any questions associated with elevated respondent drop-off. Once these checks had been completed, the survey was launched to full fieldwork.

3.2 Quotas

Quotas were established using official ONS and other government population statistics to support a sample broadly representative of children aged 11–17 in the UK. Quotas were set on child gender interlocked with age, as well as region, ethnicity, socio-economic group (SEG), urban/rural classification and disability status. In addition, monitoring quotas were applied on child gender interlocked with age, and by country.

Quota targets were informed by the following population sources:

- Age x gender: 2020 mid-year population estimates¹
- Region: 2020 mid-year population estimates²
- Ethnicity: 2023 population estimates for England and Wales³

¹

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/datasets/populationestimatesforukenglandandwalesscotlandandnorthernireland>

²

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/datasets/populationestimatesforukenglandandwalesscotlandandnorthernireland>

³<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/adhocs/1871populationbyethnicityenglandandwalesoctober2022toseptember2023>

- SEG: 2021 Census⁴
- Disability status: 2024 Family Resources Survey⁵

Survey progress was tracked through Savanta’s centrally managed quota monitoring system, which reported completes in real time. Quotas were monitored daily to manage sample composition and reduce the risk of over- or under-representation across key groups.

Nation	Unweighted base size
England	3,512
Scotland	290
Wales	192
Northern Ireland	103

The table below sets out the quota targets for this project. A degree of tolerance was built into these targets to provide flexibility during fieldwork.

Gender x Age		Targets	Achieved
Male	11-13 years old	885	866
	14-15 years old	585	630
	16-17 years old	581	510
Female	11-13 years old	843	899
	14-15 years old	557	585
	16-17 years old	548	488

Region	Targets	Achieved
North East	154	169

⁴<https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/bulletins/approximatedsocialgradeenglandandwales/census2021#approximated-social-grade-asg-in-england-and-wales>

⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/family-resources-survey-financial-year-2023-to-2024/family-resources-survey-financial-year-2023-to-2024#:~:text=Disability%20prevalence%20by%20age%20group,4.2b%20for%20full%20data.>

North West	454	446
Yorkshire and Humberside	331	363
East Midlands	292	300
West Midland	376	380
Eastern	387	388
London	514	518
South East	576	617
South West	322	331
Scotland	294	290
Northern Ireland	123	103
Wales	179	192

Ethnicity	Targets	Achieved
White	2,955	3,075
Mixed	231	311
Asian and British Asian	472	323
Black and Black British	239	271
Other ethnic group	103	89

SEG	Targets	Achieved
AB	931	1,029
C1	1,310	1,210
C2	854	774
DE	905	974

Urban/ Rural	Targets	Achieved ⁶
Urban	3,320	2,551
Rural	680	379

Disability	Targets	Achieved
Disabled	480	676
Non-disabled	3,520	2,716
Don't know	-	72
Prefer not to say	-	167

4. Questionnaire

A single questionnaire was used for the study, with separate routing to accommodate two recruitment pathways: one via a parent or guardian, and one for direct recruitment of 16–17-year-olds. The only variation between these routes was in the screening section. For parent-routed interviews, household demographic questions were completed by the parent or guardian before the survey was handed to the child. All remaining questionnaire content was identical and was structured into four sections aligned to the research objectives. These sections were:

1. Screening and Profiling
2. Section A: Understanding how young people are connecting online (proactive / reactive)
3. Section B: Responding to inappropriate / unsolicited messages
4. Section C: Encountering inappropriate behaviour online
5. Section D: Drugs / weapons / terrorism

4.1 Cognitive testing

⁶ Figures do not sum to the total sample size as they exclude respondents who chose not to provide their postcode and therefore could not be classified by urban/rural designation.

After the first full draft of the questionnaire had been developed, Savanta conducted ten cognitive testing interviews with children aged 11–17 who were users of a range of social media platforms. Cognitive testing was undertaken to assess question comprehension, relevance and fitness for purpose, and to ensure that the wording was appropriate for children. This was particularly important given that the final section covered sensitive experiences and therefore required language that was clear, age-appropriate and non-distressing. Participants were provided with an incentive in recognition of their time.

4.2 Least-fill approach

The questionnaire was designed to be no longer than 15 minutes, including screening, to ensure it remained suitable for a young audience. To limit questionnaire length while still capturing detailed evidence, a least-fill approach was used for follow-up questions on inappropriate online contact. Ten behaviours were covered in the questionnaire.

The least-fill approach was driven by a question in Section B asking whether respondents had experienced any inappropriate contact online and the frequency with which this had occurred in the last year. For detailed follow-up, respondents were assigned to one behaviour they had experienced, based first on behaviours reported in the last month and, if none were reported, on behaviours reported in the last year. Where only one behaviour had been reported, that behaviour was selected directly. Where multiple behaviours had been reported, one was selected using a least-fill allocation. This allocation was broadly random among eligible behaviours, except that lower-incidence behaviours were prioritised where relevant until their quota targets had been met.

In Section C, respondents were asked a series of questions about their experience of the selected behaviour and how they responded to it online. The least-fill methodology applied only to Section C; subsequent sections covered other harmful online behaviours, including those relating to drugs, weapons and terrorism.

Ofcom required insight into both the frequency and nature of each behaviour that was as robust as possible. The least-fill methodology was therefore used to achieve a more balanced spread of follow-up interviews across the ten behaviours, including those reported less often, and to secure sufficient base sizes for analysis of less common experiences. This meant that

respondents reporting less prevalent forms of inappropriate online contact were more likely to be routed to questions about those behaviours in detail.

Caution should be taken when using data for behaviours with smaller base sizes, particularly ‘being asked to share nude or semi-nude pictures or videos’ (91) which has a base size of below 100.

Behaviour	Base (n=)
Receiving an unwanted friend or follow request	829
Being asked to share nude or semi-nude pictures or videos	91
Being asked to share personal information (e.g. where I live or how old I am)	209
Receiving a friend request from someone pretending to be someone else (catfishing)	238
Receiving pictures or videos of nude or semi-nude people	119
Receiving abusive, nasty, or rude messages, voice notes or comments	288
Being asked to video call/chat with someone you haven’t spoken to before	173
Being asked to move chat to a different app/platform by someone you don’t know well/at all	209
Being added to a group chat with people you don’t know well/at all	470
Being added to a group video call with people you don’t know well/at all	282

4.3 Questionnaire content

The initial questionnaire section was used to screen respondents and capture profiling information. Demographic variables collected included gender, age, disability status, socio-economic group (SEG), and ethnicity.

Section A focused on children’s online communication practices and how they broaden their online networks. Questions examined usage frequency across specific social media platforms, the apps and platforms used, approaches to making new friends online, modes of communication with others online, and the nature of these interactions and conversations.

Section B explored children’s experiences of inappropriate or unsolicited online contact and their responses to those experiences. After a safeguarding and support screen, respondents were asked whether they had ever experienced a range of potentially uncomfortable forms of online contact across any platform, including unwanted requests, sexual image-related contact, deceptive contact, abusive communication, requests to move platforms, and unfamiliar group interactions. One behaviour was then selected for detailed follow-up, with last-month experiences prioritised over last-year experiences and least-fill routing used where more than one behaviour was eligible.

Section C explored children’s encounters with inappropriate online behaviour, covering both behaviour they had seen involving others and behaviour they had personally experienced. After a safeguarding and support screen, respondents were asked whether they had encountered a range of behaviours in the last year, including harassment, manipulated images, non-consensual image sharing, unsolicited sexual messages, appearance-based abuse, malicious reporting, account interference, and AI-generated sexualised imagery. The section then asked which of these behaviours respondents had personally experienced. For each reported experience, it measured frequency in the last year, which platforms it occurred on, and what action the respondent took in response. A follow-up item also captured whether respondents believed that a person shown in any AI-made or AI-edited nude or sexualised image or video was under 18.

Section D covered children’s exposure to online content relating to illegal drugs or vaping, weapons, and terrorism. After a safeguarding and support screen, respondents were asked whether they had seen or heard such content in the last year, and whether they had been sent content that appeared to offer or promote it. For any content reported, the section then measured where it had been encountered, how often it was seen, and what action the respondent took in response. The section also included two questions specifically on knives and weapons: whether seeing this content made respondents feel less safe at school or in their neighbourhood, and how likely they felt they would be to know what to do or who to tell if they saw weapons-related content online that made them feel uncomfortable or worried.

At the **end of the survey**, children were again shown signposting to support services. The closing text thanked respondents for taking part, acknowledged that some questions may have caused distress because of their sensitive and personal nature, and directed respondents to sources of help including Childline, YoungMinds and The Mix. It also provided guidance on contacting the police to report inappropriate or unwanted online situations, and on using 999 in emergencies or where there was immediate danger.

5. Data Processing

5.1 Quality control

A number of quality-assurance procedures were applied to support the integrity of the final sample:

1. **In-survey quality checks** were included to assess respondent attentiveness, alongside consistency checks comparing demographic information provided by the parent or guardian with that provided by the child.
2. **Data-quality checks** were undertaken to identify speeders, flatliners, gibberish responses and other indicators of low-quality completion. Flagged cases were reviewed and excluded where appropriate.
3. **AI-detection checks** were also conducted to identify responses suspected of being generated, or substantially assisted, by AI. Such cases were reviewed and removed from the dataset where necessary.
4. **Open-end review** was also undertaken. Where the coding team identified poor-quality verbatim responses, those respondents were removed from the dataset.

5.2 Weighting

Following fieldwork, RIM weighting⁷ was applied to adjust for minor discrepancies between the achieved sample and the target population profile. The data used in this report were weighted to ensure that the final dataset was representative of the UK population aged 11–17. Data from the direct-to-child and parent-routed recruitment approaches were combined

⁷**RIM weighting** (Raking Iterative Margins) is a statistical adjustment method used to ensure that survey sample data aligns proportionally with known population characteristics across multiple variables (e.g., age, gender, region). See Appendix A for further explanation.

within a single weighting process. Weighting variables were age × gender, socio-economic group (SEG), region and ethnicity. A full unweighted and weighted profile of the final sample is shown in the table below.

Weighting variable	Interviews achieved - unweighted	Weighted sample
Gender x Age		
Male 11-13 years	21%	22%
Male 14-15 years	15%	15%
Male 16-17 years	12%	15%
Female 11-13 years	22%	21%
Female 14-15 years	14%	14%
Female 16-17 years	12%	14%
Region		
North East	4%	4%
North West	11%	11%
Yorkshire and Humberside	9%	8%
East Midlands	7%	7%
West Midlands	9%	9%
Eastern	9%	10%
London	13%	13%
South East	15%	14%
South West	8%	8%
Scotland	7%	7%
Northern Ireland	3%	3%
Wales	5%	4%
Ethnicity		
White	75%	74%
Mixed	8%	6%

Asian and British Asian	8%	12%
Black and Black British	7%	6%
Other ethnic group	2%	3%
SEG		
AB	25%	23%
C1	30%	33%
C2	19%	21%
DE	24%	23%
Urban/ Rural		
Urban	87%	83%
Rural	13%	17%
Disability status		
Disabled	19%	12%
Non-disabled	81%	88%

The ‘% Unweighted’ column reflects the achieved sample profile at the end of fieldwork, while the ‘% Weighted’ column reflects the target population profile used in the weighting process. The weighting targets were derived from the same source data used to establish fieldwork quotas. These were as follows:

- Age x gender: 2020 mid-year population estimates
- Region: 2020 mid-year population estimates
- Ethnicity: 2023 population estimates for England and Wales
- SEG: 2021 Census

6. Reporting

All data tables were generated using MERLIN⁸, with raw data initially processed in Excel. Savanta’s analysis primarily relied on tabular outputs and cross-tabulations. Statistical

⁸ **MERLIN** is a comprehensive software package developed by [Merlinco](#) for survey data analysis and tabulation. It is designed to handle large datasets and complex analyses.

significance testing was conducted within the tables using a two-tailed Z-test at the 95% confidence level, enabling identification of results that were significantly higher or lower than relevant comparison groups. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies and standard deviations, were also used to summarise sample composition and response distributions by household and child characteristics.

In the data tables, statistically significant differences are flagged for sub-groups relative to the total result and to other categories within the same cross-break. These differences are indicated by letters shown below the percentage figure, with the corresponding column letters displayed beneath the cross-break heading. A 95% confidence level indicates that there is a 5% probability that an observed difference occurred by chance.

All percentages in this report have been rounded to the nearest whole number.

Consequently, totals may not sum to exactly 100%, and in some instances may equal 99% or 101%. Any such variation should generally be limited to 1 to 2 percentage points.