When do parents think their child is ready to use the internet independently?

Parenting for a Digital Future: Survey Report 2

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In all the recent discussion over social media data exploitation, licit or illicit, with or without consent, urging people to lock down privacy settings or even delete their profiles, the 'user' is constantly assumed to be an adult – responsible for their decisions about when to allow information society services to monetise their personal data. But who is looking out for children and their data privacy?

The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), coming into force on 25th May 2018, proposes that for children under a certain age, companies should gain parental consent before processing their personal data. But under what age?

But what is under-age? The GDPR proposed 16 as the age of consent, albeit for largely unexplained reasons. It then allowed member states to reduce the age to 13, and the UK's Data Protection Bill has proposed just that, resulting in a lower age of consent than in some European countries, but leaving unresolved the challenges of implementation.

In all this, it seems no-one has consulted parents. US research with parents suggests 13 is too young and, as Facebook reported, 77% of parents say they should be the ones to decide. The Parenting for a Digital Future project surveyed a nationally representative sample of 2032 UK parents of 0-17 year olds in November 2017.

As we show, overall parents think 13 is about right, but parents of teens – to whom this decision actually matters in practice – think 13 is too young.

The older their child, the longer parents want oversight of their internet use

Our survey asked parents:

> *"At what age do you think your child will be or was old enough to make their own decisions about the websites or apps they use?"*

We'll call this the "age of independence", as we asked parents to assess their child's maturity rather than the legal question of consent.

The findings showed that for parents of children aged 0-17, their average answer for the age of independence is 13 years old, perhaps because this is what they are used to. But the most common answer (i.e. the mode) is 16 years old (*see Figure 1*).

Figure 1: Parents' views on their child's age of independence
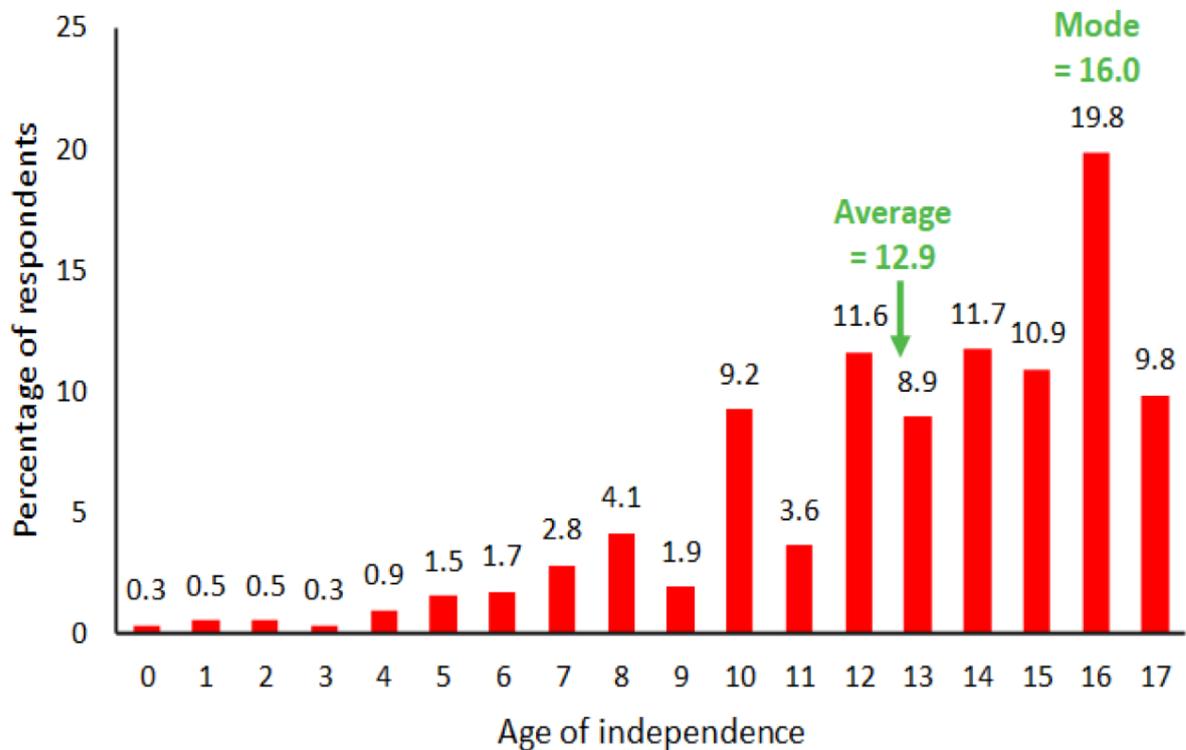
Q35. "At what age do you think your child will be or was old enough to make their own decisions about the websites or apps they use?" Base: UK parents of children aged 0-17 (n=2020).

The reason for this difference between the average and mode is that parents' views vary greatly according to the age of their child (*see Figure 2*). So while parents of young children consider 13 a reasonable age, parents of teenagers take a different view, clearly thinking that they should stay involved in their children's decisions about internet use.

Specifically:

- For parents of a child aged 0-9, the majority (63%) name an age of independence 13 years old or younger (averaging 11 or 12 years old, i.e. secondary school age).

- But for parents of children aged 10-12 the majority (58%) prefers an age of at least 14.

- And for parents of children aged 13-17, this majority rises to nearly four in five of parents (79%) who prefer an age of 14+ (averaging around 15 years old).

Figure 2: Parents' views on the age of independence rise with the age of their child
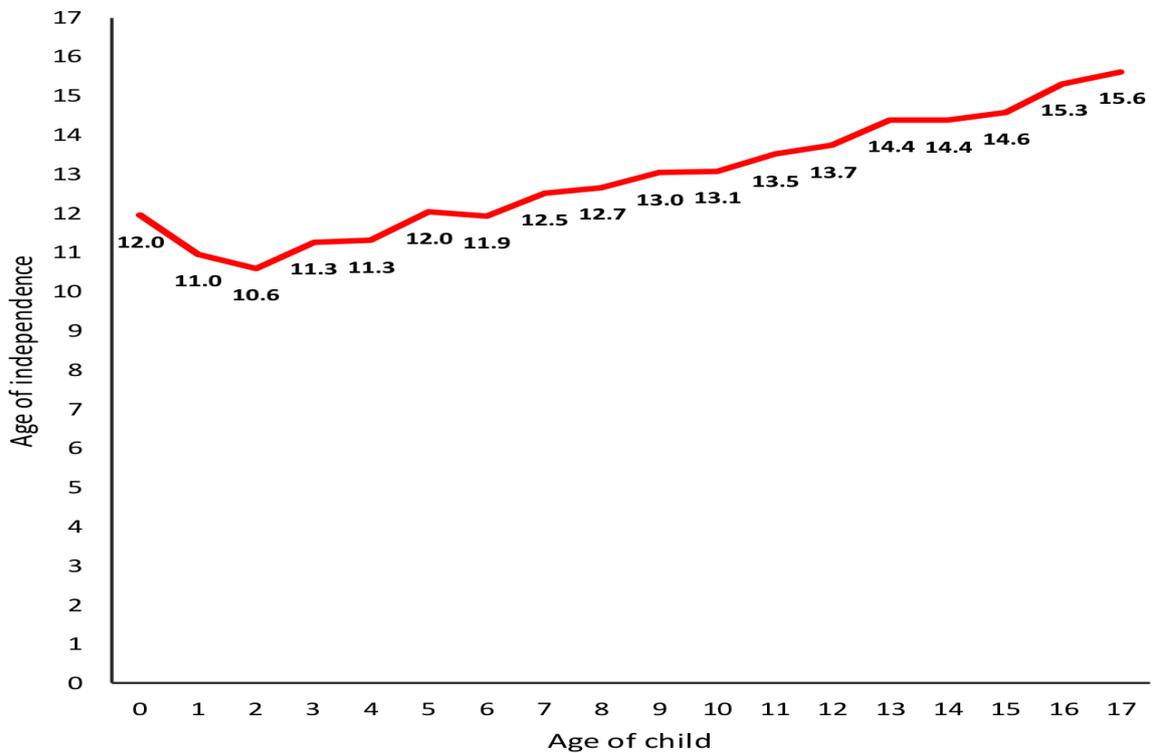
Q35. "At what age do you think your child will be or was old enough to make their own decisions about the websites or apps they use?" Base: UK parents of children aged 0-17 (n=2020).

Why does this matter? Parents must trade their teens' online opportunities against the risks

The dilemma is that if 16 is chosen, younger teenagers must rely on parental consent, potentially limiting their participation and learning opportunities. It may result in inequality (not all parents will respond attentively), deceit (teens may find workarounds) and loss of privacy (should parents know all that teens do?).

But if 13 is chosen, parents' ability to attend to young teenagers' online activities may be undermined, with responsibility implicitly devolved to platforms over which there are growing concerns. Perhaps oddly, there has been little policy attention to what teens are taught – is the government saying that after two years of secondary school education children will be prepared to manage their data privacy? The evidence does not support this at present.

Which parents prefer which age of independence and why?

We conducted further statistical analysis on the variation among parents in their preferred age of independence. We found that:

- The child's age makes the biggest difference to parents' views (as shown above) but there's little difference in their views for sons or daughters (see Model 1, in the multiple regression analysis below).

- However, more digitally skilled parents favour an *older* age of independence. This suggests that the *more* parents know about the internet, the more they are sceptical of their child's competence to manage it (irrespective of their estimate of their children's digital skills; see Model 2).

- Also, parents who have experienced something negative online favour an *older* age – presumably because they too have learned about online problems.

- But parents who say their child has experienced something negative online favour a *younger* age – see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Parents whose child has had a negative online experience favour a lower age of independence
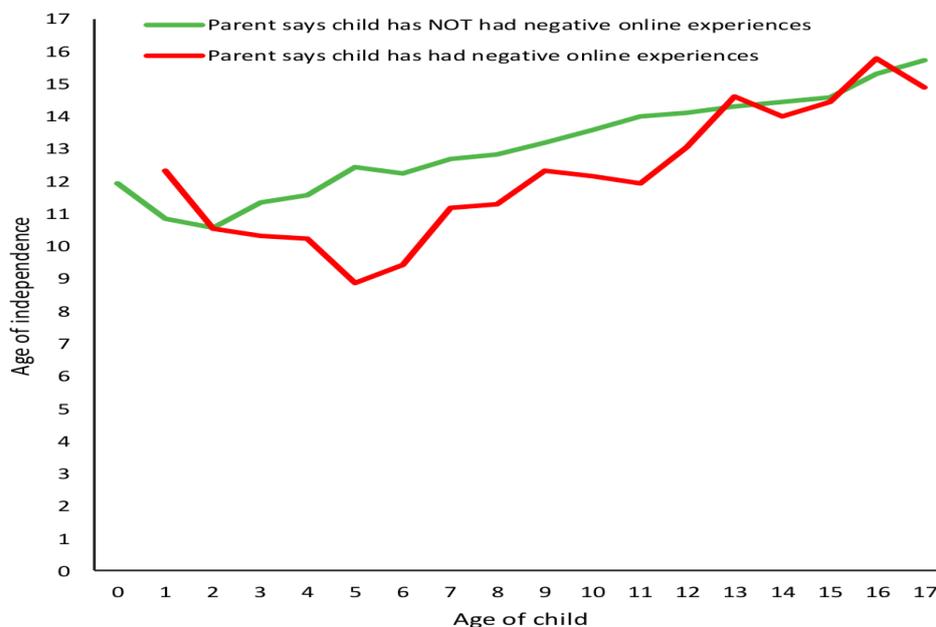
Q36. "In the past year, has anything happened online that bothered or upset your child in some way (e.g., made them feel uncomfortable, scared or feel that they shouldn't have seen it)?" Base: UK parents of children aged 0-17 (n=2020).

This result might seem puzzling (wouldn't parents of children who've had a negative experience want to protect them all the more?). But if we look at the graph, the main difference is for younger children. So if a parent knows that their young child has had a negative experience online, they will also have seen how they coped with it, and so be confident of their future resilience and independence online.

Parental views of technology make a difference too

We also found that parents who are positive about the benefits of technology favour children's independence online (see Model 3):

- So, the more parents believe that, 'Overall, using the internet benefits children's lives,' the lower their preferred age of independence.

- Also interesting, although not statistically significant but on the borderline, the more parental mediation they do, the higher their age of independence. Since parental concerns about the internet, or about their child's ability to be resilient, may drive their mediation activities, it is plausible that those who mediate more also think children should be older before they use the internet independently.

Conclusion: parents overall agree with the government that 13 is the right age. But parents of teens disagree!

Crucially, our survey findings suggest that for the parents of teenagers – who are directly affected by the new legislation - the government is setting the age of consent too young. The older their child, the older parents think their child should be before they can use the internet independently. More digitally skilled parents – who presumably understand the internet better – also think the age should be older.

So although on average, parents of 0-17 year olds think 13 is the right age, perhaps the views of parents of younger children should be taken with a pinch of salt? What matters more, surely, is that most parents of 13- to 17-year olds think 13 is too young.

If the government (and industry) want the age of 13 to meet with parents' approval, it would be worth trying to demonstrate to them that this will bring their child more benefits than harm. And that will mean paying serious attention to the exploitation of children's data and privacy in current debates about the wider public.

Note on statistics

The multiple regression analyses for the first, second and third models predicting parental view of the child's age of independence are shown in the table below.

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	B	**p**	**B**	**p**	**B**	**p**
Constant	12.56	<0.001	12.37	<0.001	13.18	<0.001
Age of child	0.28	<0.001	0.32	<0.001	0.31	<0.001
Child gender (girls = 1)	0.06	0.70	0.08	0.60	0.09	0.51
Age of parent	0.02	0.03	0.02	0.09	0.02	0.07
Parent gender (women = 1)	0.30	0.04	0.24	0.11	0.21	0.15
Perceived child skills (0-10)			-0.05	0.20	-0.04	0.26
Parent skills (0-10)			0.09	<0.001	0.09	<0.001
Child has had negative online experiences			-1.20	<0.001	-1.21	<0.001
Parent has had negative online experiences			0.61	0.01	0.59	0.01
Parental mediation (0-10)					0.05	0.06
Overall, using the internet benefits children's lives (1-5)					-0.28	<0.001
R^2	0.20		0.21		0.22	
F	107.24		59.58		49.03	
df (model)	4		8		10	
df (residual)	1766		1762		1760	
p	<0.001		<0.001		<0.001	

Note on methodology

The survey methodology is here and the questionnaire is here. Measures are as follows:
- *Child skills* (Q20/21) are estimated by ten questions where parents are asked if their child can do various things while using the internet or digital devices, such as saving a photo that they find online and checking if information they find online is true.
- *Parent skills* (Q19) are measured by the same ten questions.
- *Parental mediation* (Q33) is measured by nine questions where parents are asked how frequently they do various mediation activities (never to very often). The items are summed and adjusted to a 10 point scale (a higher score means more mediation).
- *Parents' views of negative online experiences were asked thus*:
  - Q36: As far as you are aware, in the **past year**, has anything happened online that bothered or upset 'your child' in some way (e.g., made them feel uncomfortable, scared or feel that they shouldn't have seen it?) – Yes/No/Prefer not to say
  - Q37: In the **past year**, has anything happened online that bothered or upset **you** in some way (e.g., made you feel uncomfortable, scared or feel that you shouldn't have seen it?) – Yes/No/Prefer not to say
- *Parents' views of whether, 'Overall, using the internet benefits children's lives'* (Q30) was measured on a five point scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

'Parenting for a Digital Future' publications

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- Blum-Ross, A. and Livingstone, S. (2016) 'Families and Screen Time: Current Advice and Emerging Research.' Media Policy Brief 17. London: Media Policy Project, LSE. Available at http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/66927/
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- Blum-Ross, and Livingstone, S. (in press) The trouble with 'screen time' rules. Nordicom Yearbook special issue on parenting and digital media.

Our blog at www.parenting.digital

We aim to give researchers, advocates, industry and parents easy access to the latest research on parenting, children and digital media. Recent posts have included:

- Portuguese families facing the challenge of screen time
- Parenting for a digital future roundup March 2018
- Sexual harassment at school: what can young people's gender-based activism tell us?
- Maternal well-being and the internet: balancing optimism and caution
- For, and against, Facebook's Messenger Kids
- Play for all children: robots helping children with disabilities play

Acknowledgements

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