'The Perfect Generation':
Is the internet undermining young people's mental health?

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parentzone
MAKING THE INTERNET WORK FOR FAMILIES

Acknowledgements

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Introduction

In many ways the last decade has been a good news decade for families. At Parent Zone we have championed family friendly policies and worked closely with all of the people who care about improving outcomes for children – and we have seen progress. Flexible working, shared parenting and a transformation in the way families communicate have improved family life. Gone are the days when a father working away from home had to rely on a sporadic phone call or a student living in another country had to wait until they got home to see their sibling's new hairstyle.

And yet. Family life is arguably more complex now than it has ever been. Parents face having to explain issues to their children that could, in the past, have been gently brushed under the carpet. Families have become permeable. Children have access to information, views and opinions that adults cannot control. The internet has destroyed any notions we might have had about keeping some things away from children until they were 'old enough to cope.'

In this fast-changing space concerns emerge and worries increase. The impact of the internet on young people's mental health is one such concern. All of the indicators suggest that the prevalence of mental health problems and the severity of the problems are increasing. Some people are linking the internet to the increase; but before we move to solutions that at best might not meet the need and at worse, could result in unintended consequences, we wanted to find out more: to speak to the young people who have grown up with technology and hear their views so that we can start to think about how best to support the people who care for them and educate them. This report offers a glimpse into their world. It does this by doing what parents around the country do when they are concerned about young people – talking to young people and the schools they attend.

Vicki Shotbolt, CEO Parent Zone

Summary

Overall, young people do not see the internet and technology as bad for their mental health, but adolescents have diverse views about this subject. This was reflected in our surveys and in our youth focus groups – while some teens had very positive things to say about the online world, others focused on the pressures and potential downsides. Their opinions are nuanced and thoughtful – almost all the young people we spoke to, in focus groups and through our survey, highlighted multiple ways that the internet can be good and bad for their emotional wellbeing.

A growing body of evidence suggests that online and offline resilience and vulnerability are linked.[1] The young people we spoke to strongly agreed that the online world affects people differently depending on factors like their mood and their age – what one person might be able to brush off without much worry, others might find deeply disturbing. Some of the young people we interviewed are not in mainstream education for medical reasons. Their perceptions of the internet and social media were much more negative than their peers in mainstream schools, in line with the idea that young people with one or more offline vulnerabilities are more likely to experience risk online.

The state of mental health in schools is indeed worrying, with the majority of schools respondents saying they deal with pupil mental health issues more frequently than once per month. A large majority also believe pupil mental health problems are getting more frequent and more severe, and yet 84% of schools do not have the resources to deal with these issues adequately.

There is an interesting discrepancy between what schools and young people think about the internet and about its effects on mental health. Teachers and other members of school staff are more negative about the internet – 44% of schools think it is bad for young people's mental health, compared to just 28% of young people. They also, in both our survey and our interviews, seemed to overestimate young people's propensity to seek help and information online. The young people we spoke to prefer to get support from their friends and families, but are sometimes prevented from doing so by shame or fear – suggesting we have more work to do on reducing mental health stigma.

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[1] Pryzbylski, A. et al, 2014.

Literature review

Youth mental health in the UK

One in ten children aged five to 16 has a diagnosable mental health issue, coming out to roughly three in every class.[2] This figure is often used as a benchmark for the prevalence of youth mental health issues in the UK, although it should be noted that just over ten years have passed since this research was conducted.

Between 2011 and 2012, one in eight children aged 10 to 15 reported symptoms of mental ill-health. Bullying was found to be associated with mental ill-health, as were difficult parental relationships, poor body image and dissatisfaction at school.[3]

Effects of the internet

The relationship between the internet and mental health is complex. The research that has been done in this area has not given us sufficient evidence to make a causal claim about the effects of the internet on mental health and emotional wellbeing, and has in some cases been contradictory. In many cases, researchers are not able to separate the potential effects of the internet from their 'social context.'[4]

There is a growing body of work focused on the effects of social media on mood and mental health, both in young people and in the general population. Most studies of social technology and young people point to either mixed or no effects: possible benefits include social support and relationship building and possible downsides include social isolation and exposure to harm.[5]

Time spent online and using technology has also been of interest to researchers. The 2011-2012 ONS Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire found that children who spent more than three hours on social websites on a normal school night were more than twice as likely to report mental health difficulties.[6] Public Health England's 2013 review of healthy behaviour and children's wellbeing found an association between screen time (computer use, TV and video games) and emotional distress, anxiety and depression.[7] Still, in many cases studies linking increased screen time with mental health issues do not account for other factors that could covary with both technology use and mental health.

Mental health in schools

Poor mental health in schools has also been a topic of public concern. Notably, The Key's 2015 summer report found that pupil mental health topped head teachers' list of concerns, with over two-thirds of heads saying they worry about this issue.[8]

Youth perspectives

Research on young people's opinions of the internet has highlighted the disparity in child and adult views of the digital world. Young people tend to focus on the internet as a social platform[9], for instance, making little distinction between online and offline activities.

To date, there has been insufficient research into how young people think the internet affects their emotional wellbeing. Organisations such as YoungMinds[10] and the Mental Health Foundation[11] have documented the importance of involving young people in mental health policy and representing their voice. As we address the potential effects of the internet on adolescent mental health, it is essential to keep youth perspectives at the centre of our response.

[2] Green, H., McGinnity, A., Meltzer, H., et al, 2004.

[3] Beardsmore, R. 2015.

[4] YoungMinds, Ecorys, 2016.

[5] Best, P., Manktelow, R., Taylor, B., 2014.

[6] Beardsmore, R. 2015.

[7] Public Health England, 2013.

[8] The Key, 2015.

[9] O'Keeffe, G., Clarke-Pearson, K., et al, 2011.

[10] Street, C., Herts, B., 2005.

[11] Wilson, E., 2015.

Methodology

This research was conducted between November 2015 and February 2016.

We conducted surveys of 119 teachers and 220 young people between the ages of 13 and 20 from around the UK.[12] The survey was primarily online and, to improve geographical reach, was also distributed in schools and other youth settings in London, Hull, Lincoln and Cheshire.

We conducted two depth interviews in schools and three youth focus groups, speaking to a further six members of school staff and 40 young people.

Findings in discussion – young people

In a recent evidence review, YoungMinds wrote that 'there is a consistent message from the literature that young people are often best placed to offer solutions for how best adults can support them in managing risk and staying emotionally resilient online.'[13]

In our conversations with young people, we focused on their perceptions of the internet and its effects on the emotional wellbeing of their peers. We also asked them to describe what their ideal support system would look like. Here, our youth interviews are presented alongside a few key findings from the nationwide youth survey.

- Perceptions of the internet and mental health -

Key statistics
28% of respondents either agree or strongly agree that the internet is bad for young people's mental health. 40% neither agree nor disagree and 32% disagree or strongly disagree (Figure 5).

> 'It depends on the stability of the person, if someone is unstable then they are probably more likely to be susceptible to mental health issues which can be exacerbated by the internet.'
> – youth survey
>
> 'It acts as a place to anonymously explore what your own problems are without the embarrassment of confronting a friend or stranger. Moreover it can be a place to build friendships over mutual interest with people you may never have had the opportunity to meet before.' – youth survey

48% of young people surveyed said the internet is mostly good to look at when they are upset, insecure or angry. 20% think it is mostly bad to look at (Figure 6).

75% of respondents say using the internet has made them feel happy and 66% say it has made them feel relaxed (Figure 7).

Roughly 60% of respondents have seen people talking about hurting themselves online. Of this 60%, it made 70% worried or upset. 55% have seen someone talking about hurting someone else, with 78% of these saying it made them worried or upset. 51% had seen someone talking about suicide , and it made 82% of them worried or upset (Figure 8).

42% of young people would follow advice they read online most of the time, with 49% saying they would rarely follow online advice (Figure 9).

Roughly 70% of young people would tell a friend who was upset to avoid one or more online services. 36% said they would tell an upset friend to avoid Facebook (Figure 13). On the other hand, around 78% would also tell a friend who was upset to look at one or more online services to feel better. 52% said they would tell a friend to look at YouTube to feel better (Figure 14).

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[12] A small number of responses (4%) came from young people aged 12, 21 and 22.
[13] YoungMinds, Ecorys, 2016.

In discussion

Group 1

This group had mixed and nuanced opinions on the internet and mental health. One boy, for instance, mentioned the helpful resources available online, while another described how upsetting it can be to follow models and celebrities on social media and compare yourself to them.

They agreed that the influence of the internet depends on the individual, saying that while most people are not harmed, sometimes people who are dealing with a problem will find content that exacerbates it – either accidentally or because they seek it out. One girl used the hypothetical case of someone struggling with body image issues. Looking at online resources could make her feel better, but visiting 'pro-ana' websites could make things much worse.

Most of the difference in individual susceptibility to risk, they said, is based on a combination of mood and personality factors like trust. People who are in a bad mood might choose to focus on negative content, amplifying their issues.

> 'There's enough good to counter out the bad, but one bad website could have the effects of 100 good ones. Same with comments – 100 people could be saying something good about you but if one person says something bad you'll remember the bad one.'

On the other hand, the internet is good for many people because it helps them distract themselves from their problems, connect with friends and follow the things that interest them.

> 'If you're upset some people use it more as a distraction. They might be using it to stream videos or read things, rather than looking for something in particular to make them feel better or worse. It's helpful in the sense that it's such a broad thing.'

They highlighted the negative effects of the news and current events. Many find the news disturbing, echoing other survey responses that mentioned upsetting beheading videos and news about kidnappings online.

> 'I saw an isis (sp) beheading video which made me feel scared and upset.'
> – youth survey

They are also wary of traditional media sources – one young woman, for instance, does not trust newspapers because she thinks they exaggerate their stories to boost readership. According to her, this makes young people more likely to turn to and rely on forums like Tumblr, where they believe people have no incentive to lie. In her words, 'at least it's a real person.'

Group 2

This group sees the internet as a mixed bag, but are overall very positive about its effects on emotional wellbeing.

> 'I'd say [the internet] definitely amplifies everything – the good and the bad. You just have to choose the right route.'

They strongly believe that the effects of the internet depend on individuals and on what they choose to do. One boy immediately spoke up to talk about funny and entertaining videos, while another responded by saying that the internet sets unrealistic standards for how people should look and act, undermining their confidence. We heard that some people might be more willing to victimise others online, because it's harder to say certain things face to face.

> 'I don't think the internet makes mental health problems, I think **people** make people have mental health problems. The internet puts up a wall between you and the other person – it makes you feel safer saying things, but if you were on the other end of it you might feel victimised.'

These young people have identified 'good' and 'bad' spaces online – often the 'bad' sites are anonymous, or forums known for their no-rules approach to moderation. They view it as each individual's task to find the right path online, choosing to visit the good and avoid the bad. If people look at upsetting content or go online when they know it will bother them, they are responsible for the consequences. If they do stumble across something bad by mistake, they will usually respond by deleting the offending app or trying to forget about it.

> ❝ 'I just think it depends on how you use it. If you engage yourself in social media sites, surely some bad things are going to happen.'
>
> 'You aren't really going to see anything that's going to scar you for life unless you're in places you know it's going to be posted.'

This group's views on the internet are generally very positive. They see it as an educational and entertaining resource that helps people follow their interests and connect with friends and family. They think it's up to everyone to control their own online experiences and find a balance between online and offline time.

Academic pressure is a major issue for this group. They find it difficult to balance homework, revision and exams with other aspects of life. They see succeeding in school as their best chance of having 'a good job and a good life', and can feel overwhelmed by the challenge.

> ❝ 'My parents get quite annoyed if I don't get a good mark in something. It does put a lot of stress on me.'

Many feel serious pressure from their school and their families to achieve at a high level, and some see the internet and social media as a helpful way to relax and decompress.

> ❝ 'Although providing a distraction may not fix a problem, it may calm the person down to the point where you can help move past their problem. The Internet is full of distractions, and this is a good place to go.' – youth survey
>
> 'There are some great cat videos on YouTube which are guaranteed to make anyone feel better.' – youth survey

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Group 3

This group was by far the most negative about the effects of the internet and technology, especially social media.

> ❝ 'With social media, you can't win.'

While some had positive things to say about the internet, everyone agreed that for vulnerable people, it can be a dangerous influence. One boy in particular was insistent that most people can control how social media affects them by blocking people and ignoring messages, but still told a story about someone he knows who was seriously affected by a video of animal abuse online.

We heard that there is intense pressure to conform – to have the right things, to look and act the right way. This has always been a part of teenage life, but social media has made it more pervasive and harder to escape.

> ❝ 'It's a constant competition of who can get the most "likes" or "favourites". I find myself constantly going through Instagram pages of girls that get more likes than myself, and honestly it depresses me.' – youth survey

The same is true of bullying and conflict within friendship groups – it's no longer possible to disconnect by going home. Some young people can't take a step back because they find social media addictive, while others (especially those who are already lonely or isolated) worry that they will miss out if they spend too much time offline. People who are being bullied or targeted online worry that if they take a break from social media, they won't be able to defend themselves against cruel comments.

‘When I have struggled with my mental health I have found the internet useful, but I feel social media has the potential to be very harmful to a person's mental health.’ – youth survey

Online, many people feel empowered to say things they might not face to face. This can be a good thing – some people are more comfortable talking about their feelings online – but more often, it means arguments and unkind comments get out of control.

This group sees graphic sexual and violent content regularly, including on social media platforms like Facebook. Some of their friends will like or share extreme content for a laugh – which is eventually removed, but will often come up in other people's newsfeeds first.

Some people are able to laugh this off, but others find it harder to handle. One young woman said her mood had been affected for days by extreme sexual content she saw on Facebook, while another described seeing graphic videos shared widely in the aftermath of the Paris attacks. The effects of this content depend on your mood, personality, age – and can, according to this group, be serious for more vulnerable young people.

Pornography and sexual images are a key concern for this group. They believe it's become too easy to access pornography, leading to stress, pressure and unreasonable expectations about sex. A girl said she thought the pressures are worse for women, prompting a boy to disagree – he thinks the effects are just as bad, if different, for men. One boy said that, even so, he thinks his friends are more negatively affected by gambling content online than by sexual images.

They have also had problems with sexting. None of them have personally shared or asked for sexual images, but even so they 'occasionally' receive unsolicited nudes. It is not uncommon for people they know to have their images passed around without consent, in some cases leading to serious emotional distress.

This group placed less of an emphasis on academic pressure than the other young people we met. They think their school finds a good balance between encouraging them to achieve and pressuring them. This isn't always the case for their friends and siblings in other schools, who are sometimes overwhelmed by what they are expected to accomplish. Even so, academics can still be a source of anxiety – especially in families with strict expectations.

‘My family doesn't accept failures.’

- Getting Support -

Key statistics
34% of respondents said if they were upset or had a problem, they would talk to a parent or carer first. 27% would talk to someone else they trusted in person. 27% of respondents said their first step would be some kind of online help, ranging from a Google search to an information service for young people. Just under 1% of respondents would call a helpline first (Figure 10a).

When asked if they would do anything else, 43% said they would talk to a parent or carer and 57% would talk to someone else they trusted in person. 30% would look at the top results of a Google search, 28% would talk to friends online and 28% would also watch videos on YouTube or another site. 4% would call a helpline (Figure 10b).

Just under half of our respondents said they don't need any more support to deal with these issues. 27% want more support from their school, 19% want more from their parents and carers, 20% want more from services for teens and 18% want more from health professionals. 8% would like more support from tech companies (Figure 12).

‘Schools should do more to combat depression/self-harm/mental health.’ – youth survey

Of respondents who have ever tried to get help for a problem online, 63% thought it was very helpful or somewhat helpful. Only 9% thought it was somewhat unhelpful or very unhelpful (Figure 11).

In discussion

Group 1

We heard that the internet is full of useful resources if you know how to find them, but more vulnerable or less knowledgeable individuals might stray down the wrong path. Others know where to look for support, but are unwilling to seek out help for other reasons.

> ''Some people need help, but they don't want help.'
>
> 'They might not feel like they need it or are weak enough to turn to it. Some people don't want to be told what to do.'

They recognise they have access to resources through their school and family support, but worry that school won't keep their problems confidential and, sometimes, that staff won't give honest advice. They trust their parents, but worry about coming to them with certain problems for fear of upsetting or disappointing them.

This group believes that ideal support for young people would be online and anonymous.

> 'You can always hide behind your computer screen.'

Online support, though, can come across as automated, impersonal or not genuine. The group agreed that the best way for an online help service to gain credibility among young people is to partner with major social media companies like Facebook.

They say their peers turn to friends for help before family, school or other services. They have reservations about some of the available support – helplines, for instance, which come across as something that would only be useful to certain people in times of serious crisis.

> 'You look at a helpline and you think – that's for somebody else.'

They also worry that if a friend is in trouble and they recommend going to a service rather than offering their own advice, it will seem rude or uncaring – although some have found ways to signpost appropriate help anyway.

Group 2

This group thinks that while there is enough support for young people, the problem lies in convincing them to ask for it.

> 'I think there's enough support, but people don't open up about their problems to the people who are willing to help them. They just feel embarrassed.'

They believe their peers are 'scared' to talk about these issues and think it's 'awkward' – despite decreasing stigma around mental health issues, for most people, it is still not considered 'the normal thing to talk about.'

> 'If it was spoken about more, then it would be more normal to be heard about. It's one of those things where people don't talk about it so you don't talk about it. If it's not the normal thing to talk about you just feel really awkward and insecure.'

Some of these attitudes may come from the perception that people lie about mental health issues for attention – as one boy said, 'it trivialises it for people who actually do need help.' They believe this is a problem in their age group but are unsure how common it really is.

While this group is confident that there is enough support available, they don't necessarily think it is suited to their needs. No one in this group said they or their friends would be willing to call a helpline – they would worry about being overheard, and if the same service were available by text, they would find it 'weird' to explain their problems to a stranger. They were very sceptical about the quality of information online and would prefer help from family or friends. If this failed or if they wanted to keep their concerns private, they would prefer official sources like the NHS.

> **"** 'I think if you really didn't want to talk to your family or friends, I think you could maybe, if you was that desperate, go onto a proper medical website like the NHS or something.'

Pupils in this group feel intense academic pressure from their school, their families and themselves. They worry about achieving at school because they view it as 'the best chance of having a good job and a good life.' It's challenging to balance everything – 'family, friends, relationships, social media, sleep, school,' and in some instances, the internet is a way to relieve stress.

> **"** 'You have to manage it. You don't have a choice, you just have to get on with it.'
>
> 'The good on the internet – for me – takes the pressure off.'

Group 3

These young people think we should do a better job of recognising that a lot of what's online is not appropriate for younger users – but also appreciate that as things stand, they have access to it anyway.

> **"** 'You can see a lot of horrible things online, things that you don't want to see and can be triggering to some people's issues.' – youth survey

One young woman described joining Facebook at 10. Although the site is officially for over-13s only, she says this is standard practice and we shouldn't just ignore it. This group thinks Facebook and other social media sites should have different 'versions' for different ages – not to restrict young people from connecting with someone older (like a parent or other relative), but to filter content and let children interact in a space designed for their own age group.

This group spoke critically about parents who let their young children play age inappropriate games while being unwilling to have factual conversations about, for example, sexual health. In their view, adults need to be more realistic, honest and consistent in conversations with young people. They said it was a confusing double standard, for example, that while a couple could legally have sex at 16, sending each other naked images would be a crime. They say perceived inconsistencies like this make it more difficult to take advice on staying safe seriously.

When this group needs help, they go to their friends first. Although they say arguments on social media sometimes lead to strained relationships, their friends are still the first people they would turn to for support. They are reluctant to go to their parents if they feel they can't trust them – if, for instance, they make a habit of reading their personal messages – but overall see families as a key resource for dealing with problems.

Findings in discussion – schools

Our work with schools focused on perceptions of three main themes – the extent of mental health issues in schools, the effects of the internet and what support is needed. Here, we present some key statistics from our schools survey alongside findings from depth interviews with members of staff in two schools.

- Mental health in schools – the scale of the issue -

Key statistics

Among school staff surveyed, there is a clear consensus that the state of young people's mental health has worsened. 91% of respondents say they believe mental health problems among pupils are getting more frequent (Figure 15) and 87% say they are getting more severe (Figure 16).

95% of schools deal with stress and anxiety among their pupils. Just under 70% deal with depression and 66% are dealing with pupils self-harming (Figure 17).

When we designed our survey to ask teachers how often they dealt with mental health problems in schools, 'at least monthly' was the most frequent option we provided. 58% selected this response. A further 26% answered 'other', and noted that our listed options underestimated the true frequency of these issues – weekly and daily, in their experience. Taking this into account, 84% of respondents are dealing with mental health and emotional wellbeing problems monthly or more often than monthly (Figure 18).

> " 'We are dealing with pupils on a DAILY basis. Lack of funding means we have neither the capacity nor resources to cope, but we are the only service who sees the children regularly, and do our best. This is having a SERIOUS impact on the emotional health of the staff trying to help.'
> – school survey

56% of school respondents see parents and families as the biggest positive influence on young people's mental health, followed by peer groups at 19% (Figure 23). 27%, however, see peer groups as the biggest negative influence on young people's mental health, followed by the internet and technology at 24% (Figure 24).

In discussion

School 1

Pupil mental health has 'definitely' been getting worse in the past five years, according to this school. Problems come up more often and at an earlier age. While the staff recognise that decreasing taboos around the subject of mental health may have played a role in increased reporting, there is a sense in this school that the problems that get reported are in fact 'the tip of the iceberg'. Messages about discussing and destigmatising mental health have been somewhat effective in reaching girls, but have failed to get through to many young men and boys. For them, emotional turmoil often manifests through disruptive or aggressive behaviour.

At this school, much of the pressure is academic. Students compete with each other and are encouraged by their families. Pupils who are hardworking but unable to achieve at the highest level sometimes struggle to manage the 'pressure and guilt' of failing to live up to parental expectations.

> " 'The pressure is 50% from their families, and 50% from themselves – at this school, there is a lot of competition between students.'

This school has seen more instances of mental health issues, especially in the last few years. They credit increased awareness and reduced stigma about mental health with some of this change. But they also believe issues may genuinely be on the rise, highlighting cases that still go unnoticed – one female student, for instance, struggled with bulimia for three years before anyone became aware of it.

Again, academic and family pressure is a major issue – at this school, many parents view their children's success as a reflection on them and push them to achieve at a high level.

> 'Stop the academic pressure.' – school survey

- The role of the internet -

Key statistics
44% of schools either agree or strongly agree that the internet is bad for young people's mental health. 41% neither agree nor disagree and 15% disagree or strongly disagree (Figure 19).

> 'Young people have always had to deal with issues such as body image, anxiety, depression etc. However, the prolific use of social media amongst our young people means that they never switch off from thinking about the issues and pressures they are under to look and behave a certain way. Their behaviour online towards one another, and also about themselves is constantly reflecting how they feel about themselves and what they should/shouldn't look like and behave like. This has a significant impact on their mental health and wellbeing.' – school survey

Roughly 73% of schools have dealt with a pupil mental health issue they feel was made worse by that pupil's online activity (Figure 20).

> 'A student attempted suicide and self-harmed after researching it on Tumblr. Before attempting to kill themselves, they posted pictures of the self-harm on Twitter for their friends to see. This is one of many incidents that I have to deal with on a daily basis.' – school survey

46%, however, have dealt with a pupil mental health issue that was improved by the pupil's online activity (Figure 21).

> 'We signpost children to appropriate websites for support with a variety of issues - domestic violence, self-harm, depression - many children have reported that this type of help is very valuable.' – school survey

Roughly 83% of schools think their pupils would follow advice they read online most of the time (Figure 22).

In discussion

School 1

The internet and technology are identified here as factors exacerbating an already worrying situation. This school has seen pupils turn to the internet for affirmation, finding negativity or cruelty instead. They worry about pupils' inability to switch off from technology and desire to stay 'in the loop', making them unable to take a break from social drama even when they are in their own bedrooms. They feel that their pupils are unable to find a balance between online and offline without reliable adult guidance.

They have dealt with students looking up 'dark' content about suicide and self-harm, but have also been troubled by worried young people turning to the internet for answers and coming back with unhelpful self-diagnoses. On the other hand, they have also started signposting some students in need of help to reputable websites, saying that much of the best available support is online. Again, they identify trusted adult guidance as the key in helping young people find helpful resources and avoid negative influences online.

The effect of the internet on their pupils varies based on maturity levels, friendship groups and, in their view most importantly, home lives. In their experience, young people who have difficult relationships with their parents or whose parents are not willing to set boundaries about online time are more likely to experience problems.

> 'For more dependent students, [the internet] is their world. Others are more blasé about it. It's about maturity levels.'

School 2

This school does not blame the internet for pupil mental health, but they do feel their pupils sometimes use social media as a platform to be unkind.

> 'For us, dealing with the aftermath when things go wrong, it's not the internet, it's social media. It's not the apps, it's what they do with them. They're mean to each other, they say mean things.'

While this has always been a part of teenage life, with the rise of mobile devices, it's become continuous – their students have lost the ability to disconnect for the night at home.

> 'It's in your own home, you're never away from it.'

They also see the internet as something that can validate negative behaviour, making bullying and nastiness seem acceptable because it's common and it's easy to do.

This school sees many parents struggling to enforce boundaries about internet use, making it more difficult for their children to manage online time. When parents do set rules, their children can be inadvertently isolated from their peers. One young male pupil feels he has been excluded by his friend group because he's not allowed to play 18-rated games with them outside of school. Each day they come in and discuss the games, leaving him on his own. It is difficult for well-meaning parents to find a balance between restricting inappropriate behaviour and socially disadvantaging their children.

These issues are also playing out with younger children, to the point where some pupils have 'taken a step back' from technology by the time they are older. We heard that in this school, some teens even choose to come off social media because they don't want to deal with the negative side.

> 'Some young people are feeling a bit jaded with it all.'

This school sees some pupils using the internet as a distraction from their problems or to get support from their friends. In our youth survey, many young people said the internet was good for their mental health for these same reasons. This school warns, however, that these online coping mechanisms could distract some pupils from getting other kinds of reliable support – a sentiment that was echoed by some of the teachers who responded to our survey.

> 'The students will state that being able to share experiences of self-harm and mental health with other like-minded people helped them, but this often prevents them from seeking the appropriate support.' – school survey

- Getting support -

Key statistics

A worrying 84% of schools say they do not have adequate resources to deal with pupil mental health (Figure 25a). 35% have identified 'more services for young people' as the change that would be most helpful in this area, followed by 'more support for parents' (21%) (Figure 25b).

93% of schools think that technology companies should be doing more to help with this issue (Figure 26).

> ❝ 'They have a duty of care the same as all of us.' – school survey
>
> 'Address mental issues, spread more information about it so young minds are aware and make it enjoyable. A place where they feel comfortable to open up and not feel pressure.' – school survey
>
> 'Despite various social media groups having reporting systems, they almost always refuse to remove content when reported by our school.' – school survey

In discussion

School 1

Finding a balance between online and off isn't just an issue for young people, and this school believes we are doing an inadequate job of modelling positive technology use for our children. We encourage young people to disconnect by 9pm, for instance, but check our own emails in bed. We warn teens about the dangers of sexting, but high-profile sexting cases involving adults send mixed messages.

> ❝ 'How do you tell a 15 year old about the damage [sexting] can do, when they see older people doing it all the time? We're not being role models for the kids.'

This school calls for adults to lead by example when it comes to our relationship with the online world, and they believe it starts with parental engagement. They acknowledge that some families struggle with consistency and also with admitting their children might have a problem, but schools and parents need to be on the same page to support young people.

Inadequate resources for young people's mental health are a key concern. This school is fortunate to have excellent support in-house, but they recognise that most are not in the same position – and when an issue escalates beyond what they can deal with internally, they are unimpressed with the support available.

Their experience with CAMHS has been mixed and unsatisfactory, a situation they attribute to insufficient resources. This has led them to look at getting private counsellors in-house. Mental health services are unable to cope with increasing demand and they have seen problems worsen while pupils waited for help.

This school firmly believes tech companies have a responsibility for young people's wellbeing, saying the internet can be 'a window to the most appalling and depraved areas of human existence.' They acknowledge that many people don't want to see the online world censored and controlled, but say we are paying for that freedom with our children's mental health.

The best solution, in the view of this school, is to encourage young people to be willing to talk. They need to know they have access to lots of different types of support and that it is all right to ask for help. Often, students come to them, reluctant to open up to their parents because they are worried about upsetting them. This school sees intense pressure on young people today to be 'the perfect generation,' making them less willing to admit they need help.

> **'This generation more so than others are expected to be the perfect generation.** That goes back to what we said about social media, every mistake is on there forever. Even their photos are fake, and it's how many likes do you get on your selfie. It's just bonkers.'

While stigma around mental health issues has reduced, it hasn't gone far enough. This school thinks that, for their pupils, hearing role models like celebrities and teachers speak openly and honestly about mental health is massively important. Even so, there is still a taboo against disclosing mental health issues as a teacher. They believe there would be a serious backlash from parents if they or their colleagues admitted to having a mental health problem. Some stigma, they say, is driven by the fact that people do not have accurate information about mental health. As people learn what it actually means to have a mental health condition, they will become more understanding.

> 'Trust is a massive thing for teens – if they think they can trust staff they'll come forward.'

They also see a greater responsibility for adults when it comes to technology use. Parents may themselves be distracted by their devices when they are spending time with their children, sending a bad message about prioritising online and offline time. The school believes this generation of parents is less willing to be unpopular with their children, prioritising friendship over setting rules and boundaries.

They have an in-school counsellor working six hours per week, normally seeing between eight and 12 students at a time. They see this as a massive help when issues escalate beyond what a teacher or deputy head can deal with and support proposals to have counsellors in all schools.

Ultimately, when it comes to dealing with the internet and social media, they think we need to help young people learn to handle it better themselves – because 'that's what life is now.'

Where do we go from here?

1) Bridge the gap

There is a divide between what young people and schools think about the internet and mental health. This is understandable – the adults tasked with keeping young people safe are bound to see things differently than teens exploring the online world. Still, both adults and young people can benefit from a greater understanding of each other's point of view. We should work to bridge the gap by communicating clearly and honestly with young people, and by keeping youth perspectives at the centre of the support we provide.

2) Change the narrative

We will do a better job of supporting young people when we stop imagining the internet as a monolithic entity with undue influence on their lives. The online world can have an effect on young people's wellbeing because it is one of the many places where their social dramas play out, where they experiment with relationships, where they follow their interests and discover the world around them. Teenagers see the internet as just another part of daily life – we should challenge ourselves to understand this perspective and rethink our approach to the online world.

3) Stop trying to make 20th Century Services meet 21st Century Needs

The support we offer young people also needs a new approach if it is to be fit for purpose in the digital age. Teens do not see services like helplines as a first port of call, but rather as a last resort in times of crisis. There will always be a place for this emergency support, but with schools and mental health services struggling to deal with demand for help, perhaps it is time to place more emphasis on prevention. Perhaps technology will offer an answer. The services on which young people spend their time must surely carry their share of responsibility for responding to this challenge.

4) Increase understanding, not just awareness

We heard that parents and friends are the first place young people turn when they are upset. When they feel unable to do this, it's because they are worried about disappointing their families or feeling awkward in front of their friends. We have come a long way towards reducing mental health stigma, but clearly we have more work to do – especially when it comes to reaching men and boys. All young people should feel comfortable asking for help, and they should be confident that the response they get will be sensitive and well informed. We should make sure parents, teachers and young people are educated about mental health issues, so the people teens rely on – their friends, families and schools – will be well placed to help.

5) Provide support for schools

Much of the burden for responding to mental health issues has been placed on schools, which do not have the resources to cope. If schools are to be charged with responding to pupil mental health on this scale – monthly, weekly and even daily – they should be supported to do it properly. Our school respondents want to see more services for young people and more support for parents.

6) Stop piling on the pressure

On the subject of schools, we cannot ignore the burden that education puts on young people. Most of the teens we met are worried about exams and academics, in some cases more so than anything else. Not all of this pressure comes from schools, of course, but as we heard in our third youth group, cultivating a school atmosphere that is both ambitious and supportive can help. Some of the pressure might be alleviated by presenting a more diverse view of success – young people who struggle to achieve on exams should know that there are other paths to a good and rewarding life.

7) Use technology as a force for good

An overwhelming majority of the schools we spoke to think technology companies should be doing more to protect young people's mental health. Opinion in our youth focus groups was divided, but many young people are already thinking of specific ways that tech companies could help them, from partnering with youth services to doing a better job of filtering content on their platforms. Supporting adolescent wellbeing in the digital age requires an innovative approach, and tech companies – who many young people admire and respect – should recognise both their duty of care and their unique opportunity to create online spaces that are positive and inspiring.

Appendix – survey findings

Young people

Figure 1: How old are you?

Age	Percentage
13	19%
14	15%
15	9%
16	9%
17	17%
18	13%
19	9%
20	6%
I'm older or younger than this	4%*

* The 4% respondents older or younger than 13-20 were aged 12, 21 and 22.

Figure 2: What is your gender?

2%*

39% Male

60% Female
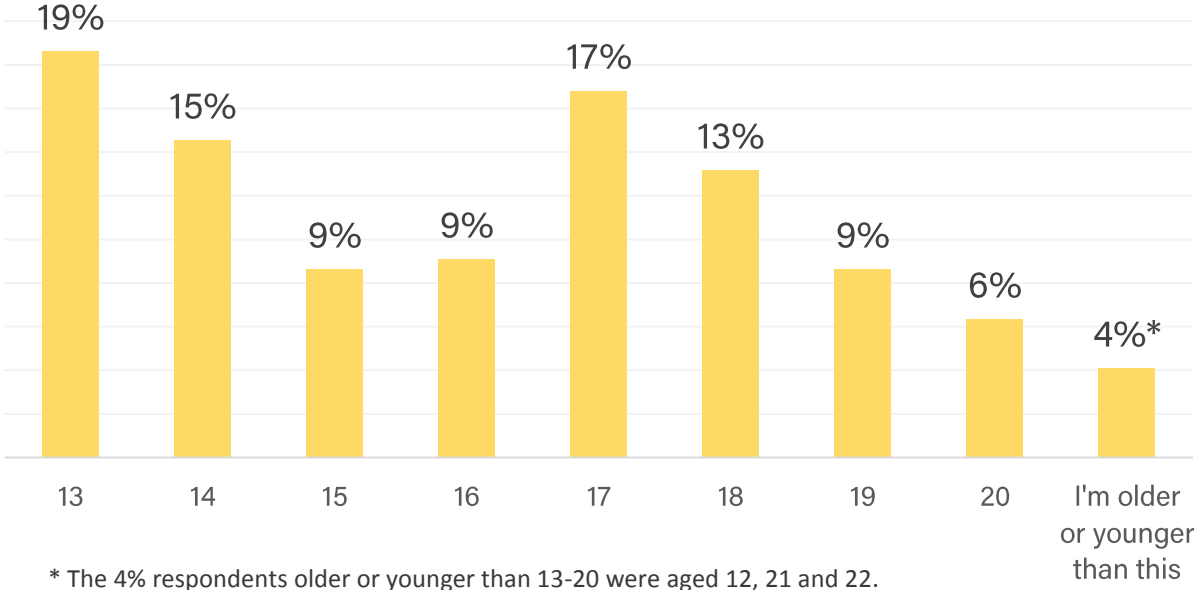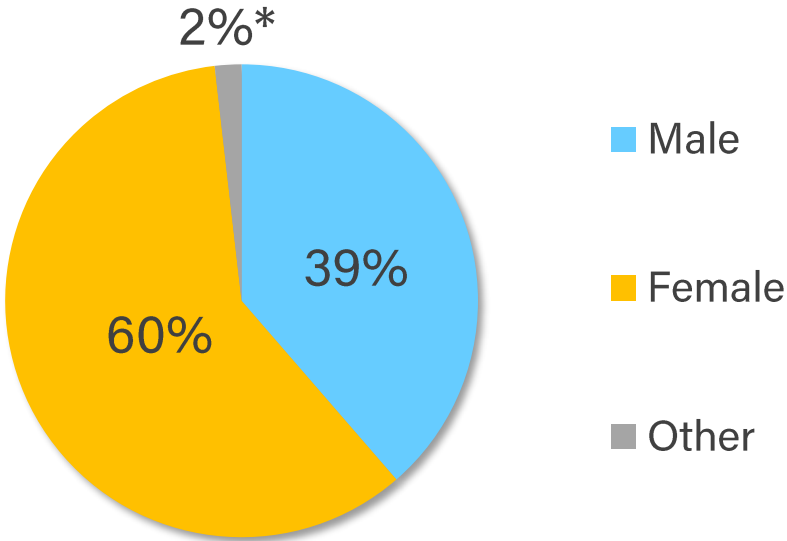
Other

* Other responses included gender fluid and non-conforming.

Figure 3: Have you ever asked for help for a mental health issue?

Response	Percentage
Other	3%
Yes, from another type of professional	4%
Yes, from my school	2%
Yes, from CAMHS	6%
Yes, from friends or family	6%
Yes, from parents	7%
No	71%

Figure 4: What do you do online?

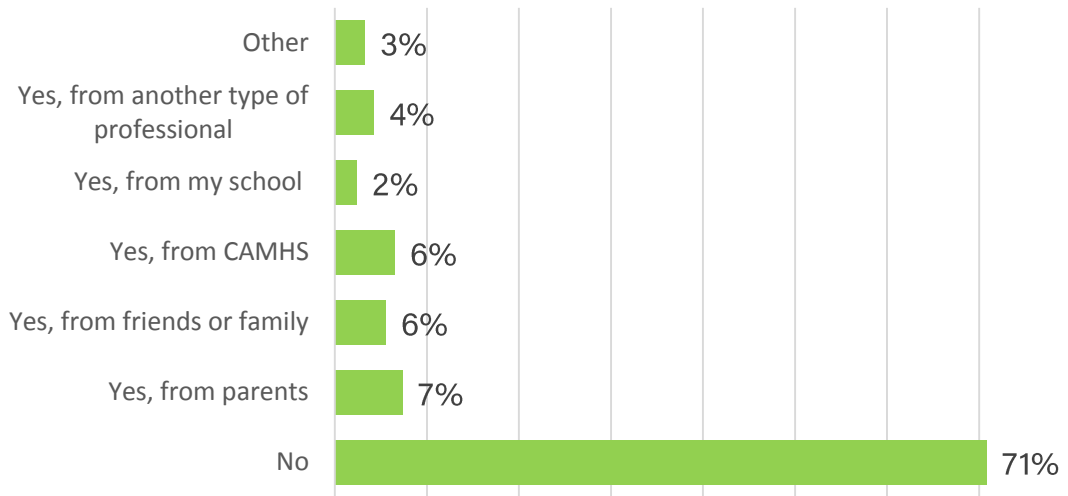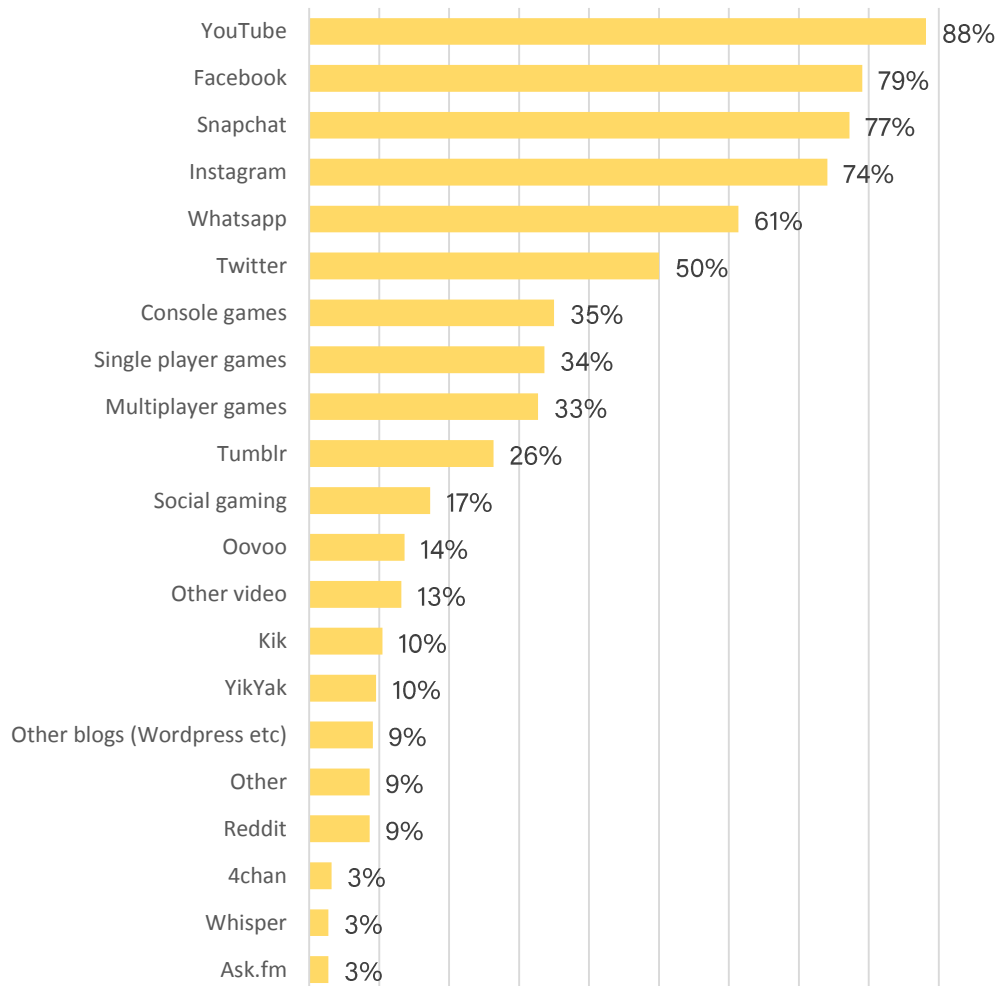| Activity	Percentage
YouTube	88%
Facebook	79%
Snapchat	77%
Instagram	74%
Whatsapp	61%
Twitter	50%
Console games	35%
Single player games	34%
Multiplayer games	33%
Tumblr	26%
Social gaming	17%
Oovoo	14%
Other video	13%
Kik	10%
YikYak	10%
Other blogs (Wordpress etc)	9%
Other	9%
Reddit	9%
4chan	3%
Whisper	3%
Ask.fm	3%

Figure 5: Do you agree or disagree with this statement? The internet is bad for young people's mental health.

- Strongly agree: 3%
- Agree: 25%
- Neither agree nor disagree: 40%
- Disagree: 24%
- Strongly disagree: 8%
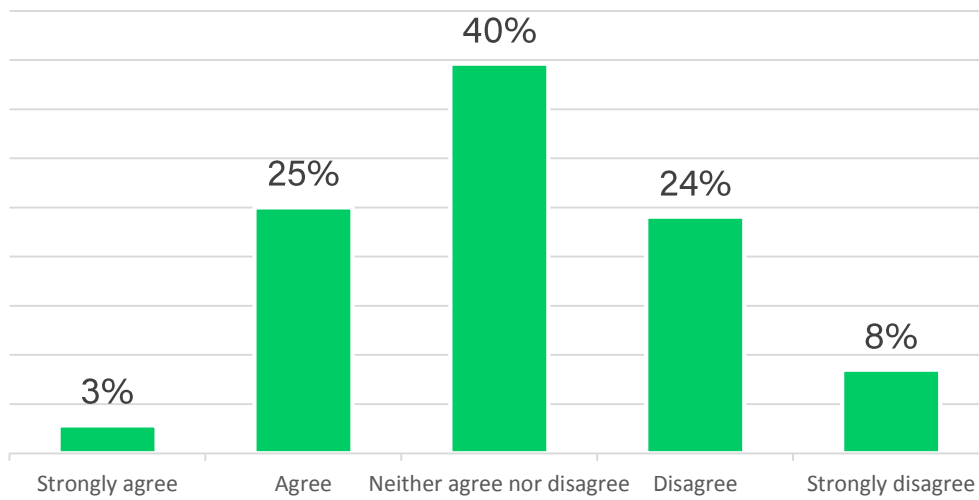
Figure 6: When you're feeling upset, insecure or angry, do you think the internet is...

- Mostly good to look at: 48%
- Mostly bad to look at: 20%
- Other/I don't know: 32%
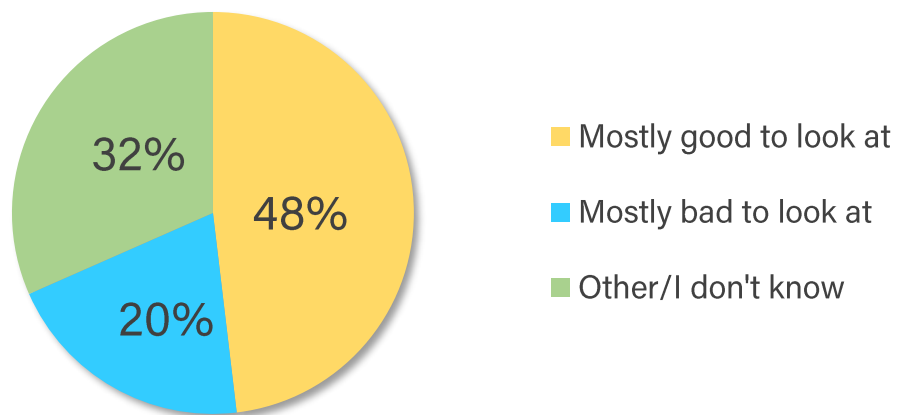
Figure 7: Has using the internet ever made you feel...

- Angry: 47%
- Sad: 44%
- Worried: 35%
- Lonely or isolated: 28%
- Less confident: 38%
- Happy: 75%
- Relaxed: 66%
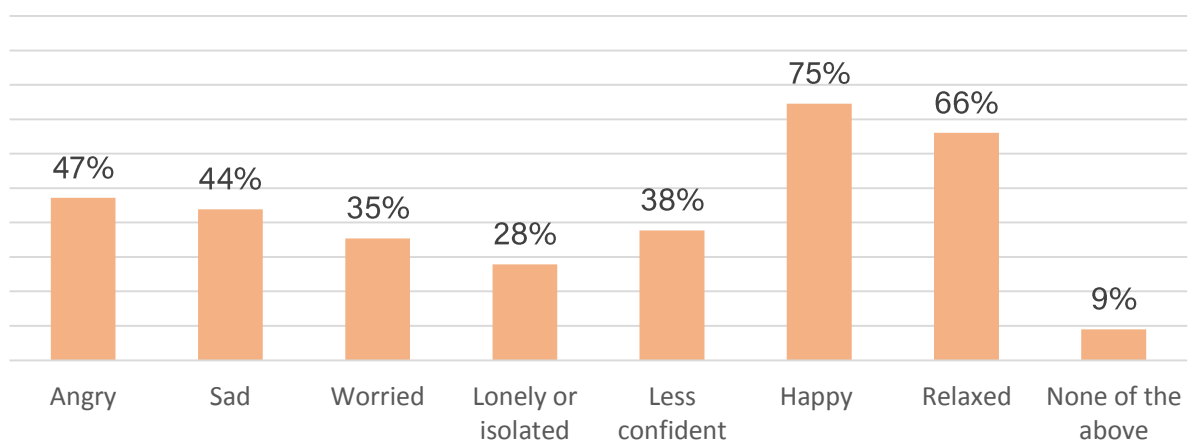- None of the above: 9%

Figure 8: Please tell us if you've seen anyone talking about these subjects online and, if so, how you felt about it.

	I haven't seen anything like this	This made me worried or upset	This didn't bother me	I was happy to see this	This was helpful or interesting
Hurting themselves	39%	**42%**	12%	2%	4%
Hurting someone else	**45%**	43%	12%	0%	0%
Suicide	**48%**	42%	6%	0%	3%
Losing a lot of weight or losing weight very quickly	22%	**35%**	25%	10%	8%
How to hide things from friends or family	**47%**	19%	23%	4%	7%
Family problems or disagreements	**34%**	30%	26%	3%	7%
Being very unhappy or depressed	25%	**43%**	22%	3%	6%
Bullying someone else	41%	**46%**	11%	0%	1%
Being bullied	**41%**	**41%**	13%	1%	4%
Being very anxious or fearful	**39%**	38%	14%	3%	6%
Feeling lonely or hopeless	34%	**45%**	12%	3%	6%
Parties or social events you didn't go to	12%	28%	**51%**	6%	2%
Parties or social events you went to	12%	6%	23%	**52%**	7%
Friendships and relationships	6%	9%	32%	**42%**	11%

Figure 9: Would you follow advice that you read online

Always	Most of the time	Rarely	Never
3%	42%	49%	6%

Figure 10a: If you were upset or had a problem, what's the first thing you would do?

Talk to my parent or carer	34%
Talk to someone else I trust in person	27%
Look at the top results of a Google search	9%
Tell no one and do nothing	7%
Talk to my friends about it online	7%
Look at advice online specifically for people my age	5%
Other	4%
Talk to a professional or expert in person	3%
Read or post in a forum specifically about my problem	2%
Watch video content on YouTube or another site	2%
Talk about it anonymously online	1%
Read what people are saying on social media	1%
Call a helpline	1%

Figure 10b: Would you do anything else?

Other	4%
Read or post in a forum specifically about my problem	19%
Watch video content on YouTube or another site	28%
Read what people are saying on social media	22%
Talk about it anonymously online	13%
Call a helpline	4%
Talk to my friends about it online	28%
Look at advice online specifically for people my age	18%
Look at the top results of a Google search	30%
Talk to a professional or expert in person	18%
Talk to someone I trust in person	57%
Talk to a parent or carer	43%

Figure 11: If you've ever tried to get support for a problem online, was it...

18%	Very helpful
46%	Somewhat helpful
28%	Neither helpful nor unhelpful
5%	Somewhat unhelpful
4%	Very unhelpful
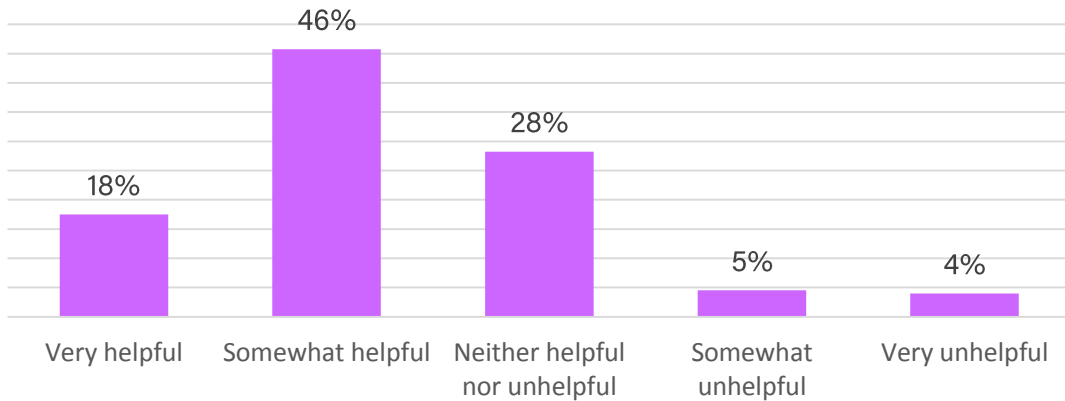
Figure 12: Do you think you need more support from anywhere else?

Other	3%
I don't need any more support	49%
Health professionals	18%
Tech companies	8%
Services for people my age	19%
My parents/carers	19%
My school	27%
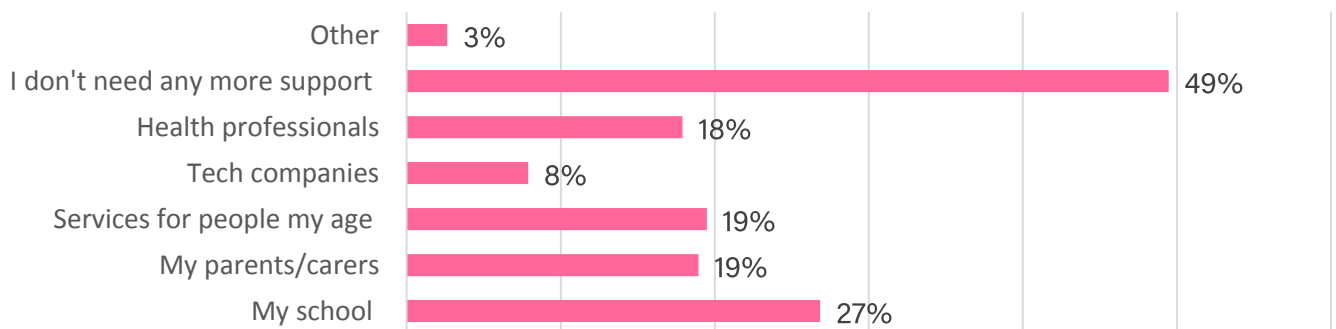
Figure 13: Is there anything online that you would tell a friend who's feeling upset to avoid?

Facebook	36%
Instagram	34%
Ask.fm	34%
I wouldn't tell them to avoid any of these	27%
Snapchat	27%
Twitter	25%
Tumblr	22%
4chan	18%
Kik	14%
Whatsapp	13%
Reddit	13%
Social gaming	12%
Other (please specify)	11%
Whisper	11%
YikYak	11%
Oovoo	11%
Multiplayer games	10%
Console games	9%
YouTube	9%
Other blogs (Wordpress etc)	9%
Other video	7%
Single player games	6%
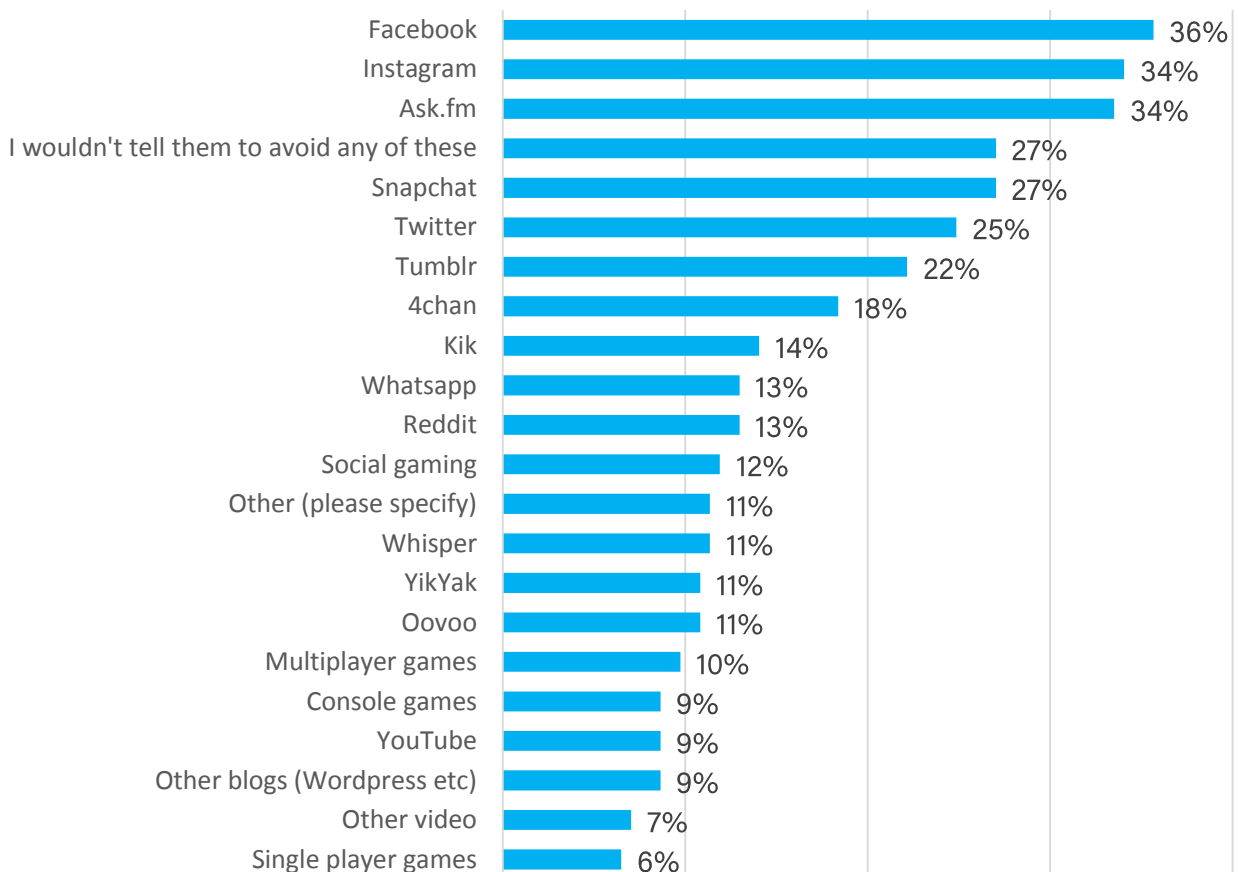
Figure 14: Is there anything online that you would say a friend should look at or do to feel better?

Platform	Percentage
YouTube	52%
Instagram	24%
None of these	22%
Snapchat	21%
Single player games	18%
Tumblr	17%
Facebook	17%
Console games	16%
Twitter	15%
Other	14%
Multiplayer games	12%
Social gaming	12%
Whatsapp	11%
Other blogs (Wordpress etc)	7%
Other video	5%
Kik	5%
Reddit	5%
YikYak	4%
Oovoo	4%
Whisper	4%
Ask.fm	4%
4chan	2%
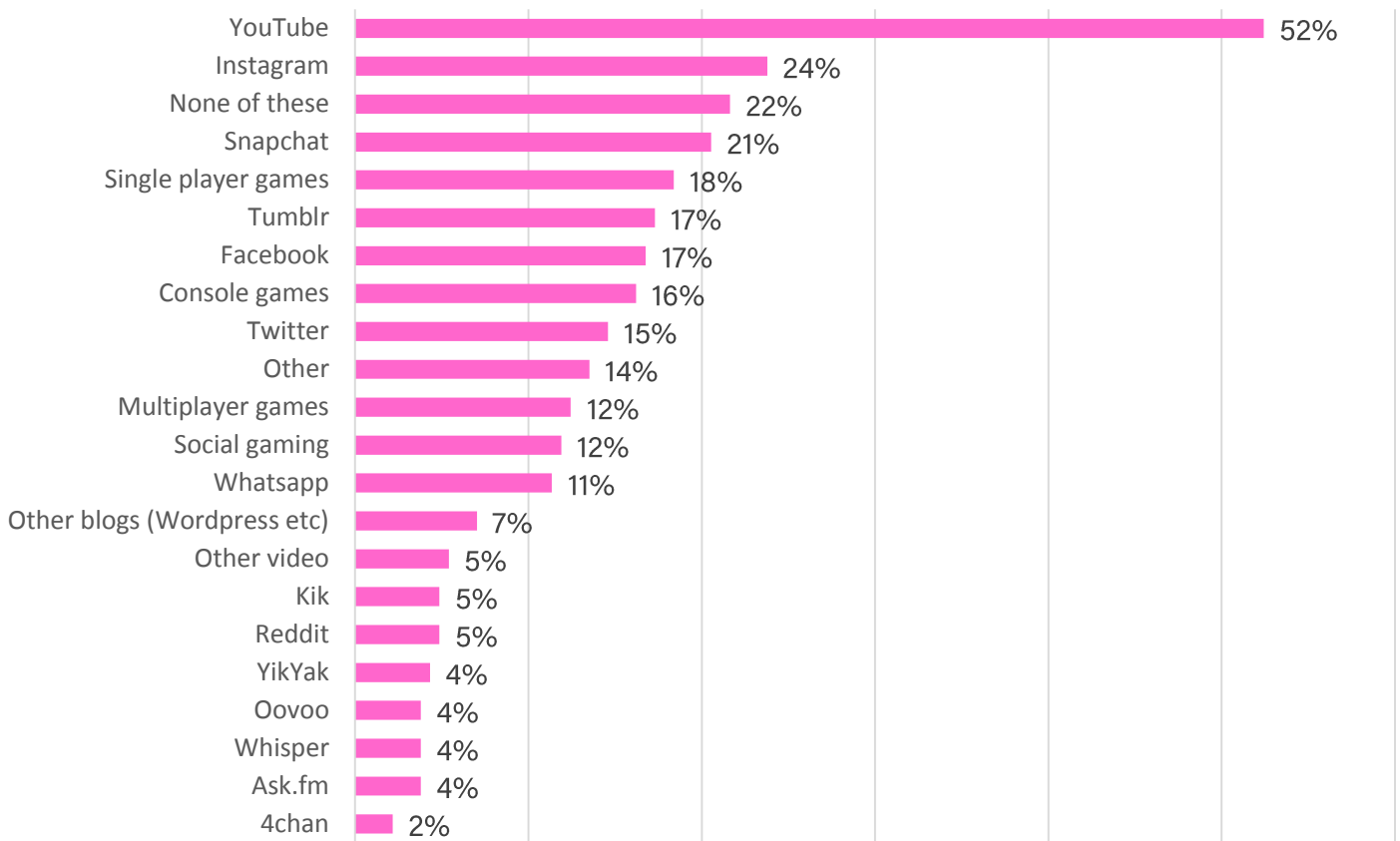
Appendix – survey findings

Schools

Figure 15: Do you think the frequency of mental health issues among school-aged children is...

90.5% — Increasing
9.5% — Staying the same
0.0% — Decreasing
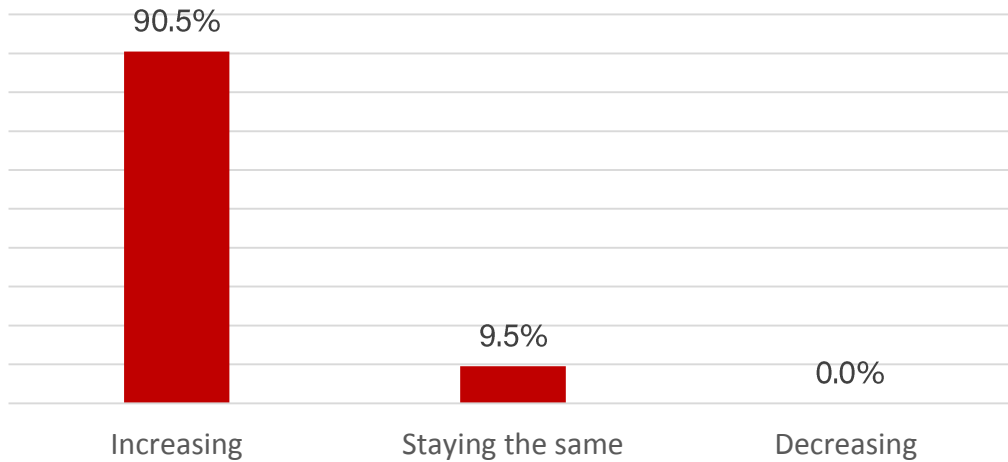
Figure 16: Do you think the severity of mental health issues among school-aged children is...

87% — Increasing
13% — Staying the same
0% — Decreasing
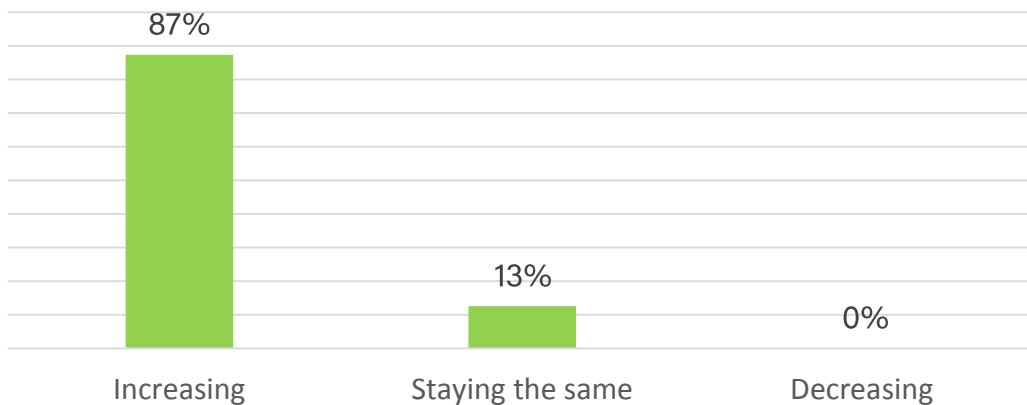
Figure 17: What mental health issues do you see most often among your pupils?

Stress and anxiety — 95%
Depression — 70%
Self-harm — 66%
Body image issues — 60%
Eating disorders — 46%
Serious insecurity — 45%
Other — 13%
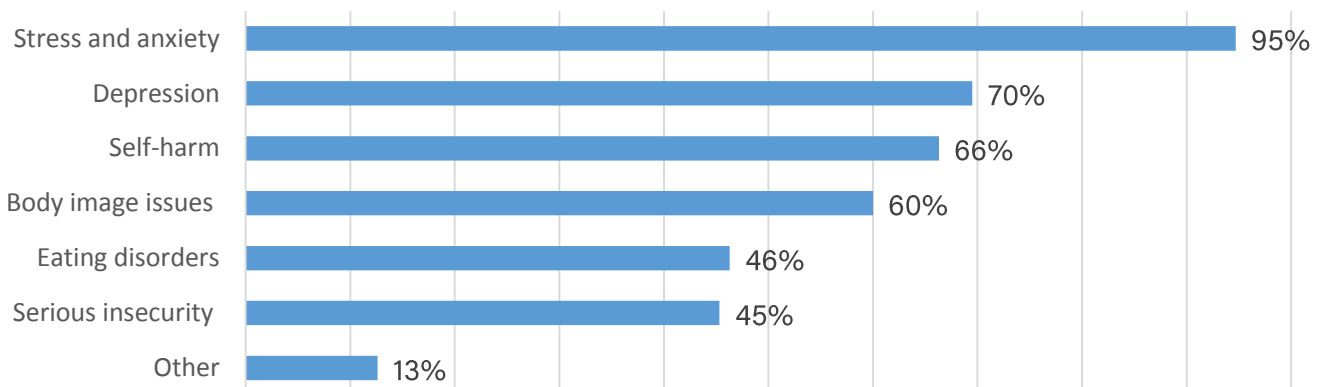
Figure 18: How often does your school become aware of or have to deal with an issue related to a pupil's mental health or emotional wellbeing?

Category	Percentage
Would you like to say something else about how often you deal with these issues?	26%
Never	0%
Less than once per academic year	0%
About once per academic year	1%
About once per term	4%
More than once per term	11%
At least monthly	58%
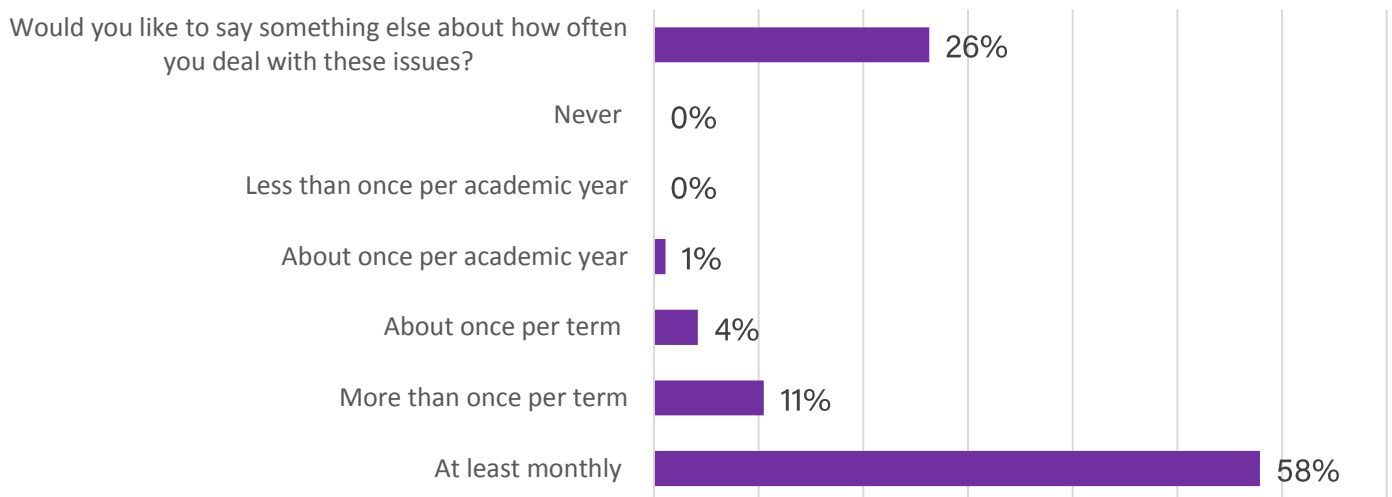
Figure 19: Do you agree or disagree with this statement? The internet is bad for young people's mental health.

Response	Percentage
Strongly agree	14%
Agree	30%
Neither agree nor disagree	41%
Disagree	14%
Strongly disagree	1%
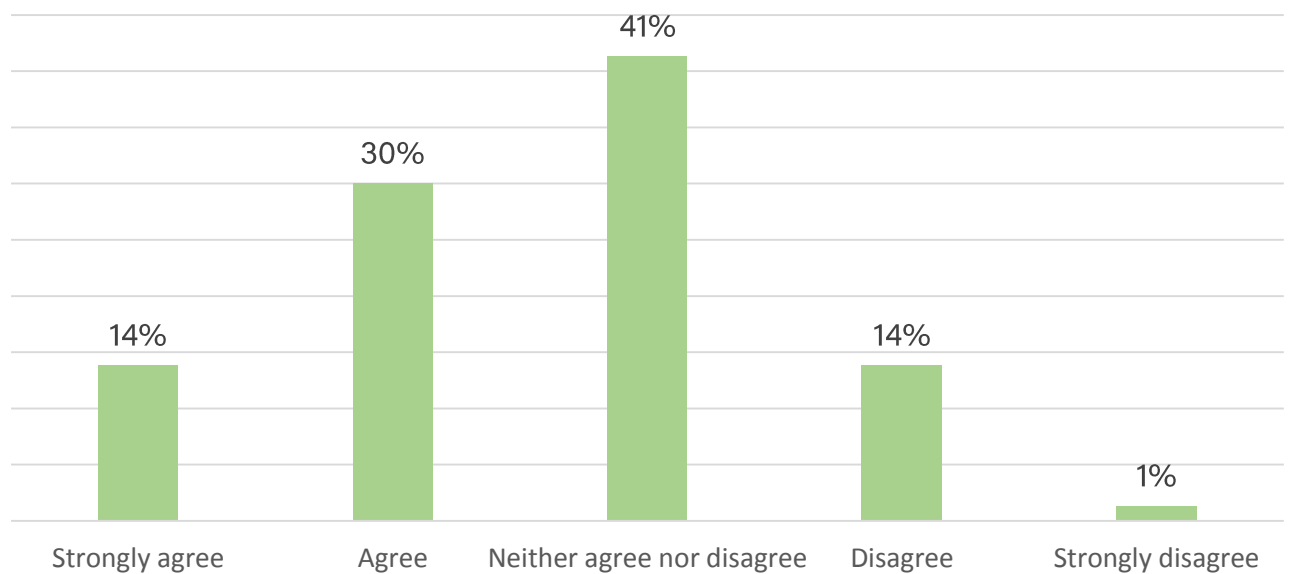
Figure 20: Have you ever had to deal with a pupil mental health issue that you think was negatively influenced by something they saw or did online?

- Yes: 72.5%
- No: 27.5%
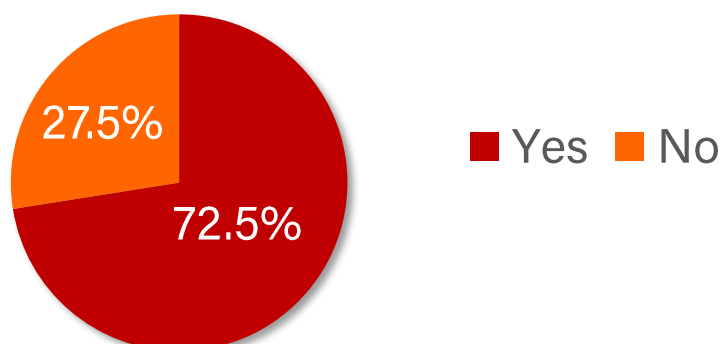
Figure 21: Have you ever had to deal with a pupil mental health issue that you think was positively influenced by what they did online?

Yes 46%
No 54%
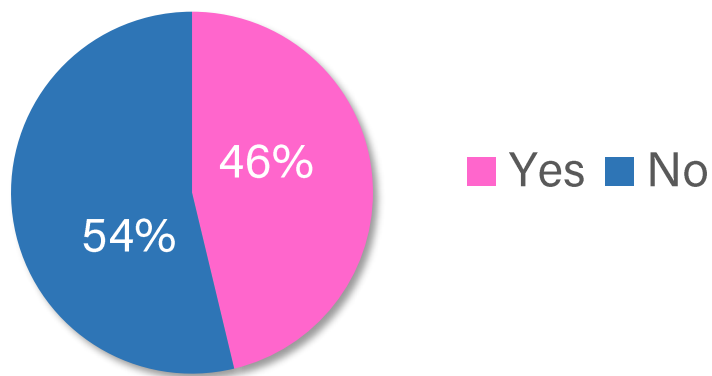
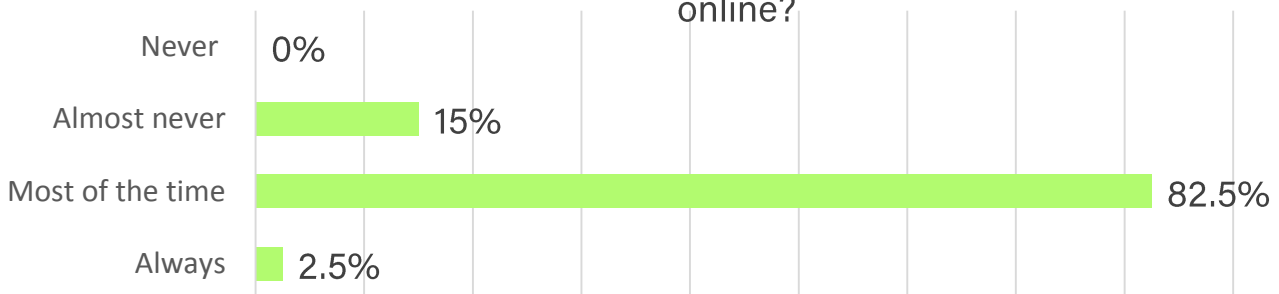## Figure 22: Do you think your pupils would follow advice they read online?

Response	Percentage
Never	0%
Almost never	15%
Most of the time	82.5%
Always	2.5%

Figure 23: What do you think is the biggest positive influence on young people's mental health today?

Influence	Percentage
Family	49%
Peer groups	19%
Other	11%
Parents	7%
Other recreational activities	5%
Academics (exams etc)	4%
Identity (religion, culture etc)	3%
Sport	1%
Internet and technology	1%
World events and news	0%
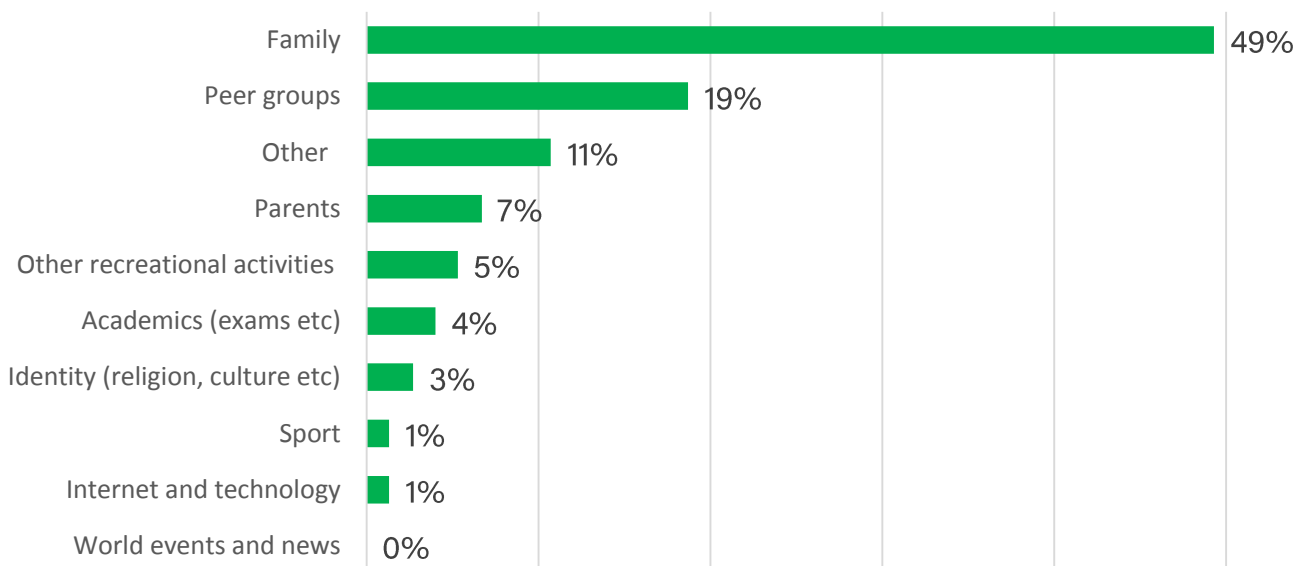
Figure 24: What do you think is the biggest negative influence on young people's mental health today?

Category	Percentage
Peer groups	27%
Internet and technology	24%
Other	17%
Parents	9%
Family	8%
Identity (religion, culture etc)	5%
Academics (exams etc)	5%
World events and news	3%
Sport	1%
Other recreational activities	0%
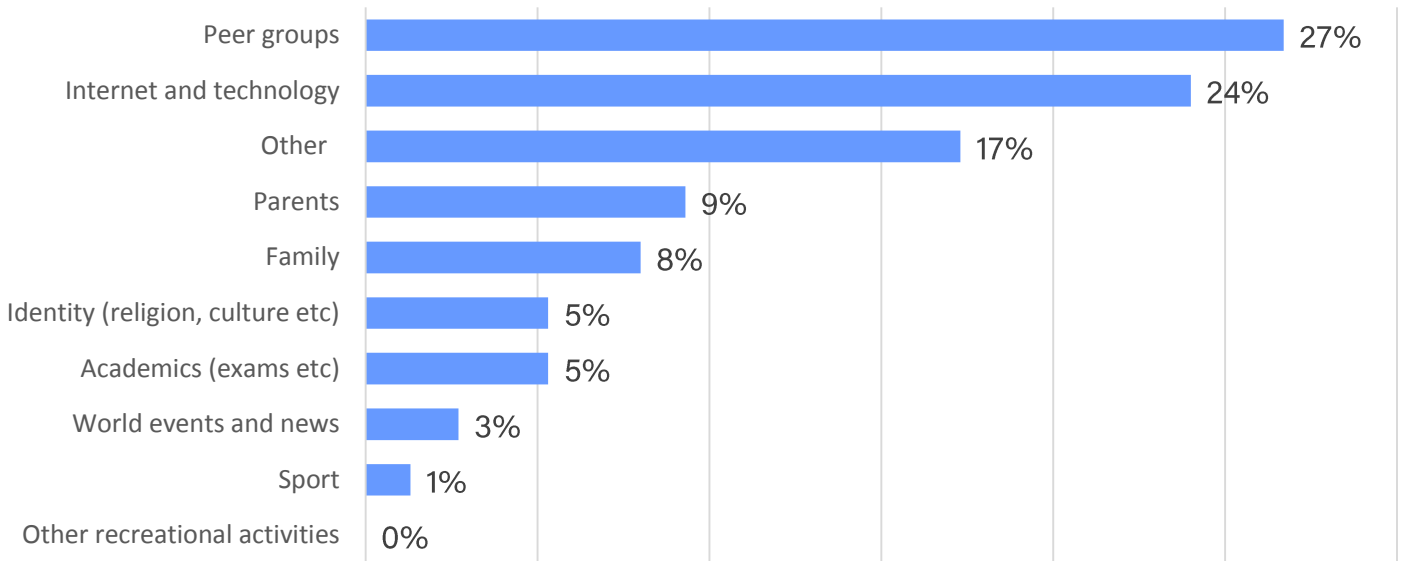
Figure 25a: Do you think you have adequate resources to deal with pupils' mental health issues?

Yes 16%
No 84%
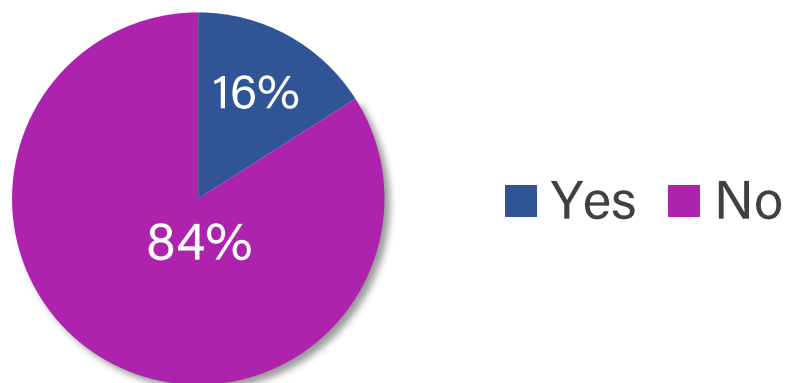
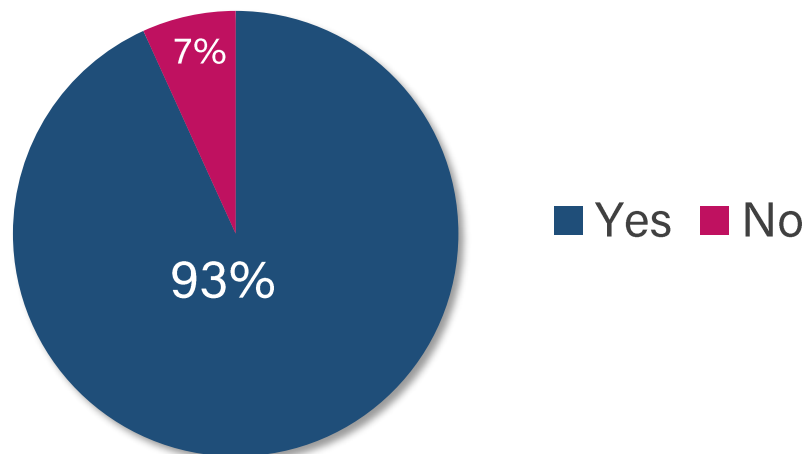## Figure 25b: If you answered no, what additional resource would be most helpful?

Category	Percentage
More services for young people	35%
More support for parents and families	21%
Other	14%
More staff working on mental health	14%
Training and education for staff	11%
Additional funding	6%
More guidance from senior members of staff	0%
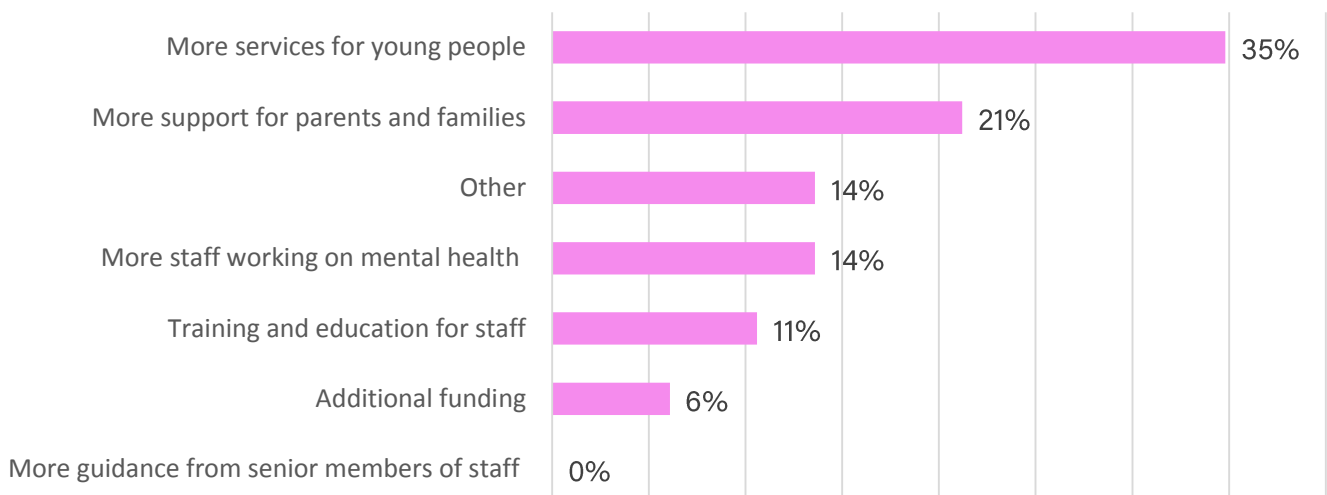
Figure 26: Do you think that tech companies should do more about this issue?

7%

93%

- 26 -

■ Yes ■ No

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