Parenting in the digital age:

# Navigating concerns about the online world of young people

REACHOUT

Key findings

- **Fifty-nine per cent** of parents and carers said that they were concerned about young people's use of social media.

- **Fifty-five per cent** of those who were concerned about young people's social media use said it had 'quite a bit' or 'a lot' of impact on the wellbeing of the people they care for.

- **Seventy per cent** of parents and carers who rated young people's social media use as a top issue lived in metropolitan areas.

- **Sixty per cent** of parents and carers who rated social media use as a top issue were caring for children aged under 15 years.

- **Fifty-six per cent** of parents and carers who rated young people's use of social media and the internet as top concerns reported needing access to quality, trusted information that could help them to support their young person.

About the study

These findings are a snapshot from ReachOut's 2023 study *What Parents Worry About: Carer Concerns for Youth Mental Health and Wellbeing*. This study was a national survey of 631 parents and carers living in Australia who were caring for 921 young people aged 12–18. Participants included parents and carers from all states and territories, including major cities (63%) and regional areas (29%), with a variety of family structures including two-parent families (62%), single- or sole-parent families (25%), blended or stepfamilies (7%), and grandparents, foster parents and others in caregiving roles (6%). Given the critical role that parents play in supporting the wellbeing of young people, the study aimed to investigate the issues that most concern parents in relation to the wellbeing of the young people they care for, and things that could better support them to deal with those issues.
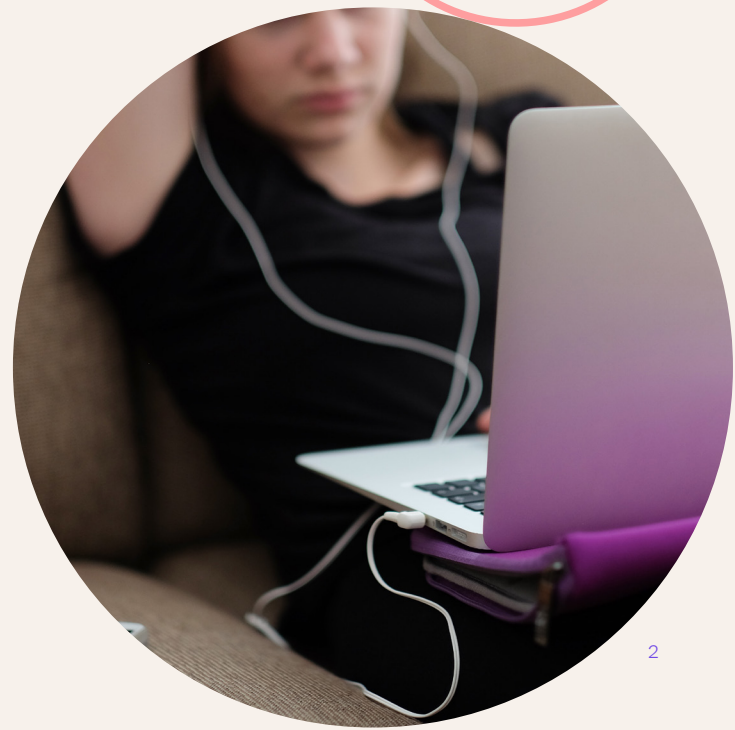
What parents are concerned about

59%

of parents and carers said their young person's social media usage was of concern.

47%

selected internet use by young people as an issue of concern.

The use of social media platforms such as TikTok grew rapidly during the COVID-19 pandemic, and young people are among the most frequent users of these platforms. Not surprisingly, therefore, social media use was the most frequently selected issue of concern for parents and carers in this study. They were also concerned about young people's use of digital devices more broadly, with nearly **1 in 2** parents and carers selecting internet use as an issue that concerned them. These issues were particularly concerning to families living in metropolitan areas **(Figure 1)** or those caring for younger teens **(Figure 2)**.

Figure 1: Percentage of parents and carers living in metropolitan areas who selected social media and internet use as top issues
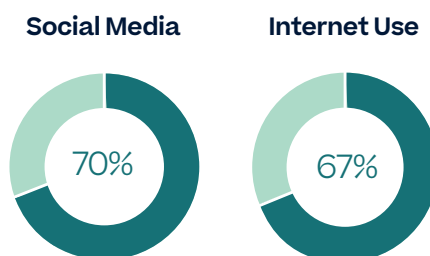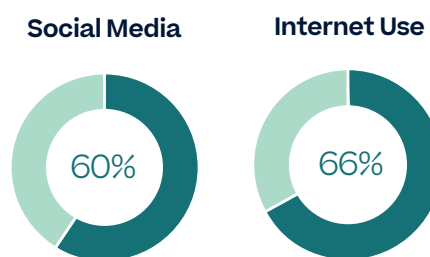
Social Media

70%

Internet Use

67%

Figure 2: Percentage of parents and carers of children aged under 15 years who selected social media and internet use as top issues

Social Media

60%

Internet Use

66%

Thematic analysis of data from open-ended questions revealed parents' and carers' particular concerns in relation to social media, internet use and gaming. Four key themes were found: *time, safety, content* and *parental controls.*

Parents and carers were particularly concerned about the amount of **time** that young people spent online on social media. Participants described these activities as 'addictive' and were concerned that the young people they care for had *'an inability to get through the day without it'* (M, inner regional area). The large amounts of time spent on social media and the internet reportedly distracted young people from other things such as studying, engaging in physical activities and *'living real life'* (F, outer regional). Parents and carers commented that there was some pressure on young people always to be switched on, to always know what was happening and to respond immediately to messages from friends.

Parents and carers were also concerned about young people's **safety** online and about their own inability to protect the young people they cared for from potential harm. In particular, they were concerned about exposure to strangers, predators or others with intent to harm, as well as about cyberbullying or harassment. As one parent put it, *'Unfortunately, people make fake accounts, hide behind screens to say to people what they can't say to their face'* (F, major city). Parents and carers were also concerned about data privacy and scams.

The **content** that young people are exposed to online was similarly of concern to the parents and carers in this study. Exposure to harmful ideas, to inappropriate content

(such as adult sites), and to content that might create unrealistic expectations in young people, were aspects that were especially concerning to parents and carers. They also expressed concern about young people's lack of discriminatory ability to detect fake news or harmful content, and about their *'having access to so much information and not being able to think critically about it'* (F, outer regional area).

Concerns were also expressed about the limited **parental controls** available for monitoring or managing the content their young people were viewing and the people they were communicating with.

When these findings are contrasted with those from a study published by ReachOut in 2023 about what young people worry about, it's clear that young people aren't as concerned about their social media use as their parents or carers are. Only 34 per cent of young people in our previous study selected social media as an issue of concern, compared to the 59 per cent of parents or carers who did so in the current study. Social media ranked 24th in the list of issues that young people were most concerned about, well below the cost of living, loneliness and study stress, while parents and carers in the current study chose social media as a top issue of concern more frequently than any other issue. Importantly, in the previous study, 57 per cent of young people said they spent time on digital platforms or social media to cope with other issues that concerned them, suggesting that social media can be a double-edged sword, both contributing to stress and providing a way of coping with it.

Parents' and carers' perception of the impact of young people's online lives on their wellbeing

Parents and carers who were concerned about social media and internet use believed these issues were having an impact on the **wellbeing** of the young people they care for **(Figure 3)**. In particular, parents and carers were concerned that the young people they care for are developing unhealthy self-images or body-image concerns, or are missing out on opportunities to develop the social skills they would need in the 'real world'. They saw these things as contributing to young people's social isolation or loneliness, which, in turn, contribute to anxiety and depression. Physical effects such as eye strain were also a source of worry.

While young people were less likely to be concerned about social media use than their parents, our 2023 study demonstrated that 79 per cent of those who did report it as being a concern said it had a 'moderate' or 'major' impact on their overall health and wellbeing. Of these young people, 75 per cent said it had caused them to have trouble focusing, while 68 per cent linked it to a lack of motivation. Young people concerned about their social media use also reported impacts such as changes to their mood and sleep patterns.

Figure 3: Percentage of parents and carers concerned about social media and internet use who indicated it had 'quite a bit' or 'a lot' of impact on youth wellbeing

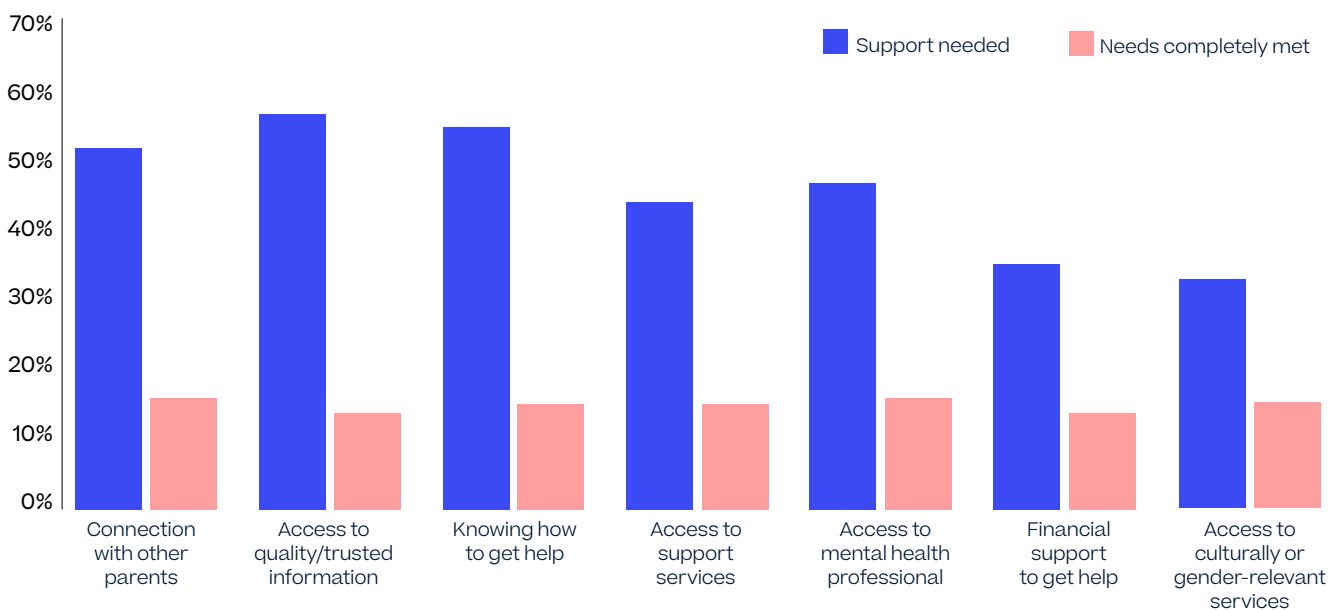### Social Media
55%
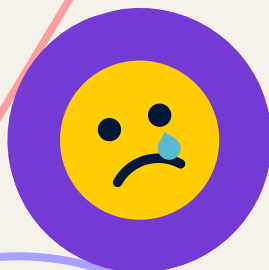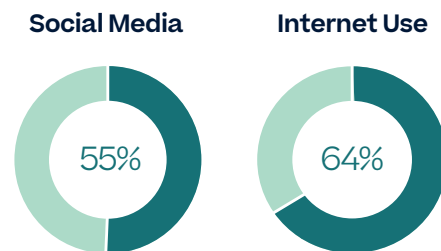
Internet Use
64%

The support that parents want

On average, 56 per cent of parents and carers who had selected internet use or social media as a top issue indicated they felt **moderately equipped** to cope with those issues. Eleven per cent reported that they didn't feel at all equipped to manage these issues. When asked what **types of support** they had sought, parents and carers who were concerned about their young people's social media and internet use selected non-professional support more frequently than support from professionals. On average, 75 per cent of parents and carers selected 'friends or other parents', 45 per cent reported seeking support from the internet, and 41 per cent had sought support from their young person's school or school wellbeing staff. Only 31 per cent reported having sought professional mental health services.

When asked to select from a list of possible supports they had needed over the past 12 months, the greatest need parents and carers selected was for access to **quality, trusted information (Figure 4)**, followed by knowledge about **how to access help** for the young person they care for. Only **14 per cent**, on average, reported that these needs had been completely met. The biggest gap between reported need and having those needs met occurred in relation to the need for quality, trusted information.

Figure 4: Percentage of parents and carers who needed support in the last 12 months compared with percentage whose needs were completely met

We asked parents and carers to describe what additional support they believed they needed in order to feel equipped to deal with these issues. In relation to young people's use of the internet and social media, parents and carers believed that **improved government regulation**, as well as **support and education within schools** and for parents, would be helpful. Additional support identified by parents and carers included better technology for monitoring, controlling and filtering content and time spent online. Parents and carers also argued that the platforms themselves needed to take some responsibility for youth wellbeing and safety, with some arguing that positive role models and greater body diversity on social media were ways that the platforms could better support the wellbeing of young people.

> '*I want help from social media companies or tech companies themselves to limit their use.*'
>
> **F, major city**

How ReachOut can help

ReachOut is the leading online mental health service supporting young people during tough times. ReachOut offers a wide range of support options that allow young people and their parents and carers to find support in the ways they want to, when they want to.

ReachOut offers content and one-to-one support for parents and carers of 12- to 18-year-olds.[1] Over the phone and online, this free, award-winning program is used by thousands of parents and carers around Australia. Parents and carers can also access free resources on topics such as cyberbullying, body image and managing a young person's technology use, including *A Parent's Guide to Instagram*.

Young people can also access ReachOut's website, a safe online place where they can openly express themselves, explore what's happening in their lives, connect with people who understand their situation, and find the resources to help them manage their challenges now and in the future. Anonymous, free and 100 per cent online, ReachOut has been designed specifically for – and with – young people.