



ParentingNI

Big Parenting Survey Findings

2019



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A photograph of a man with short dreadlocks, wearing a dark green long-sleeved shirt and blue jeans, holding a young child. The child is laughing with their mouth wide open. They are positioned in front of a textured, reddish-brown wall. The lighting is warm, coming from the side, creating soft shadows.

About Parenting NI

Parenting NI is the leading charitable organisation for supporting parents in Northern Ireland. Parenting NI have been supporting parents for over 40 years in a range of ways, including parenting programmes, family support services, parental participation, employee wellbeing service and online support.

Parenting NI has a vision of the future where parenting is highly valued and it is the charity's mission to provide a range of accessible services and support to meet the needs of those in a parenting role.

Definitions

Parent

A person or persons with parental authority or responsibility. Refers to not only biological parents, but also those who are involved in caring for and raising children.

Parental Responsibility

The legal rights, duties, powers, responsibilities and authority a parent has for a child and the child's property. A person who has the right to make decisions about their care and upbringing. Important decisions in a child's life must be agreed with anyone else who has parental responsibility.

Kinship Carer

A situation where a child or young person lives full-time or most of the time with a relative or family friend rather than with their birth parents.

Foster Carer

A person providing care for children looked after by social services because they cannot live with their own families. This can be short or long term.



Letter from the CEO

Dear Reader,

Parenting NI continues to be Northern Ireland's leading charity for parenting support, providing a wide range of help and advice to parents via programmes, workshops and other methods. Naturally, as part of our work to authentically represent the voice of Northern Ireland's parents, we seek out their views.

Last year, we launched the first "Big Parenting Survey", and gave parents from every part of our society a chance to tell us exactly what they felt, were concerned about and crucially, what they wanted done about it. We were pleased with the reception of this survey and its findings – but it was impossible to ignore the fact that the numbers made for challenging reading for everyone.

This year, we wanted to focus in on one of the major issues that came out of the responses to the 2018 survey. It is a problem that will be familiar to service providers and policy makers across all departments and organisations; the impact of technology on parents, children and families. Parents expressed a level of concern that must be met with action – and exposed a need that affected families from all backgrounds.

Additionally, parents suggested that a year of political stagnation has done little to improve general levels of concern. Parents are still overwhelmingly more worried than hopeful, and have told us that they are desperate for action to improve their lives and the lives of their children.

Policy makers, service providers, the voluntary, community and private sectors all share a responsibility to respond to these issues. The results of this year's survey show that a year of stagnation at political level has left parents feeling worried, lacking support and unsure of how best to proceed.

As with all things relating to parenting, there were plenty of bright spots. Parents felt that their children were resilient, adaptable and with the right support could achieve anything they wanted. They recognised the lengths that many at all levels within the health and education systems were dedicated to giving children the best start in life, and wanted to see more help for those individuals.

Rather than being downbeat or discouraged by the results of this survey, Parenting NI sees it as a call to action. Everyone with the power to help improve the lives of parents – educators, policy makers, businesses and political representatives to name a few – should carefully consider the findings and use them as a blueprint to make Northern Ireland a better place to be a parent. We at Parenting NI remain supremely confident that Northern Ireland can be the best place to raise a family, provided we get the policy right.

I would be remiss if I did not end my letter to you by saying thank you. A sincere thank you to the incredible number of parents who responded to this survey. Without you, we couldn't do this work and your efforts are appreciated. I also wish to thank the staff at Parenting NI who put the effort into putting this report together. Finally, I wish to personally thank Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council and our parent champions – councillors Guy, Skillen and Legge in particular. Your material and moral support have allowed this report to be realised.

Sincerely,

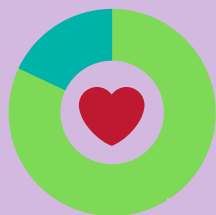
Charlene Brooks, CEO Parenting NI

Executive Summary

This is the second year of the “Big Parenting Survey”. As with last year, Parenting NI sought out the experiences and thoughts of parents from across Northern Ireland. We were delighted that for the second year running, we received responses from a diverse cross section of society.

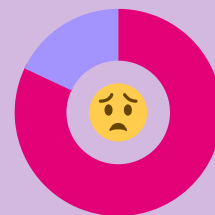
Last year, there were 1,191 responses from parents to the Big Parenting Survey. Parenting NI is pleased to report that we received an even higher level of response this year, totalling 1,358 parents. This significant level of engagement allows us to collate and share a robust picture of the experiences, concerns and hopes of parents in Northern Ireland in 2019.

As the leading provider of direct parenting support and advocacy for parents for over 40 years, Parenting NI is keen to ensure that we have a full, up-to-date picture of the realities of parenting in NI. It is a key objective of the organisation to engage parents across NI from all sections of the community to ensure they have a voice at a strategic level. It is also important to Parenting NI to enable parents to have a say and shape the services they need and wish to engage with. The results of the survey ran the gamut from parents who felt that they were coping very well to those who felt they were in urgent need of support. Many of the overall figures are as challenging for providers and policy makers as they were in 2018. For example:



82%

of parents do not feel that they get enough support, unchanged from last year



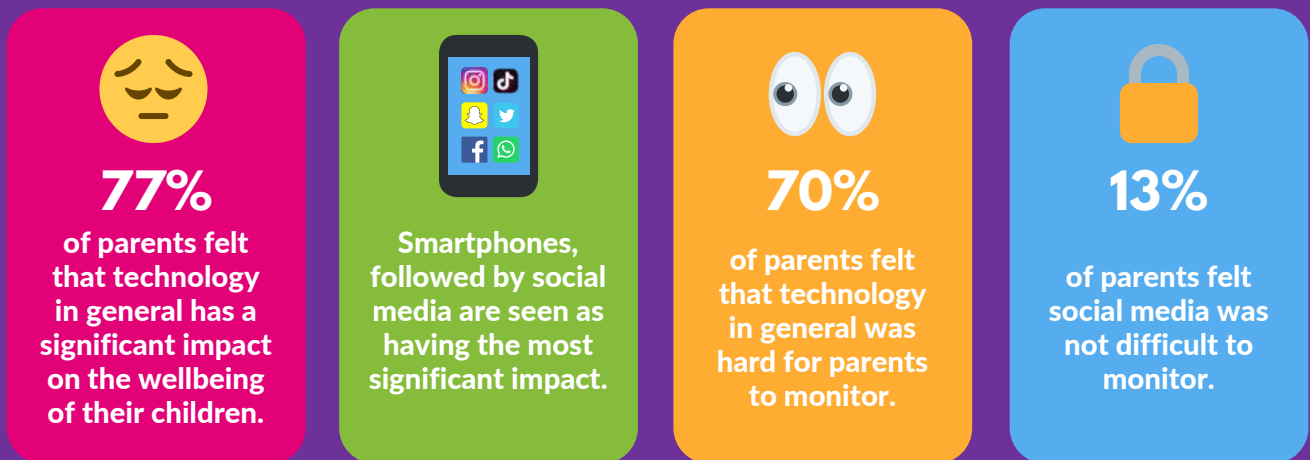
69%

of parents are more worried than hopeful about the future, up 3% from last year

However, there were some signs of improvement. 42% of parents felt that their hopes for their children could not be achieved in NI in 2018, only 30% felt this way in 2019. When considered with the other figures this suggests that parenting remains a complicated part of life, but that parents in NI believe that things can improve.

Last year, we successfully achieved an overview of the general sense of parenting in NI. In 2019, we were keen to explore some of the themes that parents expressed in the 2018 survey in more detail. In this survey, we specifically asked parents about their experiences with technology. Parents identified technology as a growing concern, and highlighted it as an area that they felt under supported in dealing with. However, technology is a very complex issue, with a number of facets worth exploring. As such, we asked questions for parents not only looking at their feelings of concern or support but also separated into different types of technology.

We found a number of interesting results from these questions on technology, for example:



This report will examine the findings on technology in more detail, but it is evident that many parents feel overwhelmed. The impact of technology on parenting in Northern Ireland is significant, and should have meaningful consequences in terms of policy making and support provision.

Additionally, parents identified a number of concerns and challenges. The most commonly identified of these were:



While these issues are in need of policy and service response (in some cases, immediately) it is also important to highlight the positives that parents noted. They told us that:

- Many felt that their children could achieve anything if they had the right support;
- Parents were proud of their children's achievements in raising kind, loving children even in difficult circumstances;
- Our health and education systems, while under pressure, are still helping parents and are generally seen positively by parents.

The diversity of responses to the survey reflect accurately the increasing diversity in families. It is correct to note that families often highlight similar issues, but it is also important to note that not every family will experience these in the same way. An event or circumstance that constitutes a crisis or triumph for one parent or child is not the same for another, even within the same family. As such, policy makers and service providers should make use of these findings as a starting point, rather than a final destination. Further study and research into areas highlighted by these results could lead to better and more effective policy and interventions. Parenting NI will continue to advocate for parents, and to champion the views expressed by parents in this survey and indeed all parents.

A background to parenting in Northern Ireland

Parenting is one of the most challenging and rewarding endeavours that anyone can undertake. Even if you are not a parent, almost everyone has experience of being parented. The experience we have of parents if they are biological or foster, or if they are kinship carers or corporate parents are part of who we are. Each person's experience of being a parent or being parented is unique, and helps to frame our understanding of the world.

Northern Ireland remains a singular place to parent. Our political, historical and geographical context means that being a parent here is not like being a parent anywhere else. Changes on the horizon – climate change, Brexit and new technologies – promise to revolutionise the realities of parenting. Between 2000 and 2017 there have been 425,311 births registered in Northern Ireland. 21% of households in Northern Ireland are married couples with dependent children and 8% are single-parent households with dependent children.

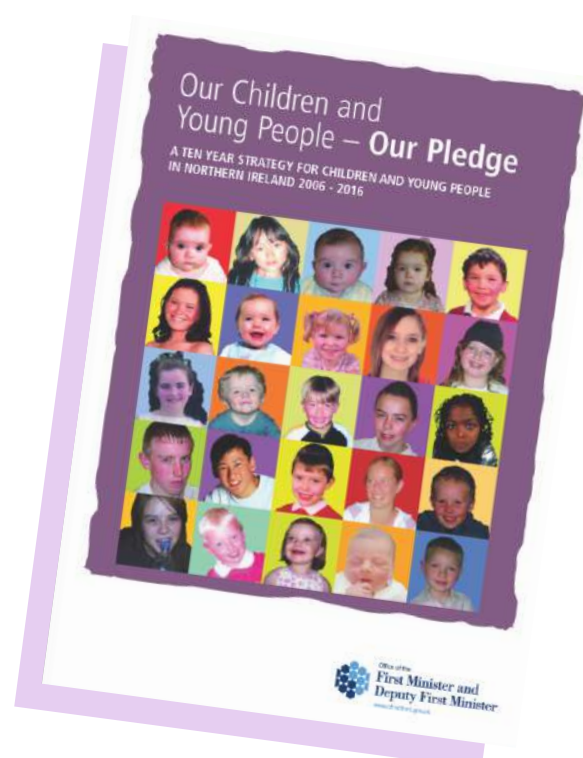
The family, centred on the parent-child relationship is one of the most fundamental building blocks of society. Every family will have their challenges and their triumphs. These might be fairly regular and simple – instilling discipline in a toddler or getting a teenager to study. But many families struggle with issues that are more serious or severe, like a mental health crisis or bereavement. All parents will have a time when they could use some support. This report will look at what parents are telling us they need help with, and what kind of help they most want.

Northern Ireland remains a close, community-minded society. Our slightly larger than average families and small cities, towns and villages mean that many families have robust support from friends and families. We are good at helping each other when we know that someone needs help. However, there are families who lack that support, who may be isolated, or new to Northern Ireland. The challenges faced by families may be common across regions, ages and other characteristics, but the ability to access support remains patchy. What causes great difficulty for one family on one street, may be a minor issue for another in the next town.

The Northern Ireland government recognised this, and has taken a number of actions in order to provide a statutory scaffolding around parents in Northern Ireland. This takes a wide range of formats, from general advice and information to highly specialised initiatives to tackle emergent problems. The format of this support had been driven by a number of important governmental strategy documents, and has evolved over time.

The Department of Health in 2006 published “Our Children and Young People – Our Pledge” which was a 10-year strategy for children and young people. This was NI’s first major government-led strategy looking at support for children and young people specifically. The Department of Education subsequently launched its 2019-2029 strategy in December of 2019. The new strategy is structured to progress eight specific outcomes for children and young people’s wellbeing. These are:

- Children and young people are physically and mentally healthy;
- Children and young people enjoy play and leisure;
- Children and young people learn and achieve;
- Children and young people live in safety and stability;



- Children and young people make a positive contribution to society;
- Children and young people live in a society which respects their rights;
- Children and young people live in a society in which equality of opportunity and good relations are promoted.

The original children and young people strategy was followed up in 2009 by the Regional Family and Parenting Strategy, “Families Matter”.



Families Matter went deeper in outlining the responsibilities of the government in providing particular support to parents. The then Health Minister, Michael McGimpsey noted in the strategy that:

“Parents are the people best placed to raise their children. Parents can give their children the emotional and physical care and support necessary for healthy development and well-being”

The aim of Families Matter was to move parents into a more vital policy position. As well as outlining the role of government, Families Matter also recognised the centrality of the community and voluntary sector. It embraced the need for integrated planning of services at local, regional and governmental level. This clarified the responsibilities of various bodies clearly, and the rights of children, young people and families.

It laid out the model that the Executive would use going forward to design and deliver services for children and parents, called the “whole child” model. This was combined with the Northern Ireland Family Support model. The strategy was a blueprint designed to help inform the public and civil servants on how parents would be supported. The primary aims of the model were to allow children and young people to:

- Be healthy, both in terms of physical and mental health
- Keep safe, being protected from harm and neglect
- Enjoy learning and achievement and reach their potential
- Have economic wellbeing
- Enjoy their rights

The strategy had a number of key policy objectives, including supporting family mediation during separation and the establishment of “a fully responsive regional helpline”.

The new “Family and Parenting Strategy” is currently in development (2018). It is being designed to build on the strengths of Families Matter and reflect lessons learned from more recent developments such as the CYPSP (Children and Young People’s Strategic Partnership) family support hubs and the EITP (Early Intervention Transformation Programme). The Government has been keen to build upon lessons learnt from the experiences of the previous strategy.

The new strategy will also draw on the Programme for Government, including the important outcome that relates directly to such support:

Outcome I2: We give our children and young people the best start in life.

In addition to these more wide-scope approaches looking at the issues of supporting children and young people via parental support, the government has produced more specific and targeted strategies. There are a number of relevant strategies but for the purpose of this report, the three considered include:

- The Childcare Strategy <https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/consultations/draft-childcare-strategy>
- The Child Poverty Strategy <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/child-poverty-strategy>
- The E-Safety Strategy (currently in draft form)

A similar story has affected the childcare strategy, which has not progressed since the events of last year. However, Parenting NI is pleased to note that in addition to the political advocacy of the “Childcare for All” coalition, political parties have identified the need for urgent action on childcare.

The main political parties made various commitments on childcare in their manifestos for the general election of December 2019. Many of these centred on the introduction of a scheme similar to the 30-hour free childcare scheme available in England. However, a range of proposals exist and the parties and policy makers have indicated a willingness to explore a more Northern Ireland specific solution to the issue. As with the E-safety strategy, a local minister is required to address many of the main aims of this strategy as well as to publish it in non-draft form.

On child poverty, shocking statistics on child poverty in 2018/19 have galvanised political will to address the issue. However, this too is an issue where action is limited until the Northern Ireland Assembly is fully functioning.

While progress on a governmental level has been slow due to the unique constraints, the work of statutory bodies like the Children and Young People’s Commissioner (NICCY) and schools and medical institutions has continued. NICCY produced an extensive report on the experience of children and young people’s experience of mental health support called “Still Waiting”. This report contained a number of important recommendations, and also considered the experiences and viewpoints of the parents of children with experience of mental health support.

Statutory support is not the only source of parental support in the region. Northern Ireland has a uniquely vibrant and proactive community and voluntary sector. There are a range of charitable, faith and community based organisations that provide a patchwork of support aimed at children and young people.

Parenting NI is unique amongst these in focusing primarily on support for parents. While other organisations provide services for children and families directly, Parenting NI provides a range of support services that includes programmes, advice and other provisions for those specifically in a parenting role. Since its establishment in 1979 as the Parents Advice Centre, Parenting NI has worked tirelessly not only to help parents directly, but also to highlight the central nature of the role of the parent. This survey is the latest in a significant line of advocacy for parents, and was designed to gather the views and experiences of not only those parents who have sought or received help, but from those who have not.

The future of parenting in Northern Ireland remains uncertain. While many parents feel that the potential for their children to thrive and succeed is there, they remain unconvinced that the political will to enact it exists. The work of the statutory and community/voluntary sector to ensure that parents are increasingly empowered and supported provides a basis for parents to be hopeful. Parents are increasingly able to express their views both via a major survey such as this, but also via social media technology. These views often directly reach those in a position to make a difference in their lives, and parents are aware of this.

Northern Ireland remains at peace – but the fractious political climate and increased challenges presented by Brexit and the 3 year lack of government are creating stress on parents. In addition to these considerations, parents are concerned about many of the same issues as last year. Technology, in particular its relationship with bullying, mental health and social changes presents a unique problem that must be met with a new and innovative solution. This cannot be done without the voices of parents and their children.

Being a parent in modern Northern Ireland remains an unusual and complicated experience. However, when compared to the realities of parenting in other parts of the world, what sticks out is the remarkable similarity. Parents in Northern Ireland want the same as parents anywhere – for their children to be happy, healthy and fulfilled. While there are issues that must be addressed to help parents to achieve this, Northern Ireland remains a place where there are many opportunities and benefits to raising a child.



What are your hopes for your children?



We gave seven options for parents to choose from (and rank) which were based on what parents using Parenting NI services have been telling us. We also provided a space for parents to tell us anything else they had as a hope for their child.

Do you think these hopes are achievable in Northern Ireland at the moment?

We understand that parents want the best for their children. However, what is “best” will be different for every individual family. We sought to ascertain what parents wanted for their children, and what was most important to them.

What parents told us

When parents were given the opportunity to note what else they hoped for their children a number of topics came through as regular themes. 354 Parents chose to give an additional answer. Compared to last year, the additional hopes parents expressed were more diverse.

The most common response was that parents broadly hoped their children would grow up to be good people, with around 14% of parents giving this answer. The exact language varied, but many parents stated that they hoped their children would be kind, caring and empathetic. One parent said they hoped their child would:

“Be a considerate and kind, respectful person.”

We asked parents to rank a range of seven “hopes” and they ranked them in the following order:

- 1. Be happy**
- 2. Be healthy**
- 3. Achieve a good education**
- 4. Get a fulfilling job**
- 5. Have a family**
- 6. Earn a good salary**
- 7. Go to university**



Another common theme parents told us about was that they hoped their child maintained a positive attitude, or that they felt fulfilled. Approximately 11% of parents said this was a hope they had. One parent told us they hoped their child would:

"Fulfil their dreams."

Parents also said that they hoped that their children would not face discrimination, bigotry or a return to negative circumstances associated with the past. Around 11% of parents told us that they were concerned about potential discrimination (against those with learning disabilities, LGBT people or based on faith for example). For example, Parents told us they wanted:

"More autism acceptance and understanding in society."

"Equal rights re marriage, minority languages, ethnic minorities etc."

Perhaps unsurprisingly, parents were also very concerned about their child feeling safe. This took several forms. Many parents had a general hope that their child would be safe and would feel safe from things like drugs or crime. Others mentioned fears that Northern Ireland would become less stable and more divided and violent.

They hoped for good mental health, and just under 10% parents mentioned concerns about mental health. For example, one parent said they hope their child has:

"Access to good early intervention mental health services without ridiculous waiting times and a one-service fits all approach."

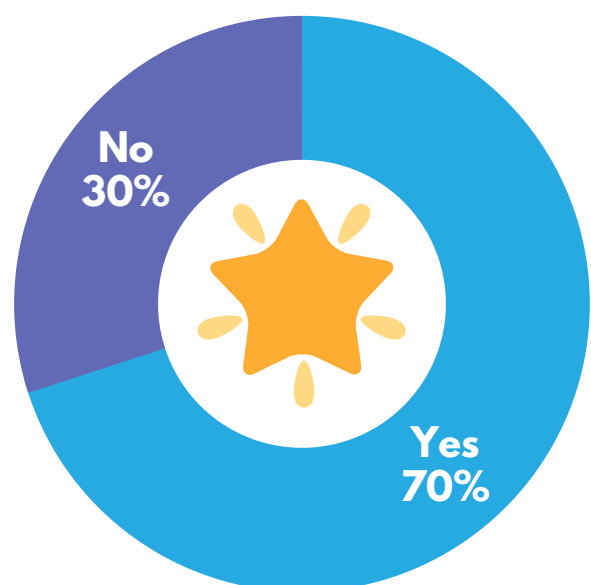
Hopes that children have strong friendships featured significantly in the open answers to this question. Parents also said that they hoped their children felt loved and that they had the opportunity to travel. One other theme that around 6% of parents mentioned was a desire for their children to have religious faith as part of their lives.

Finally in this section, we asked parents to tell us if they felt that their hopes for their children were achievable in Northern Ireland. Last year, around 42% of parents felt that their hopes for their children were not currently achievable. This year, that number has improved by 12%.

The 30% of parents who indicated that their hopes for their children were not achievable in NI gave a number of reasons for this. Five hundred and seven parents gave a response explaining their views, both positive and negative. Many answers contain more than one reason, but the five most common reasons were:

1. Brexit/Lack of government at Stormont (39%)
2. Poor economy/Bad job market in NI (37%)
3. Cuts to services/Underfunding of services (22%)
4. Issues with the education system (19%)
5. Historical/Societal division (17%)

Do you think these hopes are achievable in Northern Ireland at the moment?





Parents expressed serious worries regarding the impact the political situation would have on their children's futures, and that good paying work was difficult to find. One parent told us:

"I do not think the jobs are available here and with the uncertainty of Brexit, it makes the future even more worrying."

They also suggested that these issues are worse in parts of Northern Ireland. Several parents suggested that the situation outside of the greater Belfast area was more challenging:

"There is not enough opportunities for young people in Derry, which has a direct effect on their happiness and anti-social behaviour."



Living in the North West, their employment aspects are bleak and the majority of advertised jobs are for call centres."



Job prospects: Frankly, there are none here unless you live in Belfast."

However, it is important to recognise that 70% of parents were hopeful that their children would be able to achieve in Northern Ireland.

“

"I believe with adequate support for children they can achieve their dreams with encouragement from schools and parents. I also think community support that involves parents to do workshops on different topics adds to the advantage of the child to follow their dreams."

"I think that NI offers opportunities to our children and with such a close network within our community, I feel that my daughter will be supported as much as she needs."

"Although situations will and can cause stress, as long as we have a good support system we can hold on to what is important and make each other happiness [sic]. That is what I want for my son."

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Do you think parents get enough support?



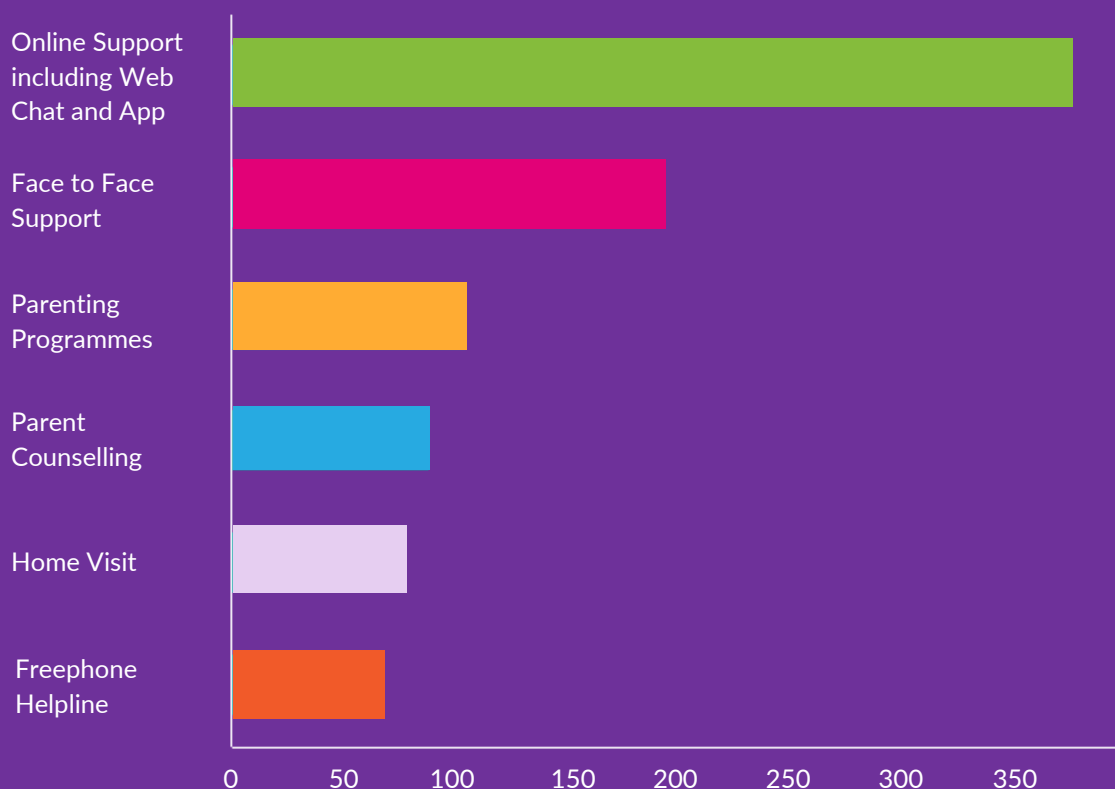
There is a plethora of anecdotal evidence which suggests there is not enough support for parents. We wanted to know however, just how widespread is this feeling? We also wanted to ask parents where they wanted to access support when they needed it.

What parents told us

Last year, we found that more than four in five respondents felt parents did not get enough support. This year that number is largely unchanged – 83% of parents told us that they did not feel there was enough support.

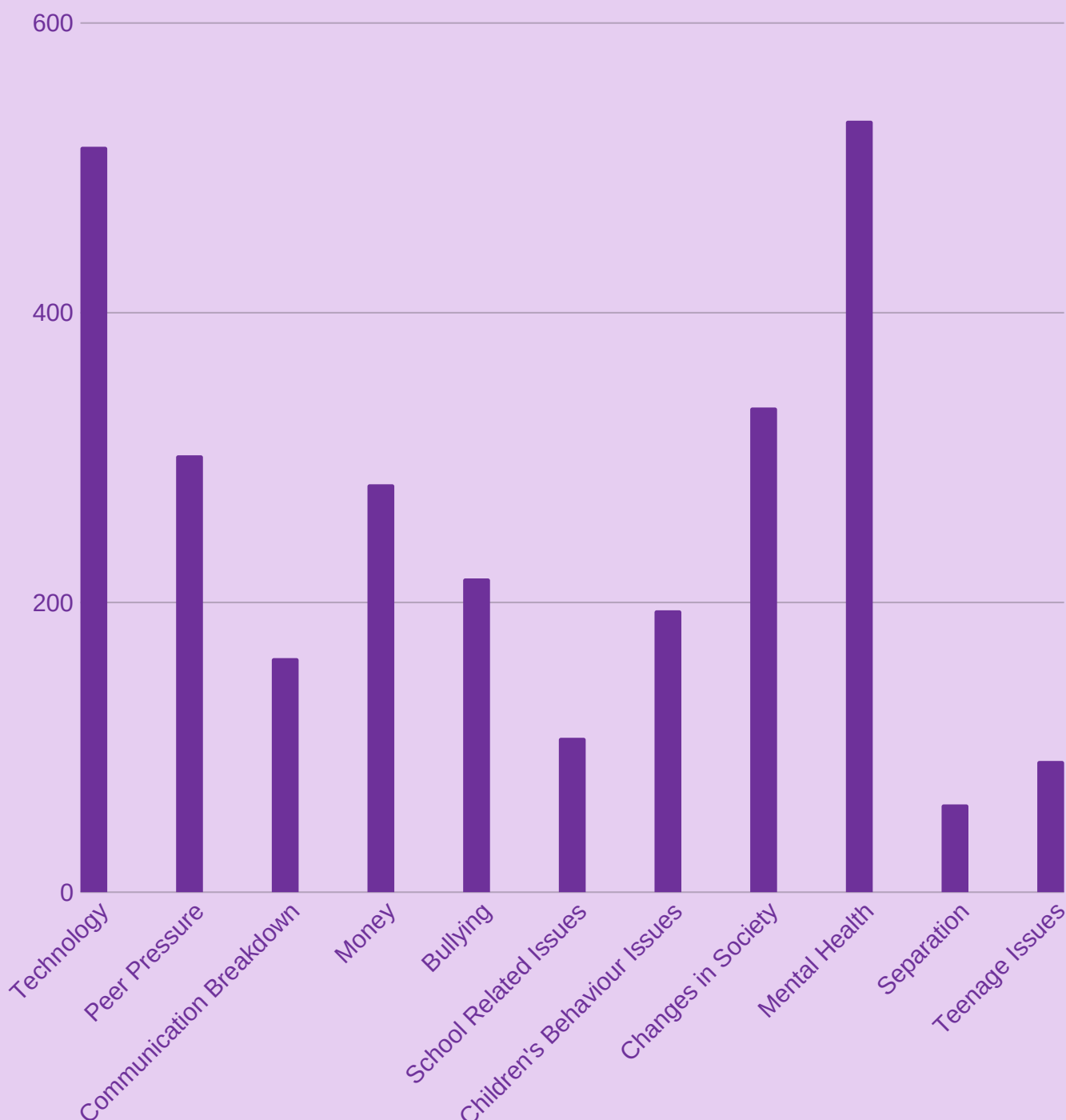
The patterns of what sort of support parents want is more nuanced. Online support, including an app and web chat accounted for just under 40% of responses. The next most popular form of support was face-to-face appointments, with just over a fifth of all parents indicating they would like this form best. Parenting programmes and counselling both came in around 10% of responses, followed by home visiting and finally a Freephone helpline.

Most Preferred Support for Parents



Concerning the biggest hurdles for parents, the most common answers were similar to last year. As in 2018, the top two were mental health followed by technology. Both were around 18%. The next three top answers were changes in society (12%), which overtook peer pressure (11%) narrowly, followed by money that was around 9%.

Biggest Hurdles for Parents



Sixty parents gave “other” options – the most common of these were time/work related (around 25% of parents gave this answer). A number of other parents mentioned concerns around crime or drug use (1 in 6) and some specifically worried about the impact of social media.

Parenting and the Future

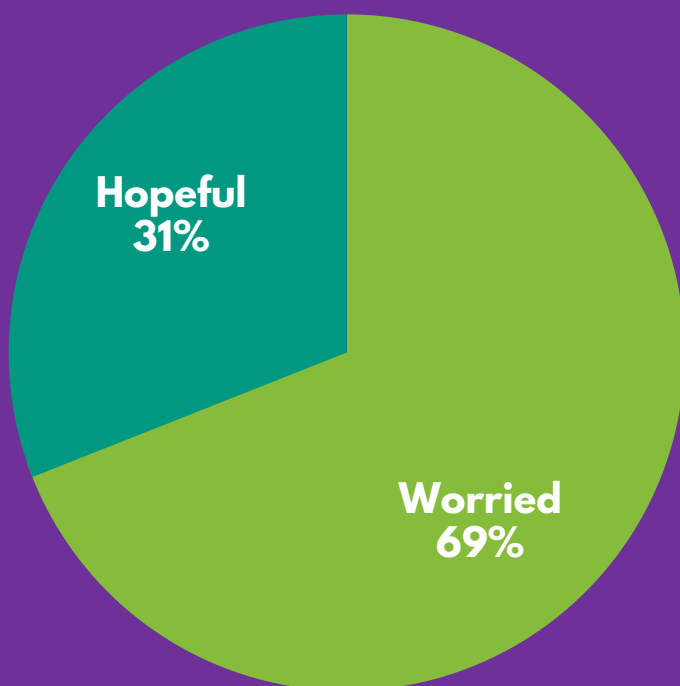


We wanted to get a better understanding of the effects of concerns on the outlook of parents.

What parents told us

More than two thirds of parents suggested that they were more worried than hopeful about parenting in the future. 69% of parents told us they were more worried about parenting than hopeful, with 31% saying they were more hopeful. These figures are slightly worse than last year - around 3% more parents are worried in this survey compared to the 2018 figures.

Are you more hopeful or worried regarding parenting in the future?



The impact of technology



We identified 5 distinct aspects of technology:

- Social Media
- Smartphones/Tablets
- Video Games/Consoles
- The internet
- Technology in general

We asked parents if they felt that these particular elements of technology:

- Had a significant impact on their child's wellbeing
- If they are difficult to monitor for parents
- If they felt they get enough support dealing with issues relating to these

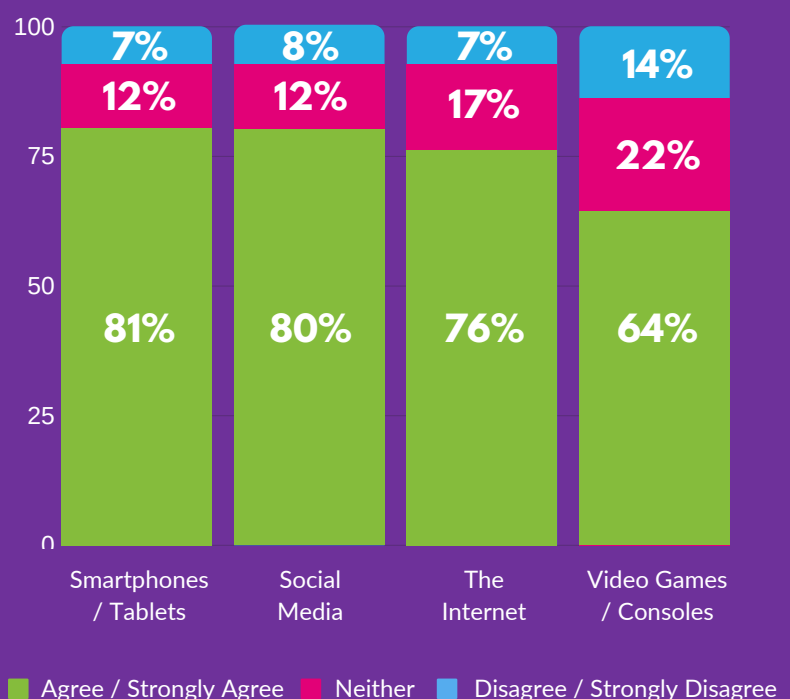
We also asked where they currently get support, and who they feel is best placed to deliver support.

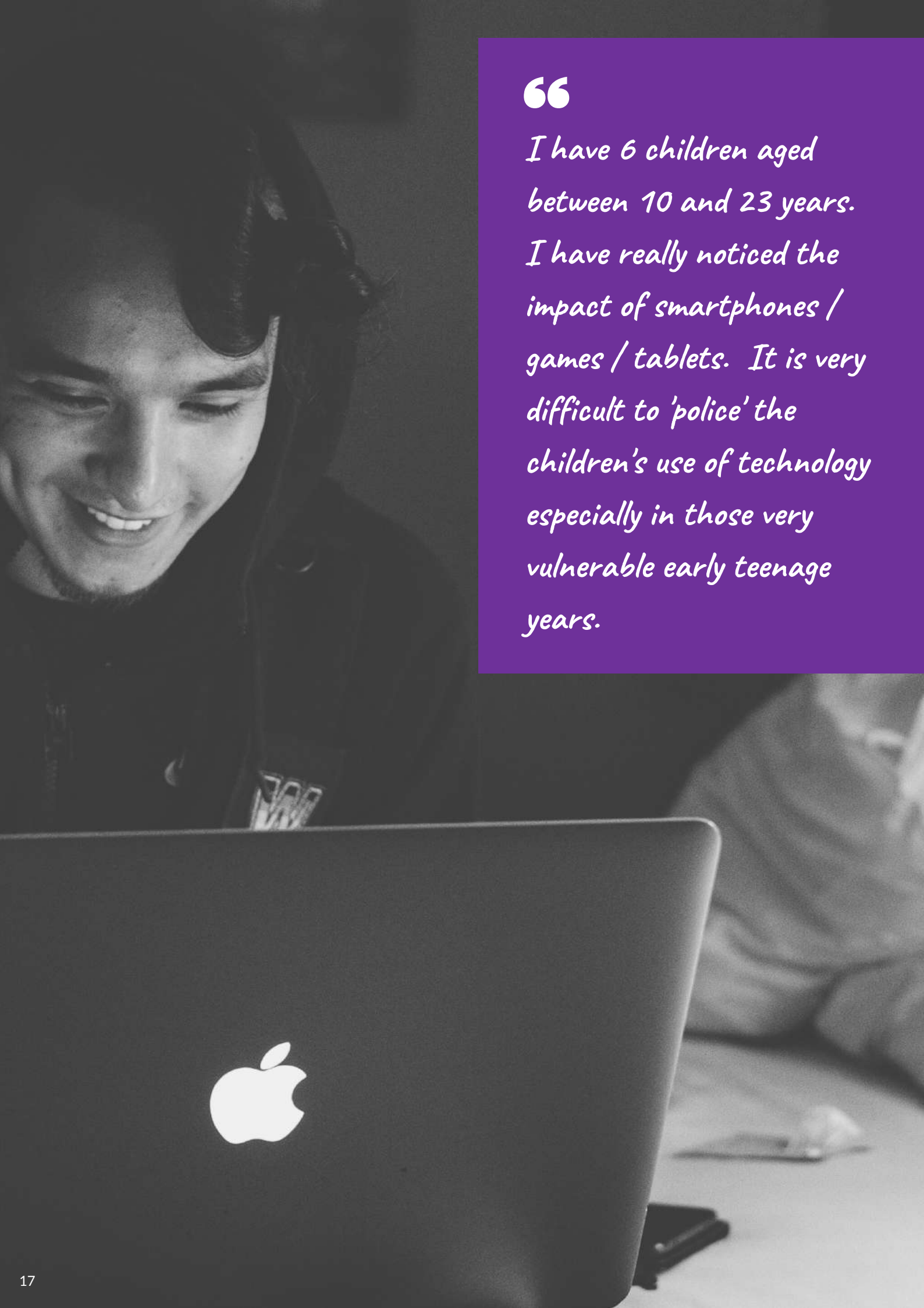
Technology was a major theme in the 2018 survey. Parents identified it as a serious concern, and expressed that they did not get enough support around it. However, technology is also a very general term covering a number of diverse elements. We wanted to drill down into what was causing the most concern, and how parents wanted to get help.

What parents told us

Overall, parents strongly felt that all five categories of technology had significant impact on their children. More than 80% of parents either agreed or strongly agreed that social media and smartphones / tablets have a significant impact on the wellbeing of their children. The other three areas also had very high levels of agreement.

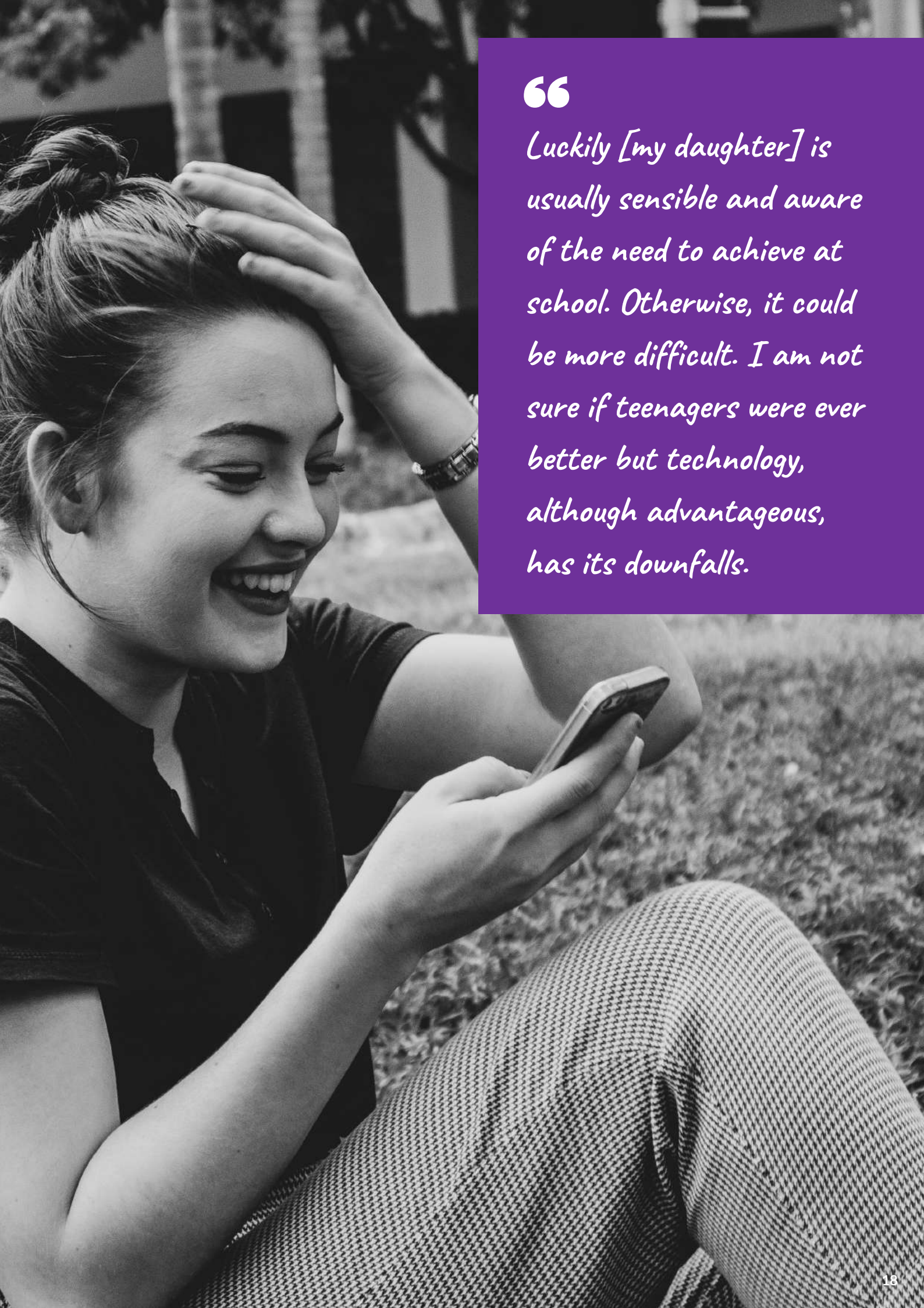
I think that the following has a significant impact on the wellbeing of my child...





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I have 6 children aged between 10 and 23 years. I have really noticed the impact of smartphones / games / tablets. It is very difficult to 'police' the children's use of technology especially in those very vulnerable early teenage years.

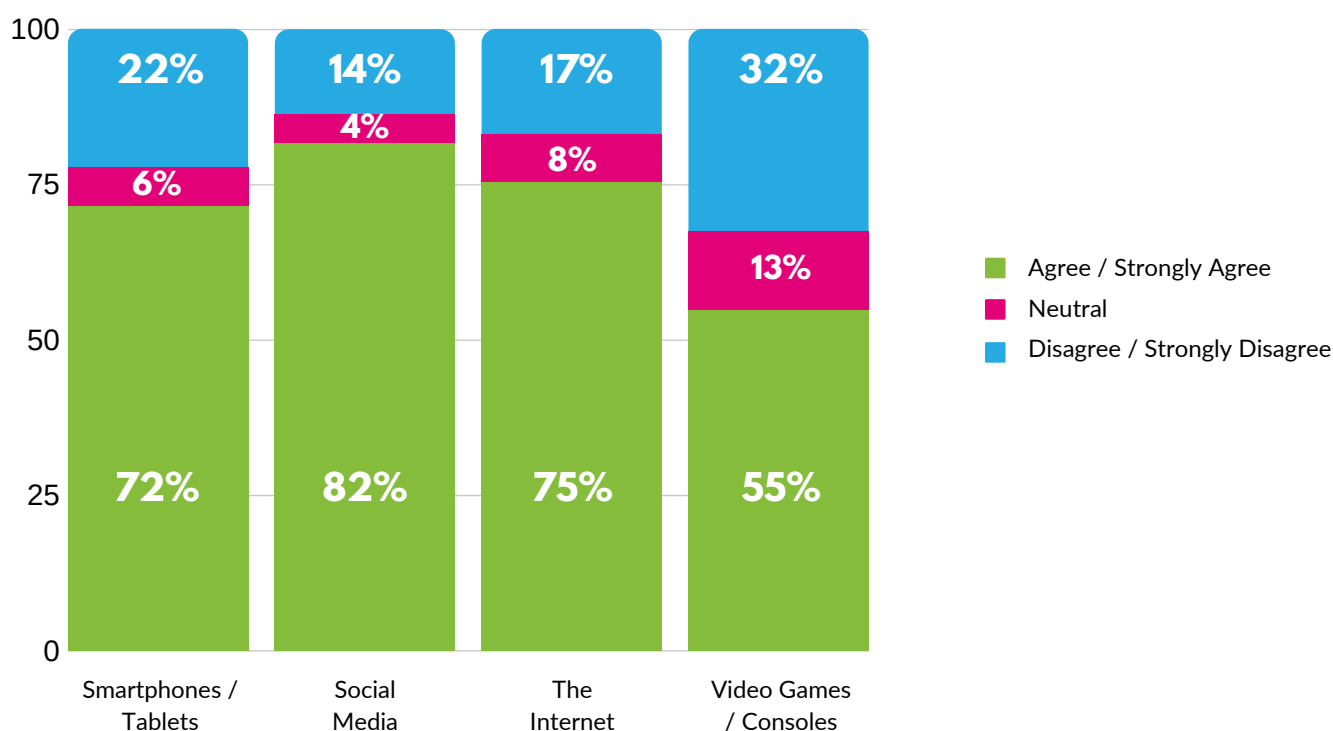


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Luckily [my daughter] is usually sensible and aware of the need to achieve at school. Otherwise, it could be more difficult. I am not sure if teenagers were ever better but technology, although advantageous, has its downfalls.

Parents also told us that they found technology difficult to monitor. In particular, social media, where over 80% of parents either agreed or strongly agreed it was hard to monitor. Similarly, the internet (75% agree or strongly agree) and smartphones/tablets (71% agree or strongly agree) presented challenges.

I think that the following is difficult for parents to monitor...



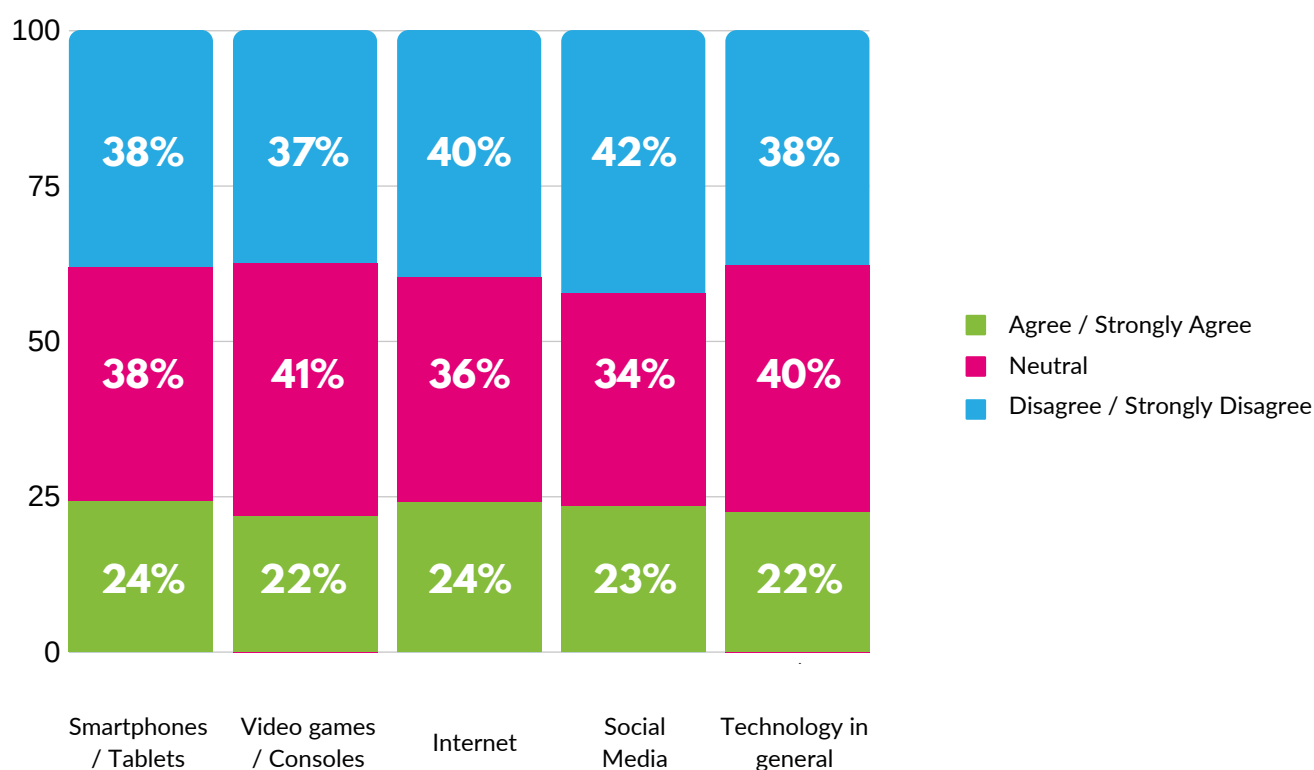
Parents told us that they were concerned about the fact that technology meant that children could not get “away” from digital social interactions. This was particularly an issue for parents of children who are being bullied, or who were inordinately focussed on responding:

“They can never escape school because they are constantly on WhatsApp, Snapchat, Instagram. They are constantly contactable and have no respite from social interaction. I have seen it incite anxiety in my sibling due to feeling that they have to respond to every message and participate in every WhatsApp chat, or face exclusion from inside jokes or invites to social events. They analyse every word they send because their messages could be misinterpreted and lead to conflict or be used against them in future - texts and WhatApps are preserved forever on someone else’s device!”

"I am worried about social media and about mental health for my child, there seems to be so many problems for kids today. When I was young it was a lot more care free and I feel the internet is to blame ... Also you are not cool if you do not have social media. A lot of pressure on kids."

Parents were more varied in responses when asked if they felt that they could get enough support on various types of technology. Parents generally did not agree they could access enough support (no type got more than 25% agree/strongly agree). However, significant numbers of parents felt they were unsure – between 34% and 40% were neutral on receiving enough support. Slightly more parents – between 37% and 42% disagreed, suggesting significant numbers did not feel able to access enough support if it was needed especially on social media.

I think that I get enough parenting support in dealing with issues my children have with...



These responses may be reflective of the very wide range of information that parents are aware of regarding issues. Similarly, in their responses many parents suggested that while they knew that there were potential issues, their children had not yet encountered them. For example:

"My son is three. I have colleagues with teenage children and when I hear about things they are going through with their children I worry for my sons future."

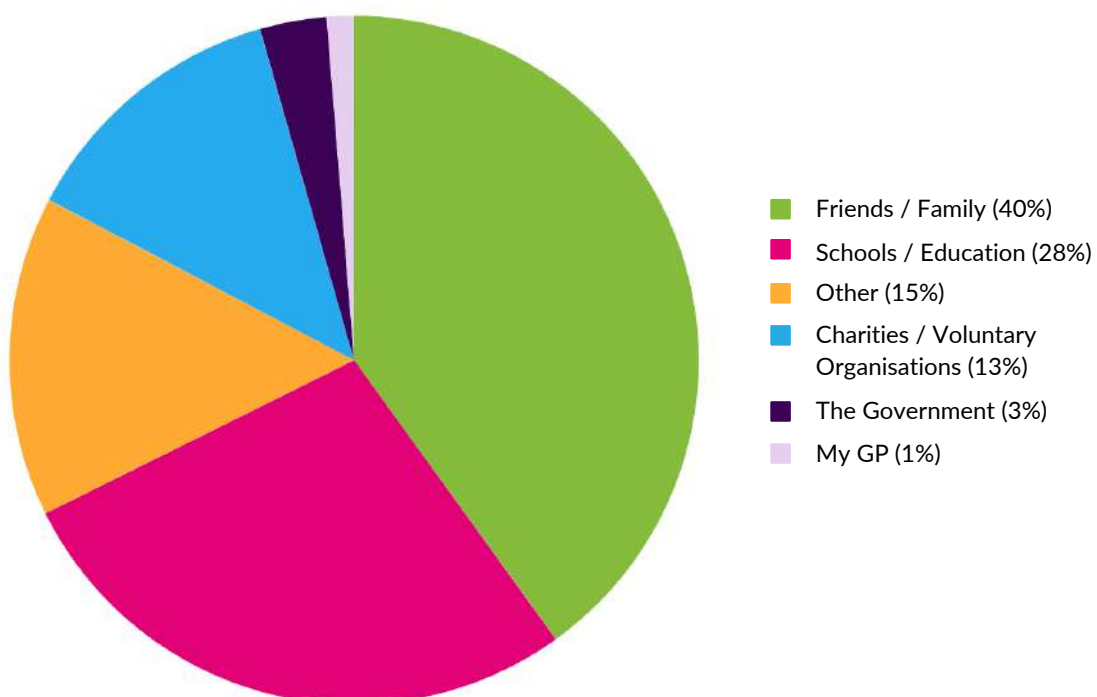
"I fear I will struggle with social media, phones and technology as my children grow."



When we asked parents where they currently got support on technology and parenting, the largest number indicated that they sought help from friends and family (around 40%). Schools and other educational settings were also a major source of help (around 28%).

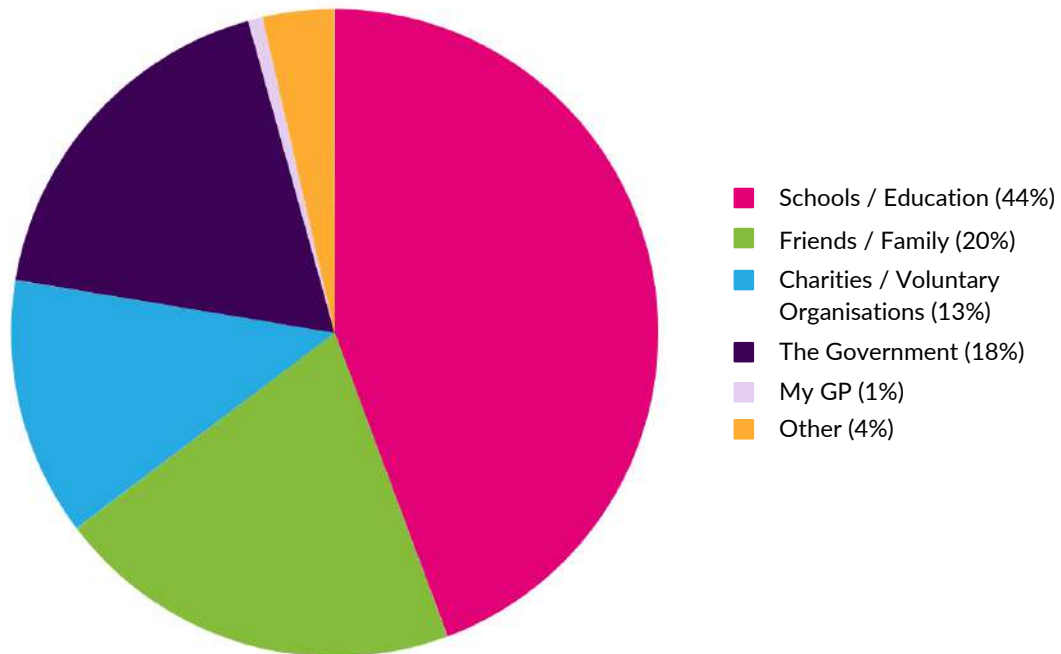
All other areas were less popular by a wide margin. When parents indicated they had other sources of support, this transpired to be primarily a mix of the internet (around 3-4%) or support being unavailable or not applicable in their home (around 6% of responses).

I currently get support on technology and parenting from...

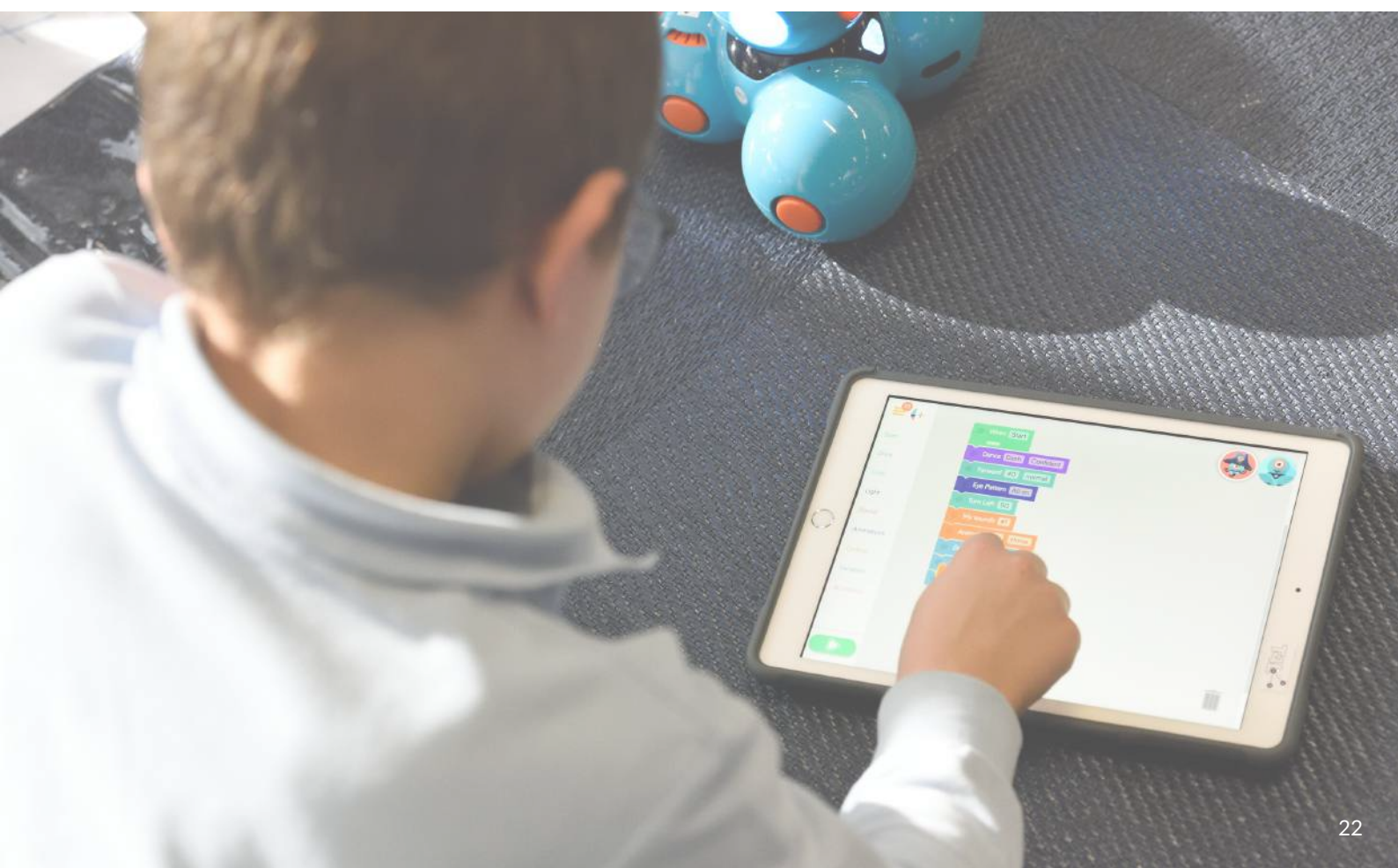


We also asked parents where the best place for support for parents on technology was. By a significant margin, schools and education was seen as the best place for support to be delivered. Around 44% of parents indicated it was their number one choice, followed by friends and family on around 20%.

Which is best placed to support parents on technology? (% ranked as #1 choice)



These results suggest that parents are worried about the impact technology has on their children's wellbeing. They are most concerned with social media, but all forms of technology present a noticeable level of concern. They broadly do not agree that they get enough support, and often turn to informal social networks for help. They would prefer to get this support in their children's schools.



Parents: In their own words



Parenting NI understands that parenting can be extremely rewarding, but also at times very challenging. The purpose of this survey is to hear real life experiences from parents who are currently parenting in Northern Ireland. We asked parents to tell us about their own personal experiences of parenting.

We suggested to parents to mention what they have succeeded in, what they have struggled with and make suggestions as to what needs to change to help support parenting.

We wanted parents to tell us their own personal stories and experiences. We wanted to provide an open format question for parents to tell us anything that they wanted, without having to relate to any specific areas.

What parents told us

We received a significant amount of responses to this question. As with last year, there was an enormously diverse range of answers. Many parents went into detail about the struggles, their successes and their experiences of being a parent.



24%

Technology



20%

General lack of support for parents



15%

Mental health (particularly of parents)



15%

Work life balance issues



10%

Mental health of children



10%

Special educational needs



Given the high level of focus on technology in the report, it was highly useful to hear parents put into their own words their challenges, views and experiences of the effects it had on their parenting and families. Many parents told us that they were concerned about the impact technology was having on their child:

"When your child is getting bullied through social media and at school, you have no idea. Think there needs to be a lot more done in schools."

"Early years up to age 10 were fantastic. Now parenting a 10 and 12 year old where challenges on phone use and games consoles are coming up. Having to monitor time spent in devices and making sure homework is done."

In addition to this, parents also raised issues that technology had on them directly. One parent said:

"It is difficult to know who to turn to when you have a problem. Social media with lots of perfect parents makes it harder."

Similar to the results last year, parents also made clear that support in general was insufficient.

"My eldest child has some mild behavioural issues, which I am struggling with. I feel there is very little help or support with this. I just want to help my son do the best he can but with little or no direction, it is very difficult."

"Struggled with lack of support as don't live in Surestart area so no support available at all."



“

Some parents can become very lonely as first time parents. They aren't advised where to go to for advice or even just a chat. They have to go out and find info themselves or else stay indoors by yourself. If there were more parent groups that met first time mums and encouraged them to come out and meet others it would be beneficial.

An interesting trend has been a steep rise in parents highlighting issues with their own mental health. In the previous survey, this issue was existent, but took a background role to parents concerns for their child's mental health. This year, more parents mentioned struggling with their own mental health:

"Stay at home mothers are not taken care of just as much as working mothers. Our mental health is just as important."

"Parental mental health. There is absolutely no support networks within Northern Ireland to help parents suffering from mental health issues."

"Lack of mental health services available to new parents."

"Needs to be more support with parental mental health."

"As a disabled parent with mental health issues, I would like more help in explaining my conditions to my child."

Work/life balance - in particular, the feeling that mothers had to give up working - was a serious concern for parents. Many expressed exasperation that employers were inflexible and made life difficult for parents, or that costs associated with childcare caused unnecessary stress:

"Missing out on big moments with children due to work."

"Financially and mentally - as working parents, there is no support for us."

"I feel guilty because I work full-time and that I don't spend enough time with them."

"Lack of support from the organisation I work for in considering a 4 hour reduction of my hours to facilitate more family time. I would like to spend more time with my kids doing homework and other club activities rather than everything being rushed and stressful of an evening."



“

I love being a parent but feel I miss out on so much of my child's growth and development because I work 9-5, Monday - Friday due to childcare costs. I don't necessarily think my child loses out as I do see benefits in childcare but do feel that it's unfair that I have to work so much and don't feel I have other options.



As with previous years, parents also shared a number of positive experiences with us. It was clear from these responses that parents are glad to have the opportunity to raise their children and be parents:

"I am the parent of a 14 month old boy. He is wonderful and I am lucky to be his parent. Overall, the proof of our success is in our son. He is happy and healthy. We are so proud and we do all that we can for him. We couldn't have got to where we are today, however, without the support of our own family (both financially and emotionally)."

"I have succeeded in making my kids confident that they know they are loved and in a safe and happy home."

"I was a lucky child my parents used positive parenting. I grew up in a very happy home. With creative parents who nurtured my love of creativity. This I have instilled in my own children."

"I love being a parent. Children are a blessing and should be treated as such."

We at Parenting NI are thankful for the responses from parents across NI. Parents represent an enormous cross-section of society, and have an awesome potential to affect change in society. As the building blocks of society, families (and in particular) parents, are so important in determining the direction of travel for Northern Ireland. Parenting NI are proud to play a part in being a conduit to translate the real-life experiences, expertise and views of parents to those in power. We are grateful to all parents who took the time to make their voices heard, and promise to endeavour to champion them at the highest levels of decision-making.

Analysis and Conclusions

Demographic Responses:

Over the period that the 2019 “Big Parenting Survey” was open, we received 1,358 responses in total. The overwhelming majority of these originated in the UK, around 97%. While we cannot be certain that the UK-origin responses were based entirely in Northern Ireland, the text-based responses suggested that they were. No specific responses suggested a non-UK base of response.

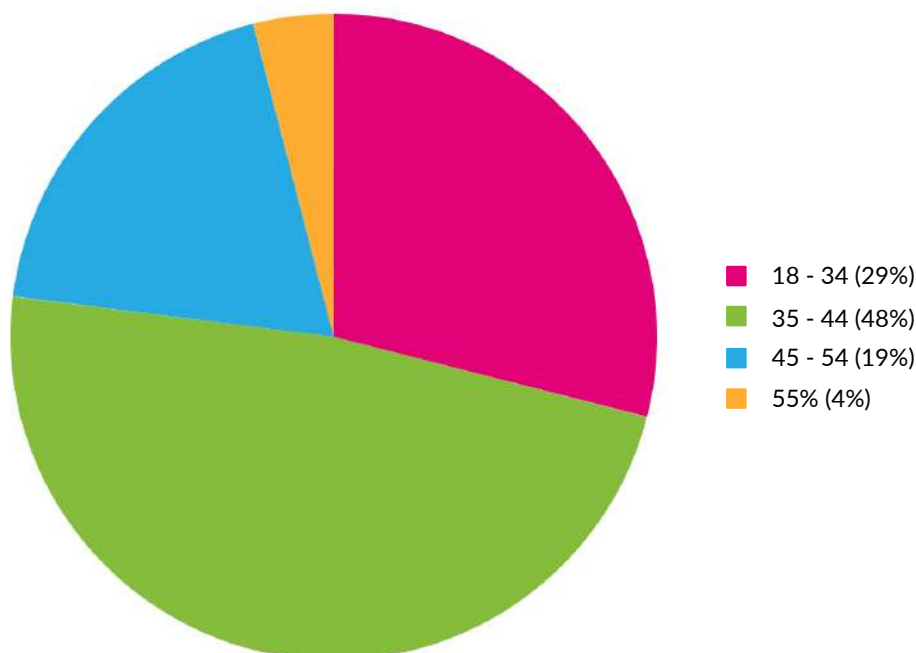
The majority of respondents (87%) that gave their gender were female. Around 12% indicated that they were male. Nine respondents either preferred not to say, or selected “other” as their gender.

96% of responses identified as heterosexual, with the remainder split between LGBT+ (around 2%) or prefer not to say/other (also around 2%).

The majority of parents indicated that they were married at the time of answering – 73% of responses. Around 13% identified as single parents, 4% were separated and just over 1% were kinship carers. Just under 9% of parents selected “other”, 69% of parents who selected this option were co-habiting.

The largest single age bracket was 35-44, with around half of all responses (47.67%) followed by 18-34 (28.57%) and 45-54 (19.24%). A small percentage indicated that they were over 55 (4.52%). These figures are close to the 2018 results.

Age Band

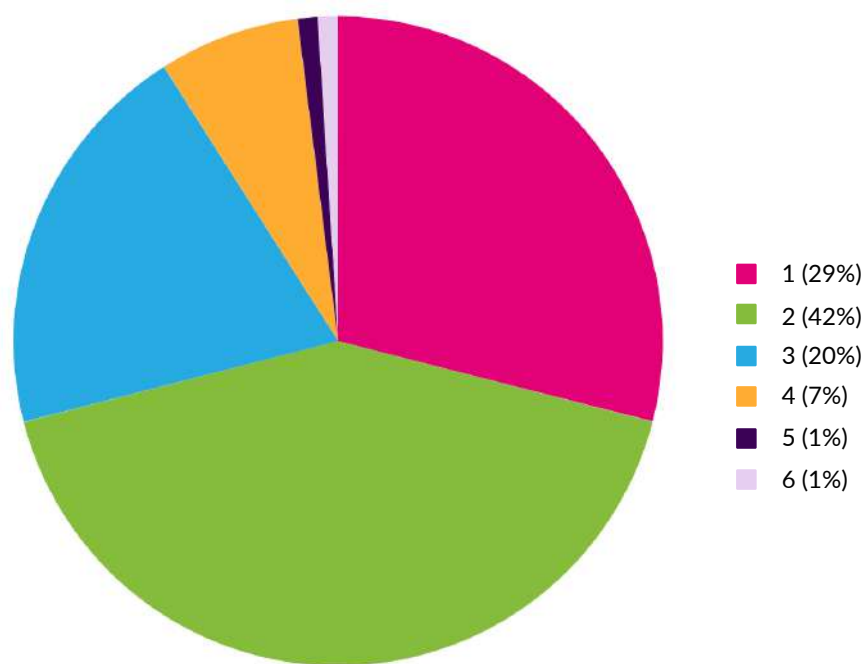


Most of the responses indicated that they were not a part of an ethnic minority (93%).

The community background of respondents was 48 % Catholic, 32% Protestant, and 19% neither. This is a slight reduction in the number of parents identifying as Protestant and a small rise in the number identifying as neither.

The most common number of children was 2 (42.14%). Over a quarter (28.63%) had one child, and about a 5th had 3 (19.97%). Considerably fewer had 4 (6.90%) with very few indicating 5 (1.17%) or 6+ (1.17%).

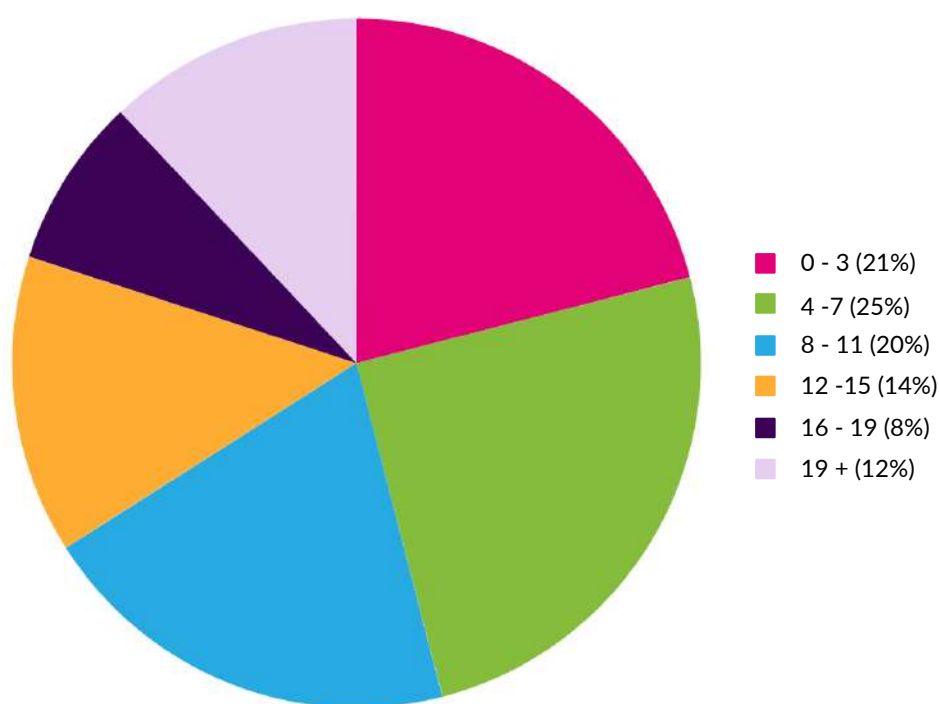
Number of children



In terms of Special Educational Needs– about 23% of parents suggested at least one child had special educational needs. These ranged in type, but the most common were autism/ASD (55%) and dyslexia (17%).

The most common age range for children was 4-7 years (30.64%) followed by 0-3 years (26.42%). 8-11 years was around a quarter (25.43%), which was higher than the 12-15 age range (17.75%). There were slightly more children aged 19+ (15%) compared to aged 16-19 (10.15%).

Children's ages



When looking at schools, the results were broadly similar to previous years. The largest single group attended primary schools (34.87%) followed by preschools (15.13%). Once again, the number of children at grammar schools (12.04%) was higher than in secondary schools (7.96%) with the difference nearly unchanged from last year. 13.25% are not currently in school, which as with previous results nearly mirrors the number of 19+ children (a 1.25% difference). Less than 1% of parents said their children attended SEN schools.

10.40% of parents said that their children are on free school meals. This number is down around 2% from last year's survey.

Geographically, Antrim again had a plurality of respondents (36.99%) but this was less overall than the previous year by around 3-4%. This was followed by Down (26.02%), which again is a lower figure than 2018. The Derry-Londonderry results nearly doubled; going from 7.51% in 2018 to 13.08% as did the Fermanagh response rate (2.4% in 2018 to 4.81% in 2019) Tyrone also had an increase, though it was more modest, up from 8.41% in 2018 to 9.47% this year. This represents a significant increase in the overall representation of parents from the west of NI. Armagh represents a slightly smaller percentage, down from over 10% to 9.62%.

We feel that these results represent a fair and reasonable approximation of parents in Northern Ireland. There is a good level of coverage in terms of parental ages, ages of children/young people, geographical, community and other factors.



Conclusions - Trends

In many ways, the 2019 results of the “Big Parenting Survey” show little change from the 2018 survey. For individuals and organisations seeking to provide help and support for parents, this should be concerning.

Even more parents than last year indicated that they do not think parents get enough support. As with last year, this may be a reflection of their views on the attitudes of society as a whole with regards to parents, rather than representing their individual circumstances. Nonetheless, less than 20% of parents feel that enough support is given. The trend is negative on this particular topic, and demonstrates clearly that better support is urgently required.

Parents expressed a desire for a wide range of supports to meet their needs, which reflects the variety of issues they face, as well as their severity. The single most popular method of support chosen by parents was online (Webchat – 20.6% and Parenting App – 19.71%) accounting for 40.31% of responses. In-person support was also a popular method of support that parents chose as their preferred method of support. In-person support could arguably cover a wide range of interventions including face to face support (21.72%), Parent Counselling (9.85%) or Home visit (8.62%). The third most popular choice for parenting support was parenting programmes, which alone accounted for 11.87% of the responses. This split, which also resembles the 2018 responses suggests that a combination of these three broad styles of support are best-placed to provide the support parents tell us they want.

This does not necessarily mean that other methods are ineffective, or that there is no place for them. It is evident that online support in particular is often an entry point means for parents seeking help, and individuals who end up taking part in more in-depth interventions often come from having sought information online as a first step. It has been well evidenced that a ‘one size fits all’ approach does not work for families as their needs are so varied and complex. Therefore it is important to have a myriad of supports for parents and families if outcomes for children and young people are going to be maximised.

The major sources of concern for parents have also remained fairly constant when compared to 2018. Mental health and technology, issues which are regularly linked by parents in their open submissions represent around 40% of parent’s primary worries. What is interesting is that parents expressed a higher level of concern around their own mental health in comparison to previous years. In fact, by a small margin the number of parent/adult mental health comments outnumbered comments regarding children’s mental health. Therefore, supports put in place by policy makers to address growing mental health concerns (and the effect of technology upon these) may need to have a distinct parent support element.

As with last year's survey, issues relating to childcare and financial stress feature prominently in parents' personal stories and concerns. While there are some policy initiatives to begin to address these problems, the results of the survey suggest they have yet to filter down to parents experiences on the ground.

Parental separation and relationship breakdown is another topic that parents expressed concerns about. A significant number of parents told us that they felt particularly unsupported due to being single parents, or parents with limited access to children. An increase in male respondents in this year’s survey allowed the results to be more reflective of specific issues associated with fathers. For example, fathers told us:

“I got little or no help, the system has let my child down and me her father also. I had nowhere to go or to live for 6 months, and had to pay courts to have the rights of my child upheld. Only to [be able to] see each other 30% of the time.

Parenting apart is tough. Money restraints, my work life balance, my ‘daddy days’ and society in general aren’t in the favour of single working dads.”

As with last year, there is a generally negative outlook among parents regarding the future. While there is some evidence that parents feel that their hopes for their children can be achieved in NI, they remain on the whole more worried than hopeful by a more than 2:1 Margin. In their comments on parenting as a whole, there was a very strong theme of a feeling of a lack of general support for parents. Parental responses suggest that they feel that they are not a priority for policy makers, and that their concerns are not being taken seriously.

They feel nervous about major changes such as the increased presence of technology in their families. They are deeply concerned about the impacts of Brexit on Northern Ireland, and that the economy will not be suitable for their children in the future. They are unhappy with the level of political stagnation, and both this and Brexit feature much more commonly in responses in 2019 than in 2018. Parents told us that:

"With the possibility of a no deal Brexit and both of us working full time jobs our son attends full time education we struggle every month to make ends meet. We both have very good jobs but with the rising costs, it is only going to get worse."

"Drugs and mental health also need more support. No government is reducing the chances of hope that the situation will change."

Technology represents a complex issue for parents in 2019. However, the parents responses lays out quite clearly what type of support they would most like and where they feel that support is best situated. Parents are concerned about all aspects of technology, but are particularly troubled by social media and smartphones. Currently, they access help from trusted friends and family members, but this presents a number of issues for policy makers. These individuals may be unsuited to provide support, particularly in severe cases. They may be misinformed or unable to guide parents in an appropriate manner.

Parents clearly expressed a desire for help to be delivered first and foremost in schools and educational settings. An issue stemming from this is the relative lack of capacity in schools to deliver this support. Teachers and school budgets are near breaking point and they may lack the ability (but not the will) to offer additional supports. They may also not feel comfortable or trained to offer expert advice. In addition Parenting NI, service providers and other policy makers are aware of difficulties associated with getting parents to engage with schools in some circumstances. However, experience in this field has led to the development of services such as the "Families Together" model, which has successfully driven engagement with parents in schools even in highly challenging circumstances. Parents felt that schools were essential to feeling supported:

"Good parenting equals good relationships between parents their children, schools, family, community and friends."

"I feel that giving schools extra resources to enable them to provide support as a first point of contact would be wonderful"

"Stormont need to prioritise school help (classroom assistants, courses for teachers, educational psychologists, specially trained senco for every school)."

The best answer therefore to providing the support parents want in the settings they say they feel are most appropriate is a co-design process. By drawing together funding (from the statutory sector), delivery (from the Voluntary/Community sector), location/facilitation (educational settings) and service users (parents) a model can be developed to begin to address the issues expressed by parents on technology.

The responses to the “Big Parenting Survey” showed more than anything that parenting in Northern Ireland is challenging. While most parents did suggest that they were able to provide adequate support to their children, they did not feel society as a whole is a positive environment for parents. Policy makers should be conscious of the results of this survey, and keep in mind the feelings of parents when seeking to improve the situation and standing of parents.

Data Limitations

There are of course limitations to this data. As noted in the demographics, there is still under-representation of men in the respondents. This is regrettable, but it should also be noted that the proportion of male respondents improved over last year. Parenting NI will continue to attempt to increase levels of male participation in future surveys.

The levels of participation by both LGBT+ and ethnic minority parents were lower than desired. There are a range of issues that causes levels of participation of these particular groups to be more challenging, but efforts will be made in future to drive higher levels of inclusion. If possible, future provision in alternative languages would make this task easier, but would require support from a funding body.

In addition, parents were allowed to drop out of the survey at any question. As such, while the majority of parents who answered the first question did complete the survey, not all chose to do so. Therefore, demographical information is not necessarily 100% reflective of earlier answers. We were aware of this potential problem in the formation of the questions, but consciously chose not to make it necessary to answer the full survey for results to be included, due to the number of individuals this approach would disregard. As such, in future surveys efforts will be made to encourage fuller participation, but no significant changes will be made in terms of “mandatory” questions.

Recommendations

As a result of these findings, Parenting NI has the following recommendations for policy makers to assist parents:

01

MENTAL HEALTH

Parents have expressed serious concerns about their own mental health and well being in this survey. In addition to asking policy makers to continue to invest in mental wellbeing initiatives, Parenting NI recommends that parent-specific mental health interventions and programmes be developed. The stigma associated with experiencing mental ill health as a parent makes this an issue in need of targeted support.



02

TECHNOLOGY

Parents have made clear that technology is a major concern for them with regarding to the impact that it has on their children's wellbeing. Parenting NI recommends that supports are developed that can be delivered in school / educational settings in a co-production model.



03

POLITICS & BREXIT

Concerns about the political situation and Brexit are causing worry for parents. Policy makers must take steps to reassure parents that regardless of the outcome of Brexit, they will be supported. A specific study of the potential impact of Brexit in a parenting context should be done, so that solutions can be tailored to need. Additionally, politicians should urgently address the political impact of the last three years of stagnation.



04

SUPPORT

Parents have clearly indicated that online is where they most often seek support with their parenting concerns. Strategies and governmental policy needs to consider this factor. All services, supports and initiatives need to have a significant digital aspect and be accessible in a manner that suits the needs and desires of parents. Additionally, existing services should be audited to ensure that they are still fit for purpose, and to explore digitisation options.

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