2025 LIFE IN MEDIA SURVEY

A Baseline Study of Digital Media Use and Well-being Among 11- to 13-year-olds

Life in MEDIA Survey

A survey conducted in Florida by researchers at the University of South Florida in collaboration with The Harris Poll.

lifeinmediasurvey.org

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Life in MEDIA Survey

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FOREWORD

Prior research has examined relationships between digital media use and wellness among children. Much of it has studied screentime, social media use, gaming, and outcomes like depression and anxiety in children.

This study, a survey of 1,510 11- to 13-year-olds in Florida, significantly extends previous research by also measuring binge-watching, news consumption, music listening, cyberbullying, engagement with social media influencers, sharing false information online, and numerous aspects of well-being. As such, this survey may be the most comprehensive study of digital media use and wellness among young adolescents ever conducted.

This study is a pilot, and tests variables that will be asked in a future longitudinal panel study that will survey 11- to 13-year-olds nationwide, tracking the same respondents for decades, hence the name *Life in Media Survey*. We preview that study later in this foreword. We'll start with what we learned in the current study.

The Latest Story

One would struggle to find a kind of media use that we didn't measure. However, despite this scope, the data in our study tell a broad story that is generally straightforward and clear. It is important to keep in mind that our data come from Florida and may not perfectly reflect nationwide trends. That said, with approximately 23 million residents, Florida is the third-largest U.S. state by population, after California and Texas, so the study examines a large portion of the U.S. This is what the data tell us.

Kids with their own smartphones tend to report greater well-being than kids without them.

On nearly all measures of health and wellness, kids who have their own smartphones fared better, or at least no worse, than kids who don't have their own smartphones. Kids with smartphones, for example, reported convening in-person more frequently with friends each week than kids who have no phone or share a phone with someone else. Kids with their own smartphone were less likely than kids without them to agree that "life often feels meaningless," to be cyberbullied, and to say they felt depressed most days in the prior year. Kids with a smartphone or tablet were more likely to say they feel good about themselves than kids who don't own these devices. Income does not explain these differences; kids in wealthier homes are actually less likely to own a smartphone than those from low-income homes.

Specific digital behaviors, not smartphone ownership alone, are associated with ill-being.

Smartphones alone don't appear to be the culprit in the adolescent mental health crisis, at least not among the adolescents we sampled. More than any other single measure, the act of publicly posting or sharing things online was associated with adverse outcomes.

Kids who post publicly online—especially those who post often—were more likely to report moderate or severe symptoms of depression, and to report severe symptoms of anxiety, compared to kids who don't post publicly. Kids who don't publicly post or share online get the minimum doctor-recommended amount of sleep, more than nine hours on school nights, while those who post publicly don't.

Heavy social media use, with or without posting, however, appears to be associated with some harms. Kids who use social media daily or multiple times per day were more likely to report that technology impairs their daily lives compared to lighter users of social media. Heavy social media users were more likely than light users to say they don't get enough sleep because they're on their phone late at night, that they feel restless or irritated when they can't check their phone, and that they'd rather spend more time online than hang out with people in-person.

Efforts to limit digital media use among kids don't appear to be working.

Children in our sample may be the most digitally connected group of young adolescents in the U.S. ever surveyed, particularly our youngest participants. Whereas prior studies placed the share of 11-year-olds who have their own smartphone at around 55%, 72% of 11-year-olds in our sample reported having their own smartphone. Overall, 78% of respondents said they have their own smartphone (another 9% share a smartphone with someone else or frequently use a smartphone belonging to someone else), and more than 99% of participants use at least one kind of electronic device, whether it's theirs or someone else's. A solid majority of our respondents also said they have their own tablet (56%).

Our respondents are also getting their devices at younger ages. One in nine children who have their own phone reported getting the device at age 7 or younger. On average, the 11-year-olds we surveyed said they've had a smartphone since they were just over eight and a half years old, while the 12- and 13-year-olds in the study said they got a smartphone when they were nine and a half and ten and a half, respectively. Kids who have tablets get them at even younger ages, on average.

Fifty-two percent of children we surveyed have a phone with a data plan, connecting them to the internet 24/7. Kids reported spending an average of 4.4 hours on their smartphone and/or tablet on schooldays, 6.3 hours on non-school days. One's screentime isn't easy to estimate, so we broke the day into four, six-hour segments and asked kids to estimate their screentime for each.

Even the smallest amount of cyberbullying is associated with numerous adverse outcomes.

We asked kids if they'd experienced any of five forms of cyberbullying in the previous three months, such as having hurtful photos or videos posted about them; being called mean or hurtful names; had rumors or lies about them spread, and others. We categorized kids as cyberbullied if they listed just one (or more) of these things happening to them in the prior three months, which a striking 57% of kids did. (One in five kids said they endure one or more of these harms once or more times each week). Using this categorization, cyberbullied children were much more likely than un-bullied kids to say they've felt depressed most days in the prior year, to say they often get angry and lose their temper, to say they find it hard to stop using technology once they've started, and to say that social media causes more harm than good.

We know from prior research how harmful cyberbullying is, but our data show that even minimal amounts of cyberbullying may be associated with harm to children. Delaying smartphone ownership is unlikely to fix the problem; kids without smartphones were *more* likely to be cyberbullied.

The broad story, then, is: more kids are getting smartphones, including younger kids. That's not necessarily harmful, and may be beneficial, though certain digital behaviors and the most modest amounts of cyberbullying are harmful.

This report is highly comprehensive and captures the full digital lives of fifteen hundred kids. We encourage you to read the Executive Summary and full report, including recommendations we offer in the Conclusion to mitigate the harm associated with specific digital activities.

As this survey is the pilot study for the longer *Life in Media Survey*, we now describe that project.

The Life in Media Survey

The *Life in Media Survey* (LIMS) will be a study of digital media use and well-being across the lifespan, tracking current 11- to 13-year-olds across the U.S. for at least the next 25 years, into early and middle adulthood. While the pilot survey included participants from Florida, the inaugural LIMS will include insights from a nationwide sample of N=8,000 11- to 13-year-olds, a large enough initial sample to overcome attrition common in longitudinal surveys.

This age group was chosen for several reasons. First, large enough minorities of kids in this age group don't yet have their own smartphones or tablets (22% and 44% in our current sample, respectively) to make important comparisons between kids who own these devices and those who don't.

Second, at the current time, ages 11 through 13 are at the dawn of a new generational classification in the United States; persons born between 1995-2012 are referred to as Gen Z'ers, while those born later are often referred to by marketing researchers as "Alphas." Other researchers call them "Polars," because of two leading challenges inherited by kids born in 2012 or later: political polarization and climate change (Twenge, 2023).

Additionally, 11- to 13-year-olds are in or are entering puberty, a formative and impressionable time. Lastly, 11 to 13 is the age of middle school enrollment in the U.S., so respondents have not yet started high school—a time of greater independence, access to older friends who drive, greater exposure to drugs and alcohol, and not yet belonging to an educational group in which nearly all other children, some 95% of high school kids (Anderson et al., 2023), have their own smartphones.

Thank you for your interest in the work. Please contact us at any time for information.

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// About The Harris Poll

The Harris Poll is a global consulting and market research firm that strives to reveal the authentic values of modern society to inspire leaders to create a better tomorrow. It works with clients in three primary areas: building twenty-first-century corporate reputation, crafting brand strategy and performance tracking, and earning organic media through public relations research. One of the longest-running surveys in the U.S., The Harris Poll has tracked public opinion, motivations, and social sentiment since 1963.

The Harris Poll To learn more, please visit www.theharrispoll.com.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

// SMARTPHONE OWNERSHIP IS ASSOCIATED WITH WELL-BEING

- While there is no doubt a mental health crisis in the U.S. among early adolescents and teens, simply taking away their smartphones might not solve it; in fact, it may make little difference or even cause harm. That kids with smartphones reported greater well-being than kids who don't is not due to household income; kids in wealthier homes are less likely to own a smartphone than kids in low-income homes.
  - Kids with their own smartphone spend more days each week hanging out with friends in-person, on average, than kids without their own smartphone;
  - 20% of kids agreed with the statement "Life often feels meaningless," and kids without smartphones were more likely to agree than those who own a smartphone (26% vs. 18%);
  - Kids without smartphones were much more likely—on some measures nearly 50% more likely—to report being cyberbullied than kids who own smartphones;
  - Smartphone-owning kids were more likely to say they feel good about themselves than kids who don't own smartphones (80% vs. 69%). The same was true among tablet-owners versus non-owners (82% vs. 71%);
  - "I get very angry and often lose my temper," found less agreement among kids who own smartphones than among kids who don't (23% vs. 34%);
  - Kids who own smartphones were also slightly less likely to say they felt depressed most days in the prior year than kids who don't own smartphones (21% vs. 26%);
  - We ran analyses on the number of years kids have had their own smartphone and measures of anxiety and depression, and there was no correlation between owning a phone for a longer period and reporting depressive or anxiety symptoms;
  - Kids without their own smartphones were just as likely as kids with smartphones to say that technology impairs their daily lives. Upwards of half of kids in both groups agreed that "I don't do things I'm supposed to because I'm using technology" (46% and 48%, respectively). Kids without smartphones may still use digital media that impose friction in their lives;
  - Kids with their own smartphone are less likely to trust other people, though this may be a good thing, given the universe of strangers that smartphones can expose children to. Thirty-seven percent of kids with smartphones agreed that "Most people can be trusted," while almost half of kids without smartphones, 49%, agreed.

// DEVICES AND SETTINGS

Despite calls by many researchers, educators, parents, and policymakers to limit digital media use among children, especially kids as young as 11, the sample we observed is more connected than ever. Seventy-eight percent of all respondents have their own smartphone, including 72% of 11-year-olds; 56% have their own tablet.

- 52% of all kids surveyed have their own smartphone and data plan, so they're connected to the internet 24/7.
- For some kids, smartphones are no doubt disruptive; 20% of kids reported that push notifications on their smartphones and other devices are always on.

- 31% of kids said they feel some relief when they're in a situation where they can't use their smartphone (29% disagreed), suggesting many kids want to use their phone less, but require help to do so.
- Kids estimated that they spend an average of 4.4 hours on their smartphone and/or tablet on schooldays, 6.3 hours on non-schooldays.

// SOCIAL MEDIA

- If having a smartphone, even for years, is not apparently harmful to children, what is? Frequently posting publicly online was consistently associated with poorer scores on wellness measures.
- Kids who post or share publicly online often are more likely to report depressive symptoms than those who don't post publicly. Forty-four percent of kids who post online publicly reported depressive symptoms compared with 36% of kids who never post publicly online.
- Kids who post publicly online often were also more likely to report anxiety symptoms than kids who never post publicly (42% vs. 26%).
- Kids who frequently post publicly online consistently reported greater sleep problems than kids who never post.
- Heavy video gamers and heavy social media users (use medium once or multiple times a day) were more likely than lighter users to say technology impairs their lives; among light social media users (use less than once a day) for example, 34% said they don't get enough sleep because they are on their phone or internet late at night, a figure that was 46% among kids who use social media every day or multiple times per day. Fifty percent of light gamers (play less than once a day) said they find it hard to stop using technology once they start, a number that jumps to 62% among daily gamers.
- Just over half of kids (51%) said they'd rather spend more time online than hang out with people. Girls were more likely to affirm this than boys (55% vs. 47%).
- One in three kids agreed with the statement "Social media causes more harm than good," and about the same proportion disagreed with that statement (34% and 33%, respectively). Three in 10 kids (29%) agreed A.I. causes more harm than good, and respondents were slightly more likely to agree with the statement if they'd previously used A.I. tools (32% vs. 28%).
- The "requirement" that children be 13 years old to open accounts on major social media platforms is little more than meaningless. Sixty percent of 11- and 12-year-olds have their own accounts on You Tube, 55% on TikTok, 42% on Instagram, and 41% on Facebook. While the penetration rates for 13-year-olds are higher than for those ages 11-12, there seems to be little to nothing keeping underage kids from signing contracts with major platforms.
- Many kids, more than one in four, admitted to lying about their age when signing up for a social media account, and three in 10 said they've posted information on social media that was false.
- Florida law as of Jan. 1, 2025, makes it illegal for kids under 14 to have social media accounts. Perhaps the law should've focused on kids 10 and younger, because most 11- to 13-year-olds already have social media accounts, and many of them easily lied to do so. A statute that also became law Jan. 1 holds that 14- and 15-year-olds must get parental permission to have social media accounts, but, again, most kids already do.
- In Florida, social media platforms are supposed to be blocked on public school Wi-Fi, per a 2023 law, but roughly four in 10 kids at public schools and at charter schools said social media aren't blocked at their school. Of course, 52% of kids in our sample have their own smartphone and data plan, so they can access social media on their own.

- Many kids, at least one in five, have more than one account on at least one social media platform. “At least 1 in 5” because kids were asked if they’ve created a second account on a platform for privacy reasons, but the figure may be greater than this as some kids may have multiple accounts but for other reasons.

// ATTITUDES

- Half of children said it’s OK to use A.I. to solve their math homework, while 43% said it is okay to use A.I. to write an essay for them, and 35% to answer exam questions. More older boys than older girls have used A.I. to do their schoolwork (55% vs. 42% for 13-year-olds).
- As with adults in other studies, kids reported some conflicting attitudes about freedom of expression. On one hand, 70% of respondents said people should be free to express unpopular ideas online, but when asked which is more important, being able to speak freely online or feeling welcome and safe online, 60% chose the latter.
- Some kids said they’ve taken measures to protect their privacy on social media, such as: used a fake name (31%), switched an account from public to private (34%), or deleted or deactivated an account (16%). Thirteen percent of respondents, though, said they’d taken no steps to guard their privacy on social media.
- A plurality of kids in the sample said they trust the U.S. government to do what’s right “just about always” or “most of the time” (42%).
- Nearly half of kids (49%) said they use technology to avoid feeling sad or to get relief from negative feelings.

// CYBERBULLYING

- More than half of the kids sampled (57%) reported being cyberbullied at least once in the prior three months. Respondents were asked if, in the last three months, they’d experienced online: being called mean or hurtful names; having lies or rumors spread about them; having mean or hurtful photos or videos about them shared; and other affronts. About 40% cited enduring each of these harms at least once in the past three months; about 20% said they experience such harms once a week or more often.
- Cyberbullied kids were almost four times as likely as un-bullied kids to say they get very angry and often lose their temper (36% vs. 10%).
- Cyberbullied kids were nearly three times as likely as un-bullied kids to say they felt depressed most days in the prior year (32% vs. 11%). What is particularly striking about this is how low the threshold for cyberbullying in our study was. A child who said someone called them mean names online once in the last three months was categorized as cyberbullied. This helps shed light on how destructive even minimal cyberbullying can be.

// SLEEP AND EXERCISE

- One area where the existence of a smartphone causes harm is sleep. One in four kids sleeps with their smartphone in their hand or in bed with them. Kids who literally sleep with their phone get 8.6 hours of sleep per school night, short of doctors’ recommendation of 9-12 hours a night. Even kids who sleep with the phone in the room but out of reach don’t get enough sleep: 8.9 hours. Only kids who sleep with a phone in another room get a bare minimum of 9.3 hours on school nights.
- Kids who use social media everyday get, on average, less than the 9 hours minimum of Dr.-recommended sleep for young adolescents, while kids who use social media less often (never or a few times a week) do get the minimum (8.7 vs. 9.2 hours).
- Heavy social media users are far more likely to exercise everyday than lighter users of social media (50% vs. 31%).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Rather than generate a long list of do's and don'ts, this report is meant to be exploratory and descriptive, painting a broad picture of the digital lives and mental health of adolescents. However, this study may be the most in-depth survey of young adolescent media use ever conducted, and some of the data are so compelling that a few recommendations are in order.

// RECOMMENDATION 1

Giving kids as young as 11 years of age their own smartphone is likely fine and may be beneficial.

Giving kids their own smartphones may help them, and withholding phones from them or taking them away may hurt them. The most consistent trend in our data is that kids with their own smartphones are healthier and better adjusted than kids without their own phones. The former are less likely than the latter to be depressed, to be isolated from in-person friendships, to be cyberbullied, to say they often lose their temper, and to experience numerous other harms.

The reason is not socioeconomic; kids in wealthier homes are much less likely to have their own smartphone than kids in low-income homes.

And we looked at the relationship between the number of years kids have had their own smartphone and anxiety and depression, and there was no correlation between owning a phone at a very young age and reporting depressive or anxiety symptoms.

Nearly eight in 10 children in our sample have their own smartphone, and that may be a good thing.

It's worth noting that our cross-sectional survey is not able to determine any long-term effects on children of having a smartphone starting at a young age. Also, among the things we did not measure was attention span. One of the key harms that Haidt (2024) says smartphones and social media visit upon children is attention fragmentation. It's possible that kids in our sample who have had their own smartphones since a young age have attention problems.

// RECOMMENDATION 2

Try to keep kids from social platforms where they are likely to post or share publicly.

Repeatedly in our study, posting or sharing on social media was associated with adverse outcomes. Kids who post publicly—especially those who do so often—are more likely than kids who don't post to report symptoms of depression and anxiety, to report numerous sleep problems, and to get less sleep than experts recommend. Of course, the act of posting itself is not likely what contributes to depression and sleep deprivation in children, but instead what potentially follows: negative feedback from peers and/or strangers, cyberbullying, unfriending or blocking, doxxing, or any number of other online ills.

Given the challenge of letting a child use social media but keeping them from posting, it may be easier—and more beneficial—to enforce a no-social-media policy, at least for children as young as 11, 12, and 13 years old. And heavy social media use was associated with some problems reported by kids in the sample; heavy users were more likely than lighter users or non-users to say they'd rather spend more time online than engage with people, to say they feel restless or irritated when they can't check their phone, and to say they lose sleep because they're on their phone late at night.

Hall (2024) recently published a paper, "Ten myths about the effect of social media use on well-being." Among the statements he claims are myths, and refutes, are "Social media are the main cause of problems teens are facing" and "Compared to other harms, the harm of social media use is far greater."

Broadly speaking, Hall's arguments hold up in our data. We did not find that social media use was consistently associated with harm to young adolescents. In fact, heavy social media use was associated with an increased likelihood to exercise. However, some of our data partially support one of Hall's alleged myths: "Spending more time on social media will inevitably make users depressed, anxious, sad, and lonely." Posting publicly to social media was associated with these outcomes.

// RECOMMENDATION 3

Be on alert for the slightest signs of cyberbullying and do all you can to stanch it.

If a child in our study said they'd been called mean or hurtful names online once in the last three months, they were categorized as "cyberbullied." While there were four other questions we used to assess cyberbullying, the threshold for being in the cyberbullied category was low. And yet, the outcomes appear dire. Cyberbullied kids are much more likely than un-bullied kids to say life often feels meaningless, that they felt depressed most days in the prior year, that they often lose their temper, and several other negatives. We knew cyberbullying was a major scourge among children, we just perhaps didn't know that even the most fleeting amounts of cyberbullying can be harmful. And a scourge it is; using our metric, 57% of kids in the sample are cyberbullied, and about 20% are bullied online at least once a week.

// RECOMMENDATION 4

Don't let kids and smartphones sleep in the same room.

Children who sleep with their phones in their room—and especially those who sleep with their phone in their hand and/or in bed with them, who were 24% of respondents—don't get enough sleep, on average. Kids who sleep with a phone in another room, however, exceeded the minimum number of hours prescribed by the American Academy of Sleep Medicine for young adolescents (9.2 hours; AASM recommends 9-12 hours).

// LIMITATIONS AND SUBSEQUENT RESEARCH

There are three criteria for establishing causality in science, and cross-sectional surveys meet just one of them: establishing that variables are correlated with each other (the other two are causal priority and eliminating possible alternative explanations for the relationship).

Given that we can't establish causality, we are cautious throughout the study to speak of associations rather than causation, and this is also why we make just four straightforward recommendations above.

Again, however, this study may be the most thorough examination of digital media use among young adolescents to date. And when we see correlations again and again—like that between publicly posting online and indicators of harm—the likelihood that there's an underlying relationship increases.

Another cautionary note about this study is that we cannot make long-term predictions about young adolescents from our data or analyses. We took a snapshot of young adolescents' lives. The findings from our data and analyses are limited to what the respondents have said, are doing, and how they feel about things *currently*. All this may change in the future. For example, as in Recommendation 1, we note that letting 11-year-olds own smartphones may be beneficial; however, this does not necessarily mean that kids with smartphones at 11 will do better later in life; we simply do not know. To understand how digital media impacts the trajectory of an individual's life, we need to track the same kids throughout their lives.

As discussed in the Foreword, this is why we believe a longitudinal study is crucial for understanding the impact of media on young adolescents as they transition into adulthood. The *Life in Media Survey* will continue tracking 11- to 13-year-olds in the future, allowing us to discuss causal relationships with greater certainty. For now, though, this study gives us plenty of new knowledge and a lot to think about before tracking digital media use and wellness across the lifespan.

1. DEVICES

Nearly 8 in 10 kids in our sample have their own smartphones.
1 in 9 kids got their first smartphone at age 7 or younger.

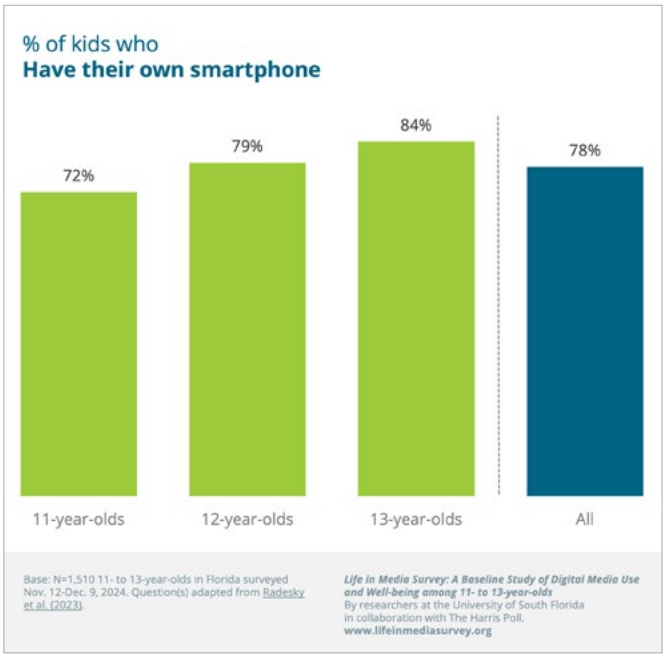


Figure 1.1

So pervasive are digital screens in the lives of children, some researchers talk about a shift from a play-based childhood to a phone-based childhood (Haidt, 2024). The smartphone first became available to consumers in the U.S. in 2007, and most people in the country owned one by 2013, the fastest adoption of a new technology in human history (Twenge, 2023). While many countries have been close to 100% saturation for smartphone ownership for as many as 6 to 7 years, like several energy-rich countries in the Arab Gulf (Dennis et al., 2019), the share of people in the U.S. with smartphones only recently surpassed 91% (Pew Research Center, 2024), after being stuck in the 80s since 2019. This is likely partly due to weak internet networks in rural areas.

Like adults, most, but not all children in the U.S. have their own smartphone, especially kids as young as 11 and 12 years old. This is a key reason why we survey kids as young as 11—we're interested in factors contributing

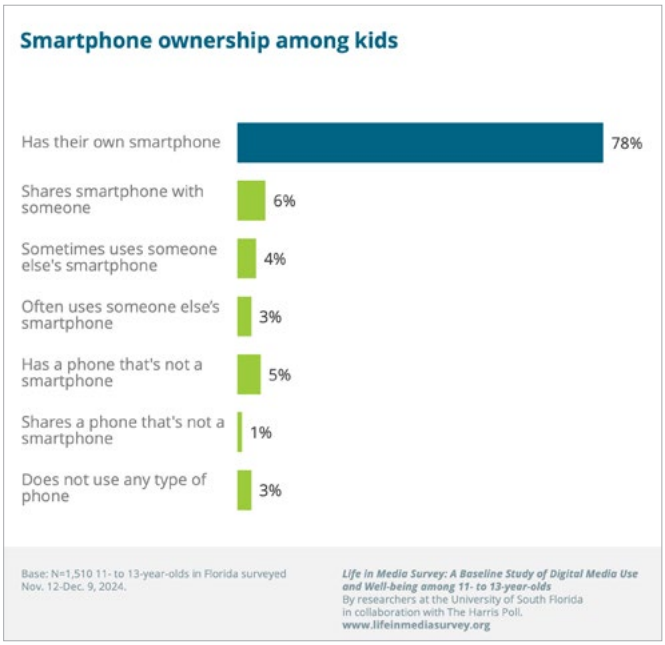


Figure 1.2

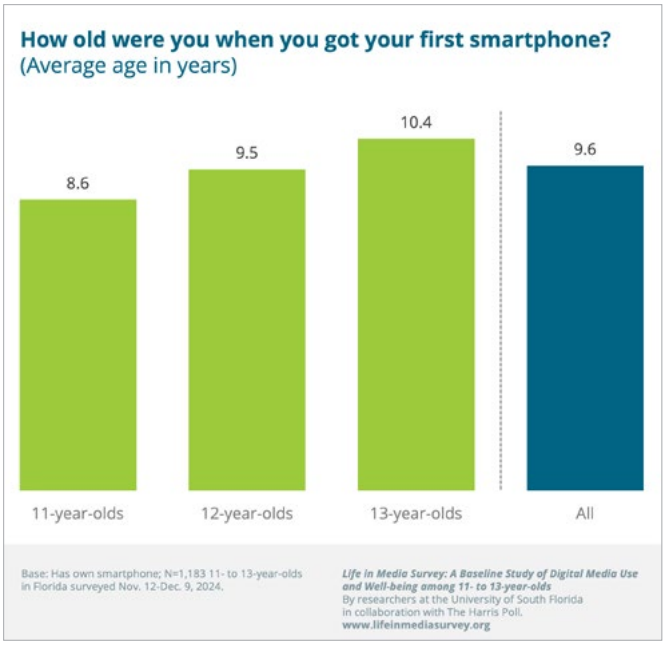


Figure 1.3

to later smartphone adoption in children; how kids with smartphones and those without them differ, or don't, in their current behaviors, attitudes, and wellness indicators; and, ultimately, how delayed smartphone adoption is associated with behaviors, attitudes, and well-being.

Smartphone ownership figures in our data differ from prior research in two ways; compared to national data from the U.S., more of our youngest respondents have smartphones, 72% of 11-year-olds, while slightly fewer of our older respondents do: 84% of 13-year-olds (Fig. 1.1). Our data are from Florida, which may account for some of the differences. Recent figures put smartphone ownership among 11-year-olds at slightly over half, and about nine in 10 among 13-year-olds (Radesky et al., 2023).

Just because a kid doesn't have a smartphone needn't indicate that they don't use one. Thirteen percent or so of respondents said they share a smartphone with someone, or they often or sometimes use someone else's smartphone, meaning nine in 10 kids in our sample are smartphone users. Only 5% of kids said they have a phone that isn't a smartphone.

Younger kids in our sample who have smartphones got the device at younger ages. Eleven-year-olds who have a smartphone got it at just over age eight and a half, on average, while 12- and 13- year-olds first got the device at slightly older than nine and a half and ten and a half, respectively (Fig. 1.3). Intriguingly, this means that kids in our sample with smartphones received the device at about the same time, in 2021, or about a year into the pandemic. Some previously smartphone-resistant parents may have acquiesced at a time when people were living most of their lives online anyway. As our research moves forward, it will be interesting to see if the average age of smartphone possession sticks at just over nine and a half years.

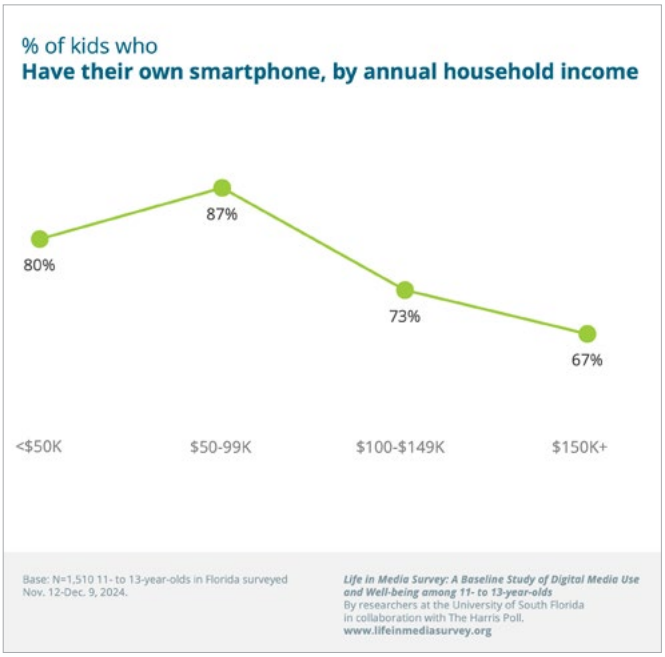


Figure 1.4

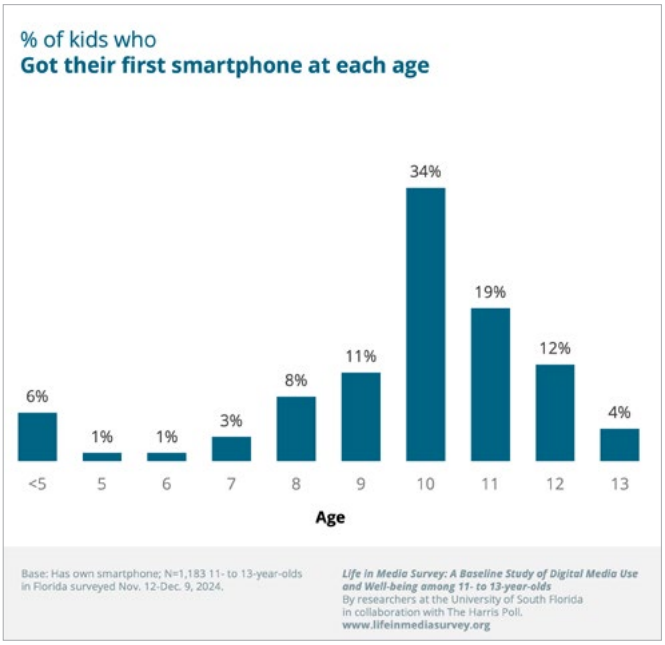


Figure 1.5

While some kids likely don't have their own smartphones due to the financial cost, fewer kids in wealthier households have their own smartphones than kids from poorer backgrounds (Fig. 1.4). There are some other examples coming in this report showing that kids from low-income homes are heavier media consumers and have more access to digital devices than kids from wealthier households. Digital media may be somewhat like junk food; it's everywhere, it's affordable, it can have adverse effects when consumed in large quantities, and poorer kids consume more of it than wealthy kids do.

And just as kids often start consuming convenience food at a young age, so, too, do many have their own smartphones early in life. Six percent of kids with smartphones in our sample got their first smartphone when they *were younger than age 5*. One in nine got their first phone at age 7 or younger. A large majority, two-thirds, had their first smartphone by age 10 (Fig. 1.5). While some readers may question kids' ability to recall how old they were when their phone-based childhood began, getting a smartphone is such a transformative rite of passage in childhood that kids can likely be trusted to know when it happened.

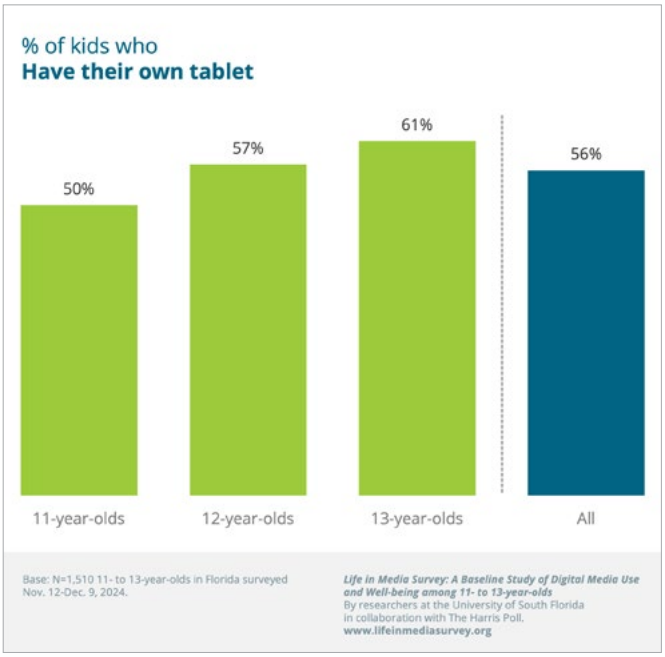


Figure 1.6

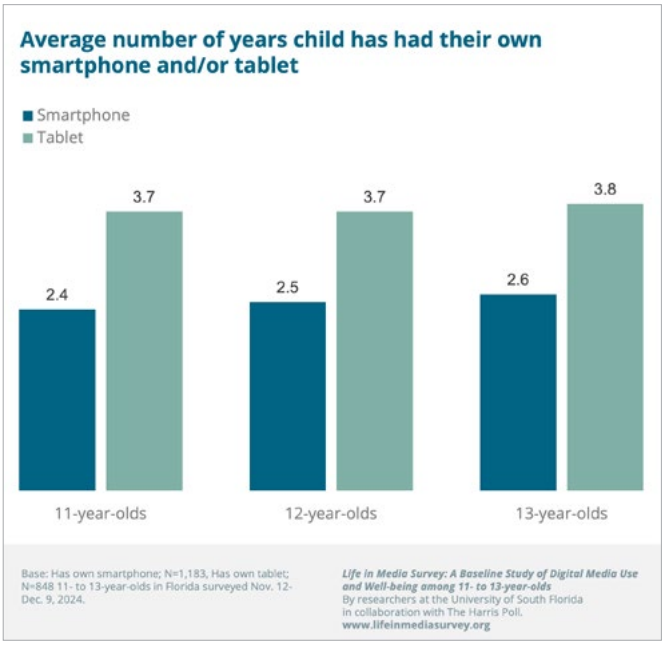


Figure 1.7

Most children in our sample are connected via their own tablet, too. Half of 11-year-olds and six in 10 of both 12- and 13-year-olds have their own tablet (Fig. 1.6).

While more kids have smartphones than tablets, those who do have tablets get them at younger ages, on average (Fig. 1.7). Regardless of age, kids with tablets said they'd had them for about 3.7 years and smartphones for about 2.5 years. Moving backward about 3.7 years from our data collection period, Nov.-Dec. 2024, means that, regardless of age, kids in our sample got their own tablet in the spring of 2020, on average, which aligns with the onset of the pandemic. A little over a year later was when kids in our sample tended to receive their own smartphones. After getting their kids tablets to do remote schoolwork and socialize during the pandemic, a year or so later, many parents may have said, "Well, they already have a tablet; might as well let them have a smartphone." Additionally, the return to in-person schooling may have served as the catalyst for smartphone acquisition in order for families to stay connected after a period of social isolation.

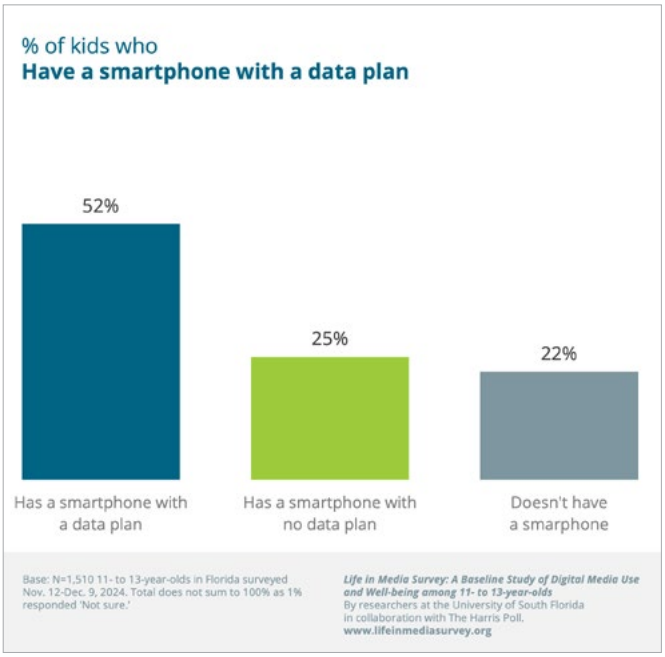


Figure 1.8

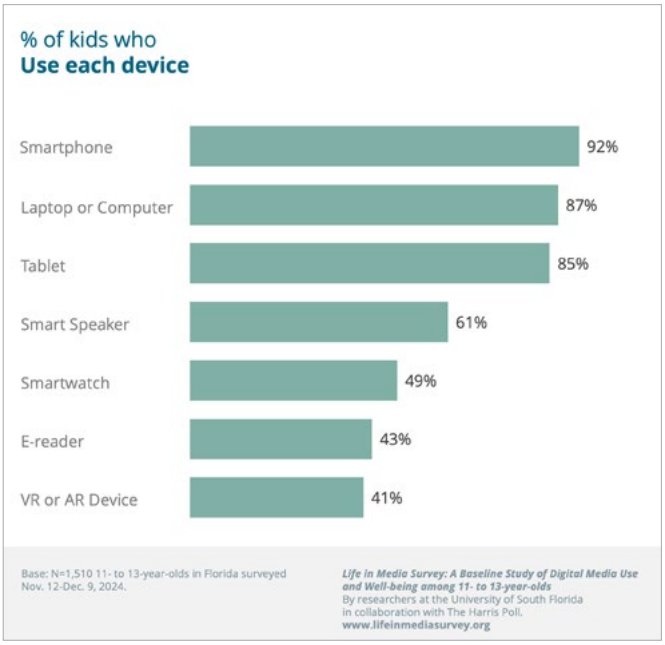


Figure 1.9

Having a smartphone, even the same year and model, doesn't necessarily mean the same thing for every child. We asked kids if their phone has a data plan or if it requires Wi-Fi for internet access. More than half of the kids in our sample are connected to the internet 24 hours a day, or at least can be. Fifty-two percent of the 1,510 kids we sampled had their own smartphone with a data plan. About 25% of children had a smartphone but no data plan.

Of course, smartphones and tablets are not the only digital devices in kids' lives. Nearly nine in 10 kids we sampled also use a laptop or other computer. Six in 10 use a smart speaker like an Amazon Alexa or Google Home. Half of kids said they use a smartwatch. Technologist and media scholar Henry Jenkins (2008) described some years ago what he called the "Black Box Fallacy," that is, the common but errant prediction that we'll use just one device in the future for all our communication needs. Jenkins said at the time that, when he looked around, he saw more screens and more devices, not less. Nearly two decades later, his admonition still holds. Without even assessing their use of Fitbits or other fitness trackers or certain video game consoles, children's lives seem to be overflowing with screens, even though smartphones may be their most common companion.

2. WHAT THEY'RE USING, AND FOR HOW LONG

Kids average 4.4 hours on their smartphones and tablets on school days, 6.3 hours on non-school days.

Public posting online is associated with poorer mental health.

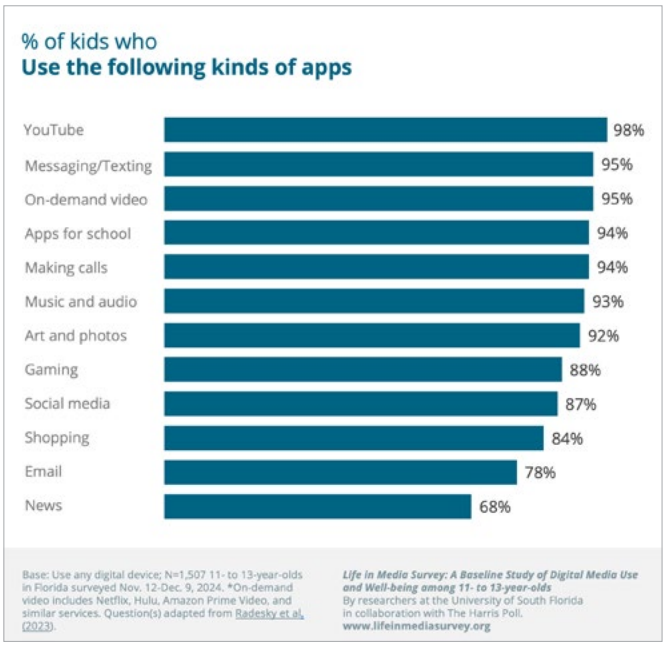


Figure 2.1

Much, perhaps most, of the concern about kids' digital media use involves the length of time kids spend using devices, social platforms, and other applications, and what specifically they are doing. As we explore these topics in this chapter, we confirm that digital media is pervasive in kids' lives. They reported using devices more than four (school days) and six (non-school days) hours per day for various purposes including entertainment, socializing, school, and communication.

Data in this study highlight that kids use devices often and for multiple purposes (Fig. 2.1). Ninety percent or more of the kids surveyed use apps for YouTube (98%), message/texting (95%), on-demand video (95%), school (94%), to make calls (94%), for music or audio (93%), and for art

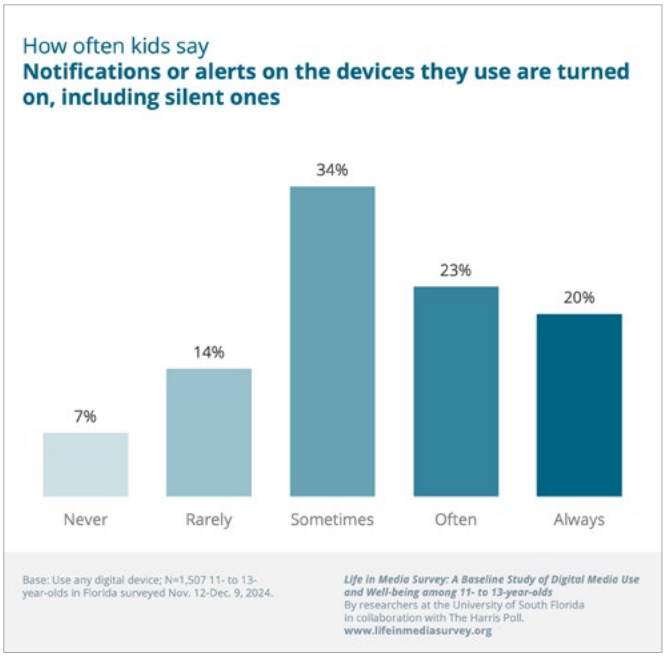


Figure 2.2

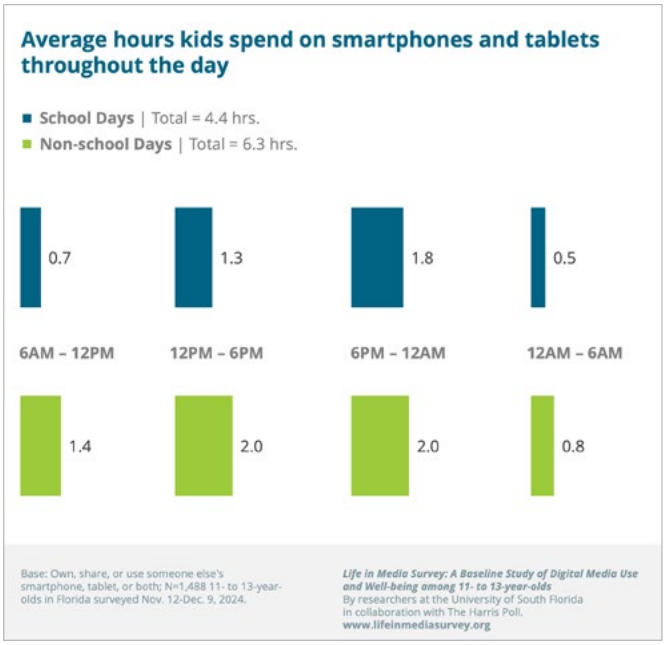
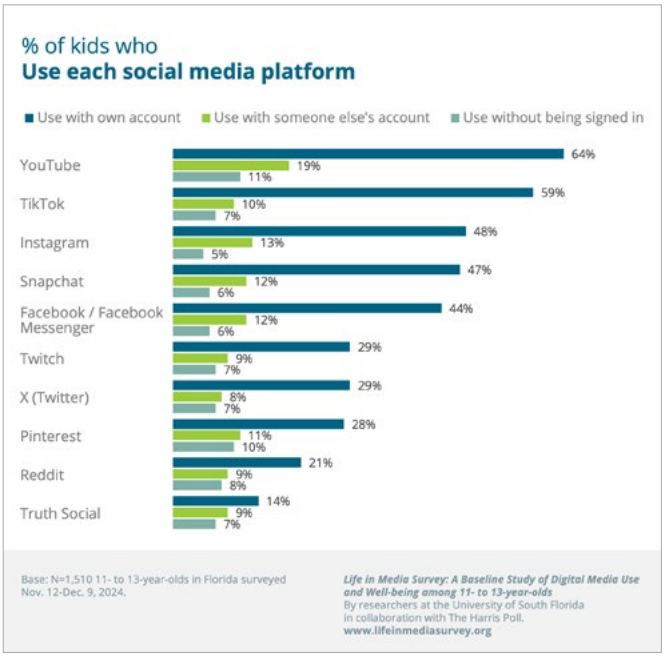


Figure 2.3

and photos (92%). The only categories used by fewer than 80% of children are email (78%) and news apps (68%). Also of note, more children use apps for school than use social media apps (94% vs. 87%).

Three in four kids who use devices have notifications enabled at least sometimes, and one-fifth always have notifications enabled (Fig. 2.2). Heitmayer and Lahlou (2021) found that only 11% of phone interactions were initiated by notifications, but they also acknowledge that further study is required, and they did not measure whether the user is distracted by the notification itself.

Kids report spending more time on their devices during non-school days than school days, but device use is heavy every day of the week. Kids spend 4.4 hours on their phones on school days, on average, compared to 6.3 hours on non-school days. On school days, users report 0.7 hours of use from 6 a.m. - noon, and 1.3 hours from noon - 6 p.m. While these periods do cover more than just typical school hours, it does appear likely that devices are being used, at least to some degree, during school, although users report their highest usage on school days—1.8 hours—between 6 p.m. and midnight. On non-school days, users spend the most time on their devices from noon to midnight (2.0 hours each from 12 p.m. to 6 p.m. and from 6 p.m. to 12 a.m.). Additionally, they spend twice as much time on their devices in the morning on non-school days compared to school days (1.4 hours vs. 0.7 hours from 6 a.m. to 12 p.m.).



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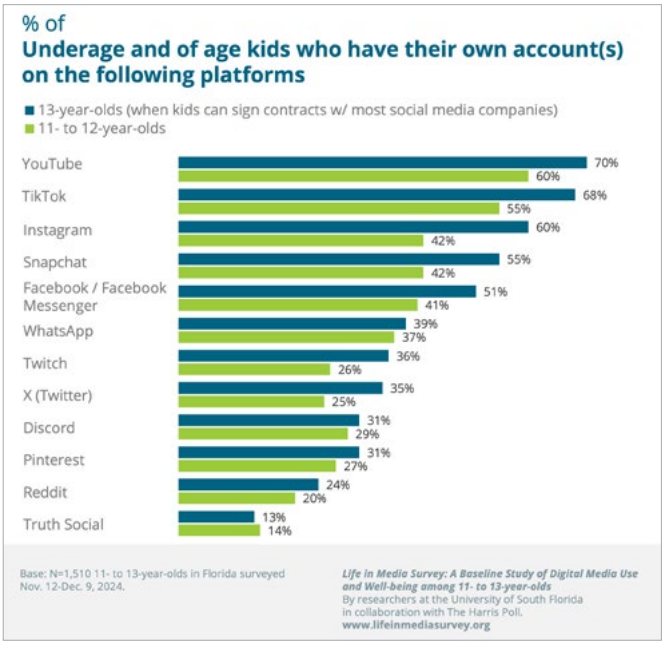
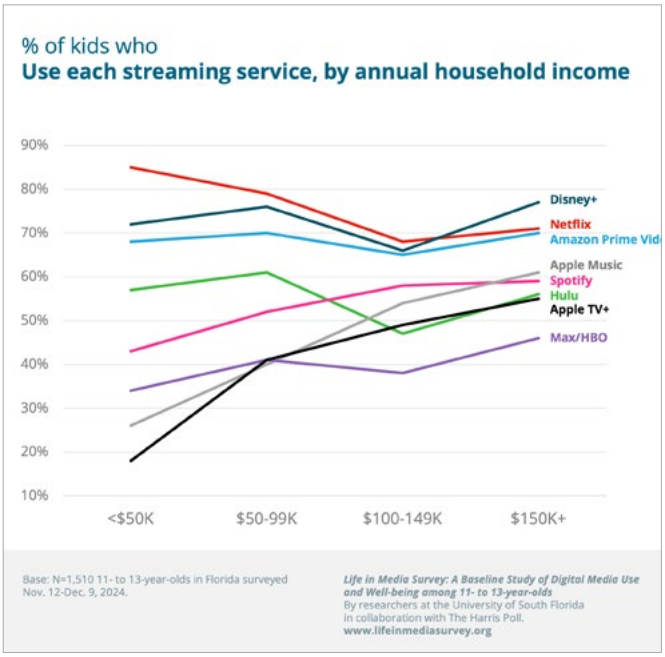


Figure 2.5

Despite age restrictions on many social platforms, children are more likely to use social media platforms with their own account(s) than with someone else's account or without being signed in, and generally by a large margin (Fig. 2.4). Apps like TikTok require users to be at least 13 years old to create an account, but age verification beyond a self-reported date of birth is only required for some app functions.

Kids are most likely to have their own account (one or multiple) on YouTube (64%), TikTok (59%), Roblox (57%), Instagram (48%), and Snapchat (47%). In most cases, 13-year-olds—who are of an age to be able to sign a contract with social media companies—are more likely to have their own account than 11- and 12-year-olds. But most 11- and 12-year-olds have their own accounts, including more than half who have an account on YouTube and TikTok (60% and 55%, respectively). Interesting to note, 35% of 13-year-olds and 25% of 11- and 12-year-olds have an account on X (Twitter), and one in eight of both groups have an account on Truth Social.

Mirroring digital media use behaviors among their adult counterparts (Gottfried, 2024), adolescents also overwhelmingly turn to YouTube (98% reported using the app). Video- and visual-based platforms, including TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat, are used by robust majorities of adolescents surveyed. Roblox, an online gaming platform, is also in the top five platforms used by most kids (66% report using with their own or someone else's account).



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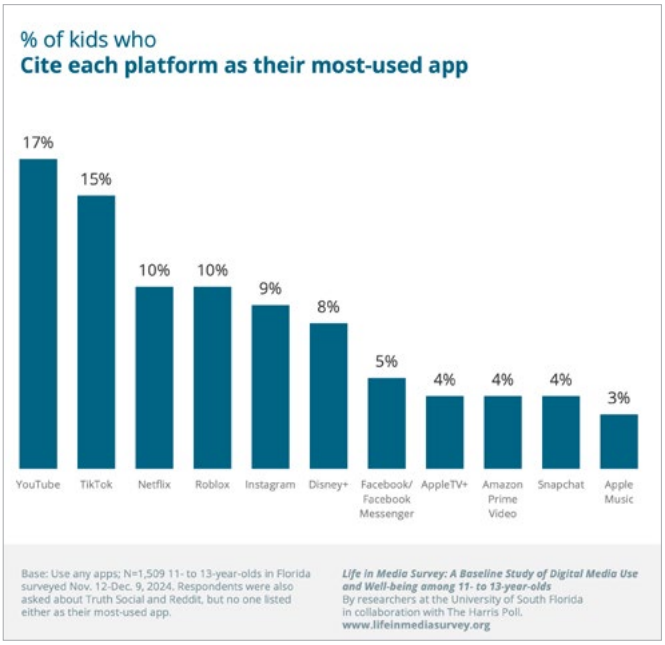


Figure 2.7

The data also indicate that most kids (56%) continue to use Facebook and Facebook Messenger. Although the Pew Research Center has documented a steady decline in the platform's use since 2014 among teenagers (Vogels et al., 2022), the data here indicate continued relevance to American adolescents, at least those in Florida. We asked about Facebook/Facebook Messenger together, so it's possible the latter is driving the use figure. When ranking use, Facebook use is ranked just ahead of other text-based apps such as WhatsApp and Discord.

Streaming platforms are also a prominent component of kids media diets. Three in four use Netflix and Disney+ (77% and 73%, respectively), and half or more use Amazon Prime Video, Hulu, and Spotify (68%, 56%, and 52%, respectively). The use of these services reveals some sharp differences based on household income (Fig. 2.6). For instance, while Spotify use rises moderately with income level (by 16 percentage points from the lowest to highest income levels), Apple Music use increases sharply (by 35 points from the lowest to highest income levels). This data tracks more generally with public observations that wealthier Americans own more Apple products than their less affluent compatriots (Liesman, 2017). Additionally, kids from lower income households (<$50,000 annually) were the most likely to use Netflix, while those from higher income homes ($150,000 or more) reported the highest level of use of most other streaming services. Children from higher income households likely have the resources to subscribe to multiple services.

When asked to list their most-used platform, more respondents selected YouTube than any other program, followed closely by TikTok (17% and 15%, respectively). Not surveyed, but of note for potential further exploration, is the amount of time this age group spends consuming content on TikTok as opposed to time spent creating for the platform. Although three of the top six responses indicate that users' most-used app is a form of social media (YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram), the other three top apps are streaming services (Netflix, Roblox, and Disney+).

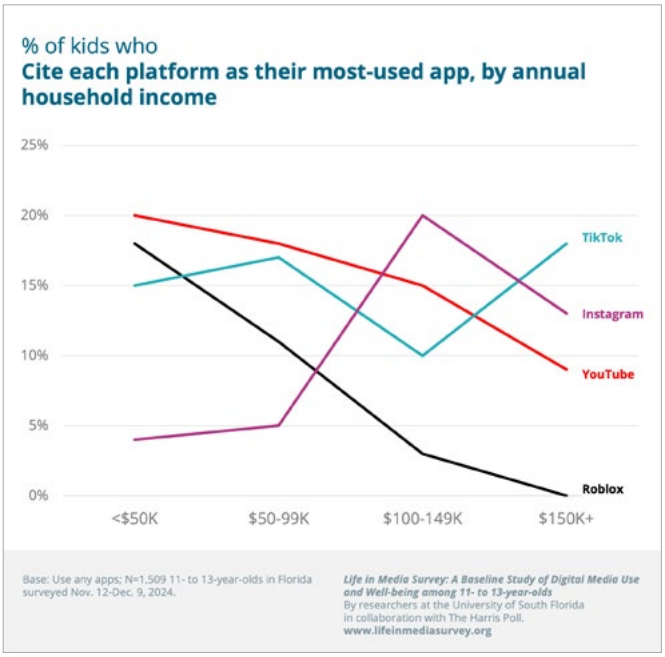


Figure 2.8

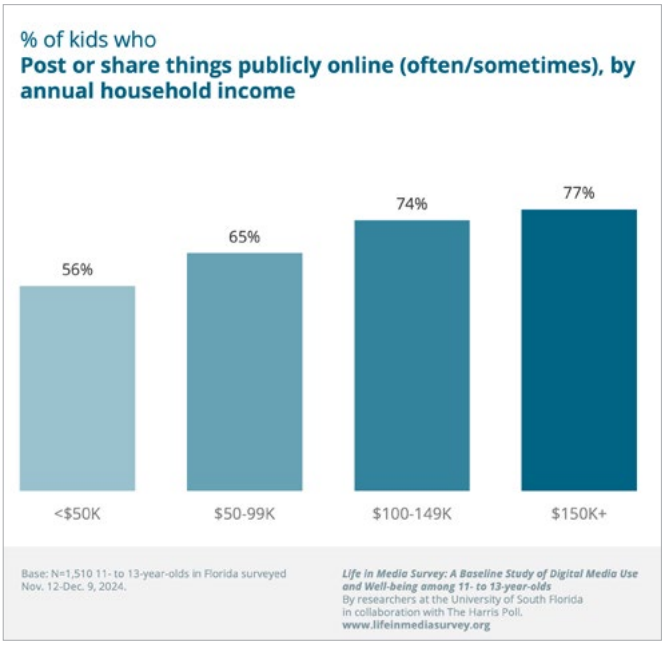


Figure 2.9

The most-preferred platforms differed by household income (Fig 2.8). YouTube and Roblox were the most preferred apps among children from low-income households (<$50,000 annual household income). The percentage of those who cited these apps as their favorite decreases as household income increases. There was a marked increase at $100,000 in citing Instagram as the preferred app, and those from the highest income households ($150,000 or more) cited TikTok as their most-preferred app.

Perhaps linked to their most-preferred apps, the likelihood to post or share things publicly online increases with household income (Fig 2.9), ranging from 56% among kids from the lowest income households to 77% among the highest income households. This is important, for, as we will see, posting publicly online is associated with significantly lower scores on mental well-being measures. TikTok and Instagram, the most preferred apps of kids from high income homes, lend themselves to active participation via posting and sharing content. Regarding the preferred apps of kids from lower income households, YouTube is likely used more to consume than to post content, and Roblox focuses more on gaming than on disseminating users' posts.

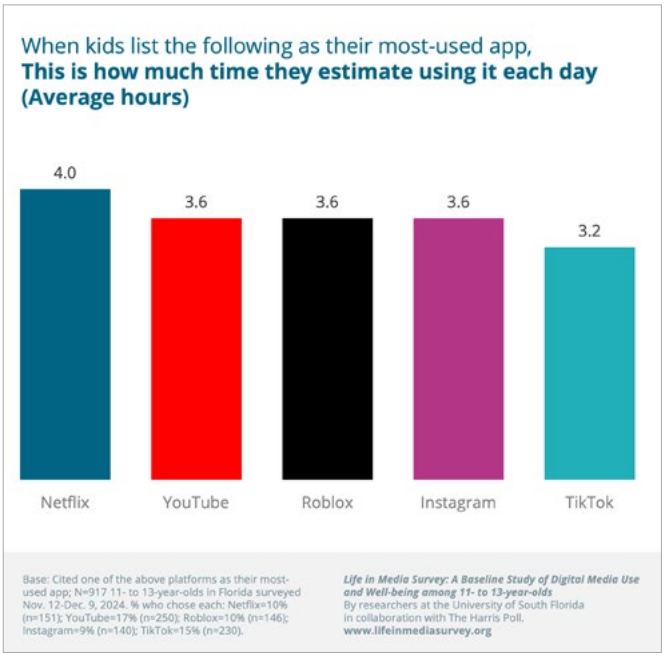


Figure 2.10

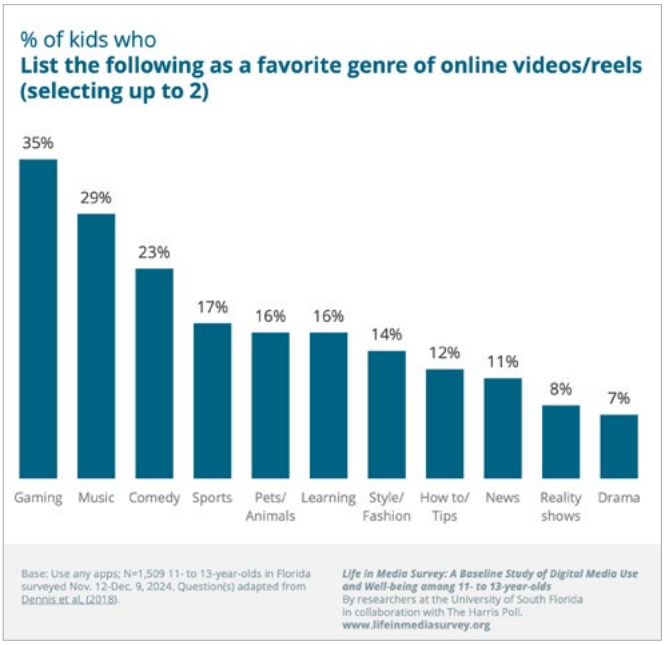


Figure 2.11

Our findings show that users spend almost four hours a day on their most-used app. Those who favor Netflix report using the app for an average of 4.0 hours a day, which is slightly higher than the average 3.6 hours reported by those who prefer YouTube, Roblox, and Instagram. The slight bump might be attributable to the longer-form content on Netflix. TikTok use averaged slightly lower, at 3.2 hours a day. Taken with the data from Figure 2.3—time spent on devices each day—users spend the majority of their total screentime on their most-used app.

Entertainment tops the favorite genres of online videos, with gaming listed by 35% of respondents, followed by music and comedy (29% and 23%, respectively, based on selecting up to two favorite genres). On the lower end, news is selected as a favorite genre by 11% of those surveyed, followed by reality shows (8%) and drama (7%). This indicates a preference for entertainment, and reinforces findings by Tamboer, et al. that many young people are not strongly motivated to consume news.

3. IN-PERSON AND DIGITAL ACTIVITIES

Kids with smartphones spend more time with friends in-person than kids without them.
Even modestly cyberbullied kids score poorly on measures of mental health.
Kids with screen time limits are more likely to do extracurricular activities than those without limits.

Going back to the 1960s, when researchers began studying the effects of heavy TV viewing among children, their concerns were dual: what are the effects on children of viewing hours upon hours of TV each day; and, which healthy and pro-social activities does heavy TV use displace? Concerns about digital media use among children today are similar: what are hours upon hours of screentime doing to kids cognitively, psychologically, and socially; and, which analog activities does a phone-based childhood limit, or even eliminate?

Even researchers in the no-phones-until-later-in-adolescence camp acknowledge that merely having a smartphone is probably not enough to make a child inactive, depressed, anxious, or a poor student. Twenge (2023) and Haidt (2024) both acknowledge that in most cases heavy cell phone use and social deprivation combined lead to negative outcomes among kids. Haidt does maintain, though, that smartphone use leads to social deprivation in many children, and two of the ultimate recommendations in his book are no smartphones until high school and no social media until age 16. But how much would such restrictions help? Based on data we have here, is cutting out smartphones and social media for years beyond when most kids currently use them a good idea? As elsewhere in our report (especially the Wellness chapter, but others, too), in this chapter we use our data to address some of these questions.

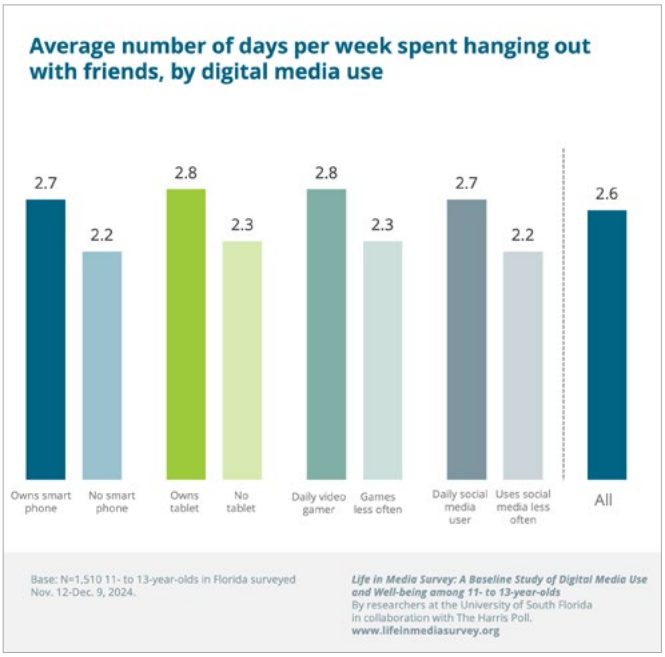


Figure 3.1

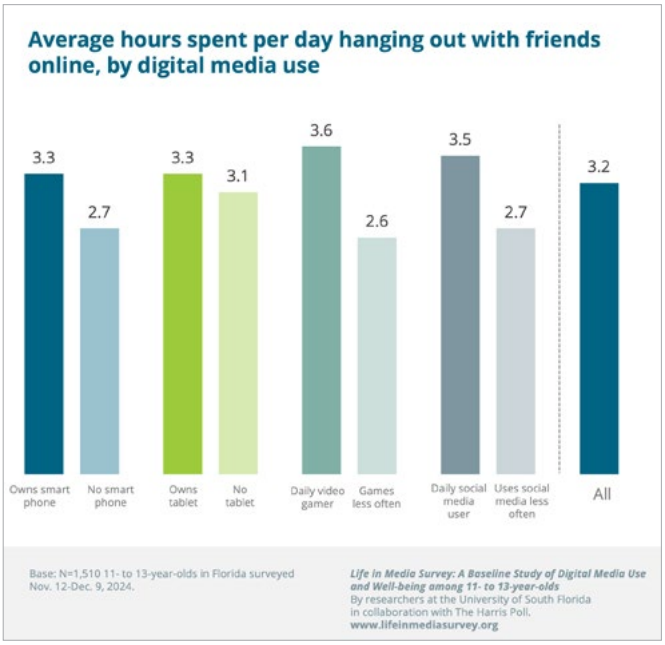


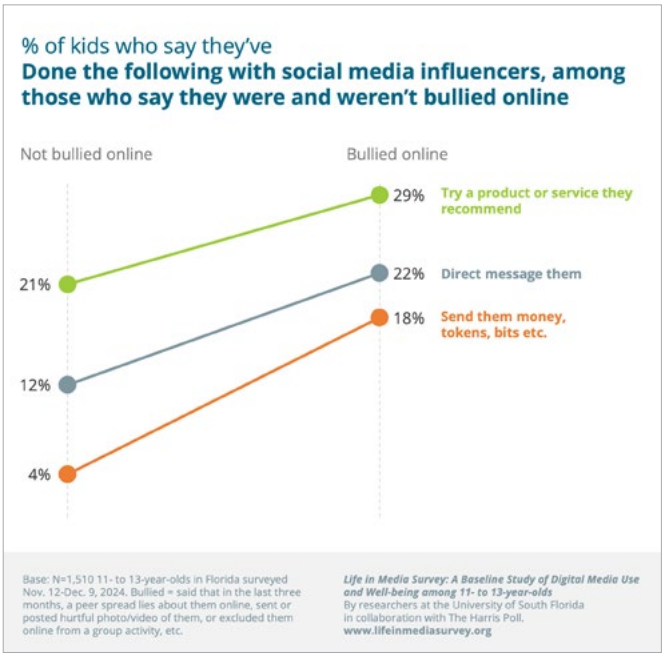
Figure 3.2

We asked kids to report how many days in a typical week they hang out with a friend(s) in-person and outside of school, and here, we compare the results by digital media use.

Contrary to the position that smartphone use is associated with fewer in-person meetups with friends, on average, smartphone owners spend nearly three days a week in-person with a friend(s), while kids with no smartphone spend closer to two days a week in-person with friends (Fig. 3.1). The same trend was seen for tablet ownership, daily video gaming, and daily social media use.

Kids with their own smartphone also spend more time in a typical week online with friends than do children without their own smartphone, which of course makes sense. Heavy gamers and heavy social media users also spend more time online with friends than lighter users do. The same is not true for tablet owners, who spend roughly the same amount of time online with friends as those who don't own a tablet (Fig. 3.2).

Of course, time online with friends may be salubrious, or not. There was a significant, though not huge, difference, in the amount of time respondents said they spend with friends online each day between kids who reported being cyberbullied and those who did not (2.9 hours vs. 3.4 hours, respectively, on average). Kids could be spending time with the same people who are cyberbullying them, or, hopefully, they've found friends online who are giving them support (or just not bullying them). A worrisome possibility, though, is that cyberbullied kids spend about the same amount of time online and could be subject to chronic mistreatment.



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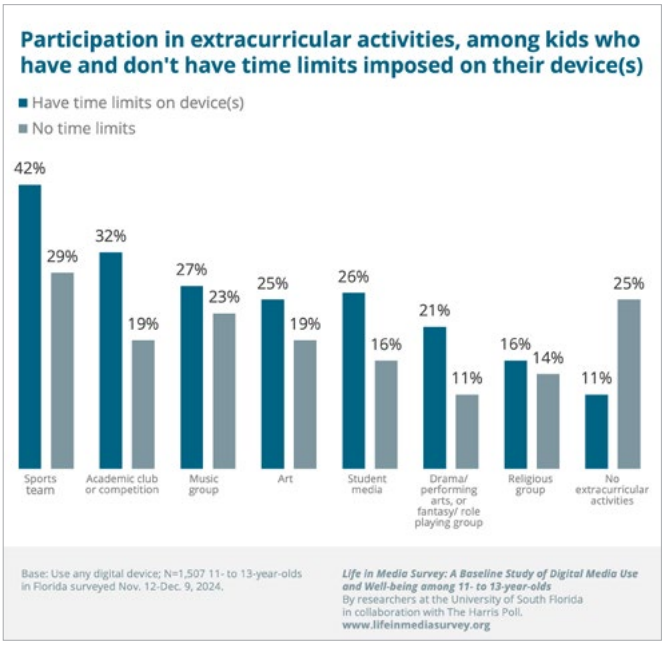


Figure 3.4

Among the activities cyberbullied kids do online more than non-bullied kids is engage with people they don't likely know personally: social media influencers (SMIs). Cyberbullied kids are four times as likely to give SMIs money or tokens, nearly twice as likely to direct message SMIs, and 40% more likely to buy a product or service they endorse compared to non-bullied children (Fig. 3.3).

Cyberbullied kids may be seeking to form parasocial relationships with SMIs, or to get relief and repose from bullying they experience elsewhere online, especially considering one in five cyberbullied kids in the sample said they've direct-messaged an SMI(s).

Among the things that can mitigate online bullying are extracurricular activities (though kids can be bullied on sports teams or in other extracurriculars). We asked kids which, if any, extracurricular groups or activities they belong to. A large majority of kids (80%) reported belonging to at least one, and the most popular activities were playing on a sports team (35%) and belonging to an academic club or music group (both 25%). While we find mixed results throughout our study on the effects of time and device limitations parents impose on their kids, with regard to extracurriculars, limits appear to be effective (Fig. 3.4). Of course, making kids engage in certain extracurriculars is an effective way to cut their screentime; more than a few parents have said, "You're not going to sit staring at that thing all day. I'm signing you up for soccer."

For almost every extracurricular activity assessed, more kids with device time limits reported participating in the activity than did kids with time limits imposed. And kids who face no device limitations were more than twice as likely as kids with no time limits to report that they do not participate in any extracurricular activity.

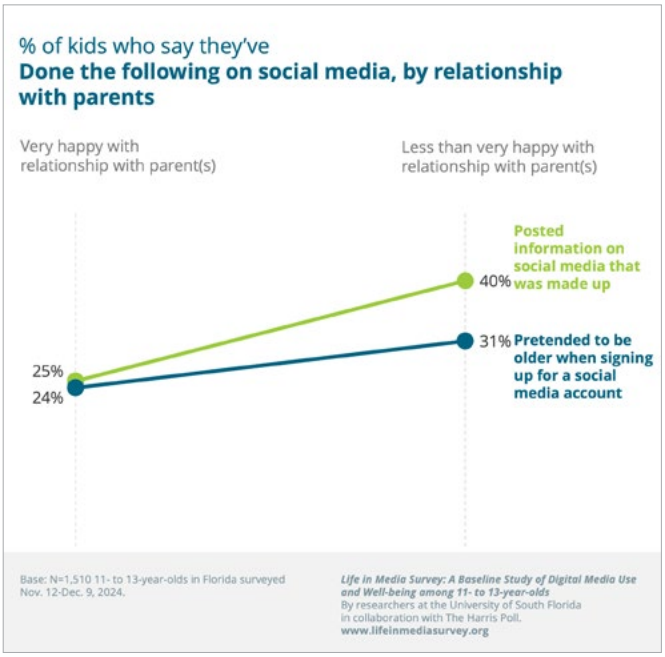


Figure 3.5

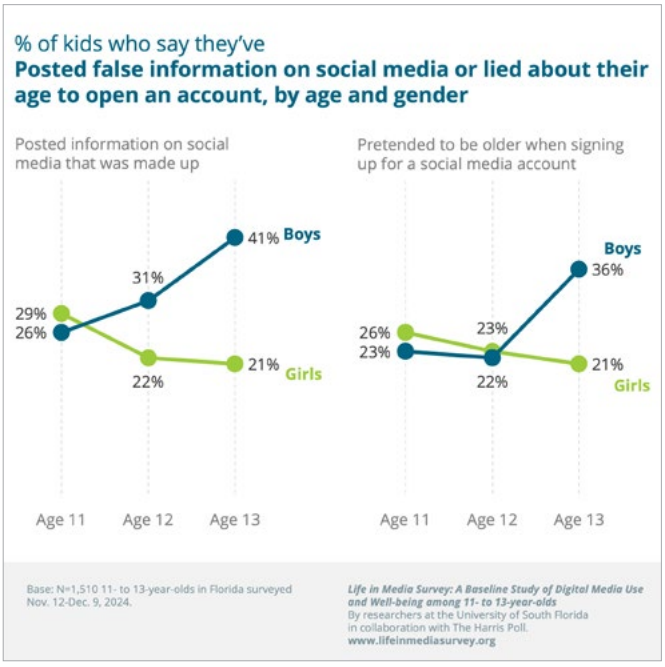


Figure 3.6

Kids' relationship with their parents also seems linked with falsifying information online. Kids who reported being *less* than "very happy" with the relationship with their parent(s) were more likely than kids who are very happy with the relationship to post things that are false on social media, and to have lied about their age when opening a social media account (Fig. 3.5). Across the *whole sample*, 29% of kids said they've posted something on social media that was false, and 26% said they've lied about their age when opening an account(s).

There were considerable differences by gender and age, as the share of boys who make such misrepresentations was elevated among older boys but fell among older girls (Fig. 3.6).

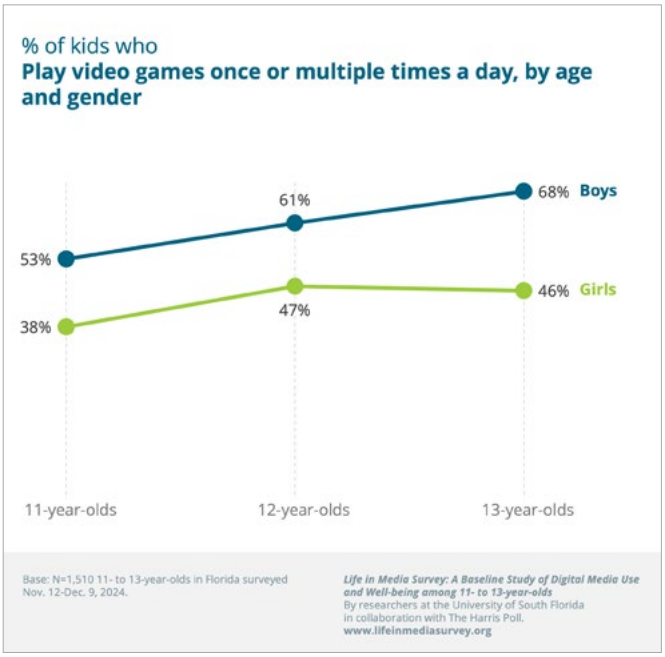


Figure 3.7

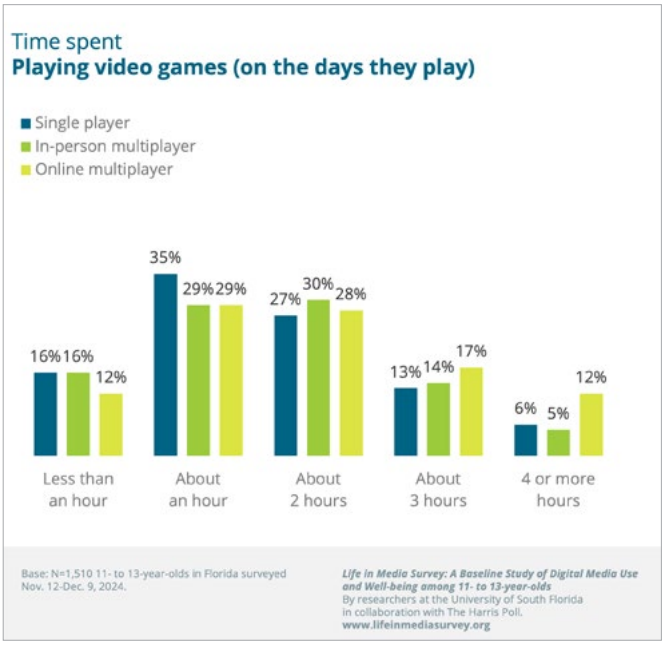


Figure 3.8

While almost all kids play video games—98% of both boys and girls—there were substantial age and gender differences in video gaming. Among 11-year-olds, the difference between boys and girls who game once or more a day was +15 percentage points; among 13-year-olds the difference was +22 points, though more boys as well as girls at age 13 said they game once or more times a day compared to those at age 11 (Fig. 3.7).

Kids who play video games do so using many formats including single player games, online multiplayer games, and in-person multiplayer games (97%, 93%, and 89%, respectively). But they tend to spend more time playing online multiplayer games than other formats. On the days they play video games, 19% play single player or in-person multiplayer game for three hours or more, compared to 29% who play online multiplayer games for the same amount of time (Fig. 3.8). The social aspect and ability to play with many different people, known or unknown, which exponentially expands the pool of players, likely contributes to the longer amount of time playing online multiplayer games.

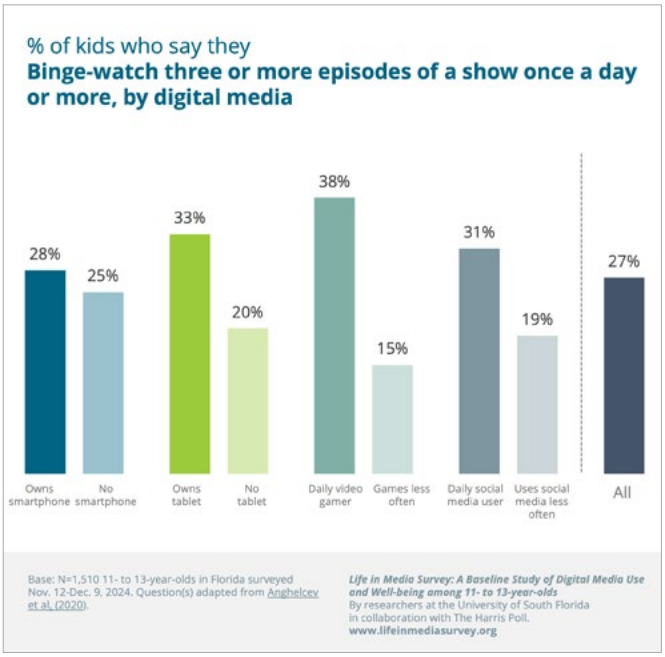


Figure 3.9

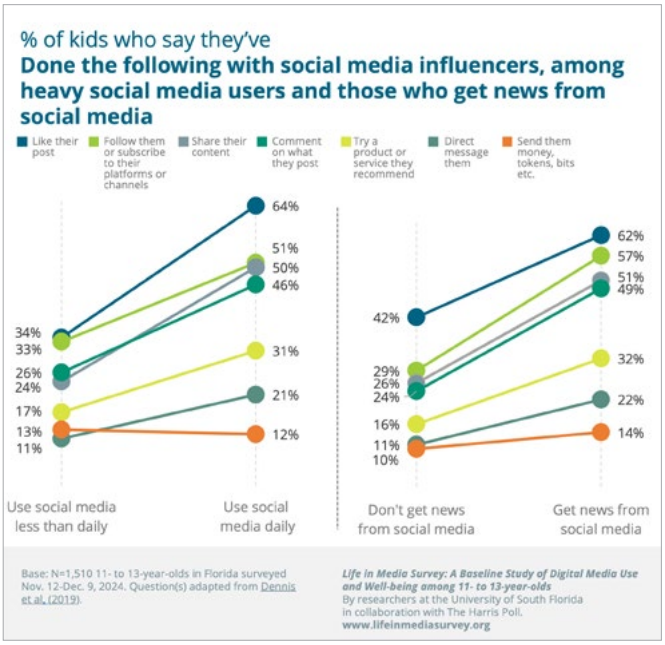


Figure 3.10

There's a media tendency first articulated by Lazarsfeld et al. (1944) called the "more-and-more phenomenon," whereby people who got news via, say, radio were likely to also get news from newspapers and magazines. In recent decades, other researchers have observed that people who use one form of electronic or digital media, say, streaming serial content, are more likely to use other forms of digital media, like podcasting on social media (Martin & Sharma, 2022). We observe the more-and-more tendency among kids in our sample, too (Fig. 3.9).

Daily video gamers and daily social media users were far more likely than lighter gamers and lighter social media users to say they binge-watch three or more episodes of a show once a day or more. One in four of all kids said they binge-watch in this way every day. Unsurprisingly, tablet owners were much more likely to binge-watch than kids with no tablet, though this wasn't the case for smartphones. Not giving kids their own tablet may help reduce binge-watching.

The more-and-more phenomenon was also observed among kids who use social media daily and get news from social media, who were, broadly speaking, much more likely to engage with SMIs than those who use social media less often or who don't get news from social media (Fig. 3.10).

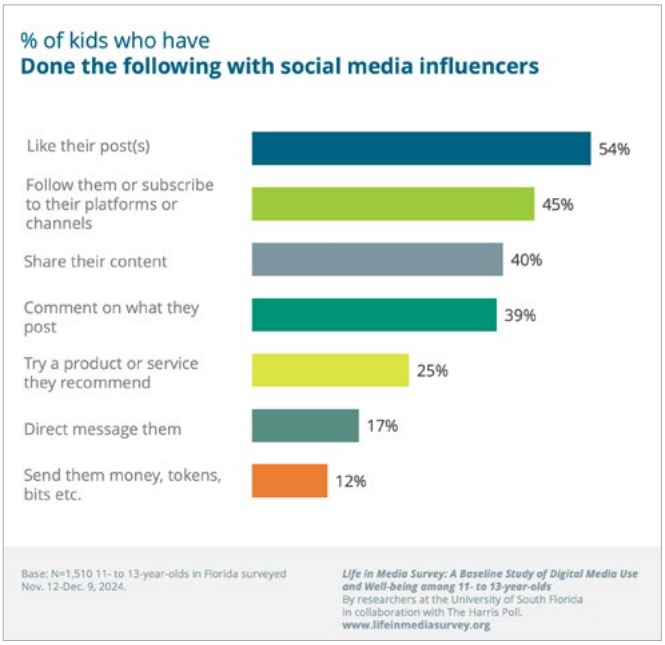
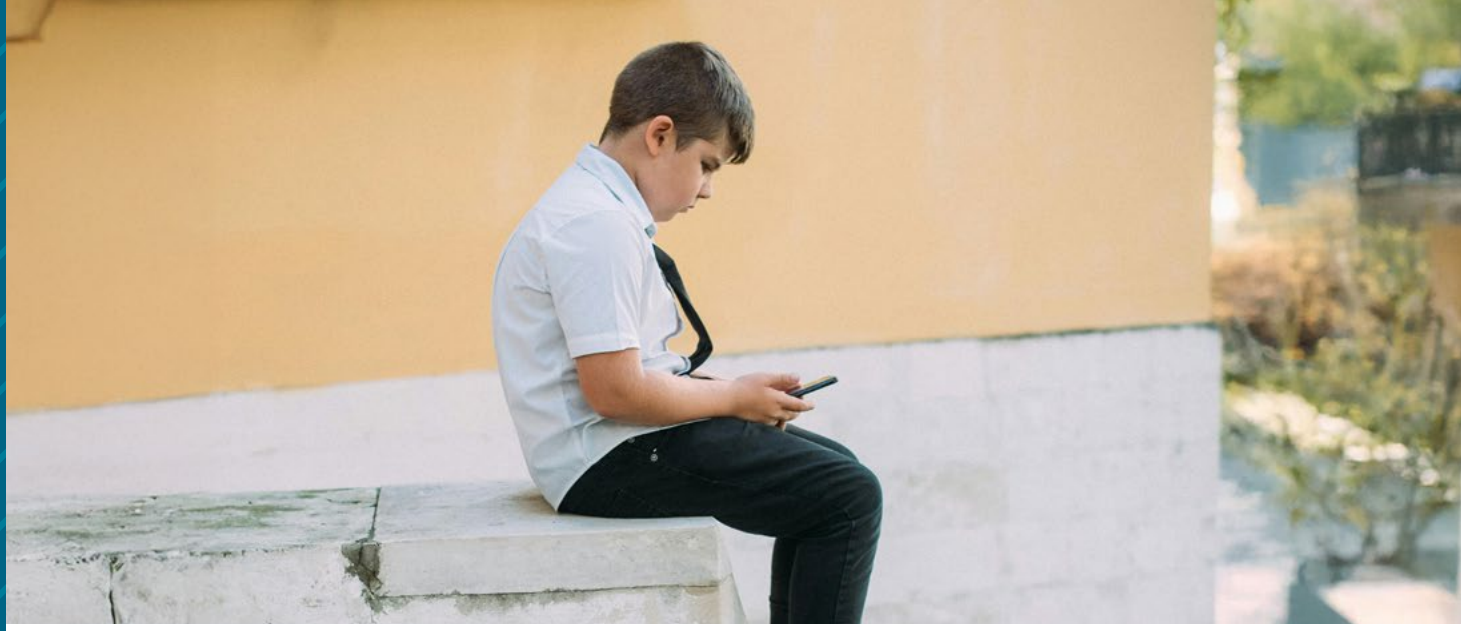


Figure 3.11

Kids who get news from social media in particular were more likely to follow SMIs, direct-message them, and to send them money or other remunerations. Still, many kids engage with SMIs, regardless of other media use habits. Importantly, one in four of all respondents said they try products or services SMIs endorse, highlighting the importance and efficacy of this kind of marketing, and one in eight of all kids give money or other material rewards to SMIs (Fig. 3.11).



4. PERCEPTIONS OF TECHNOLOGY AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Kids are split on whether social media are harmful.
Around half of kids say digital technology disrupts their daily lives.
Bullied kids report more negative effects of technology than non-bullied peers.

When children were asked whether social media causes more harm than good, their perceptions were evenly distributed. About one-third of the kids agreed that social media causes more harm than good (34%), a third disagreed, and a third was neutral. This equal distribution suggests there is not a clear consensus among kids about social media's value. Rather, individual kids' perceptions of social media likely differ based on their unique media experiences, behaviors, and habits. With this as a backdrop, this chapter analyzes other factors related to kids' perceptions of social media and digital devices.

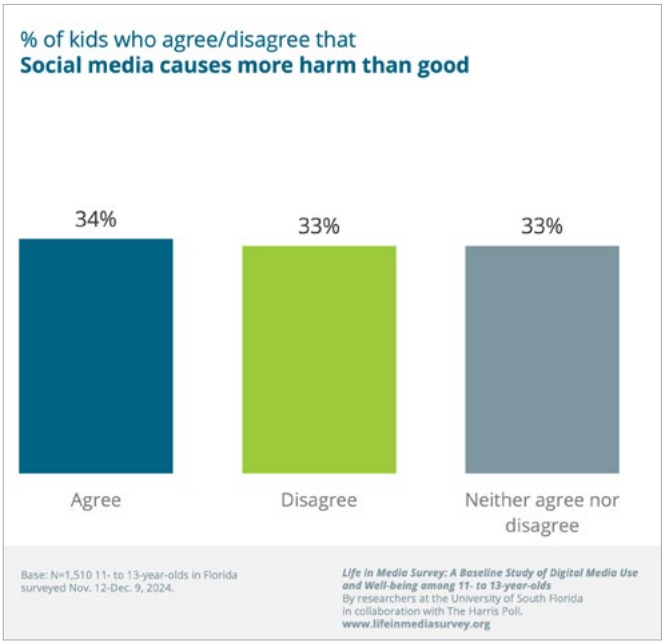


Figure 4.1

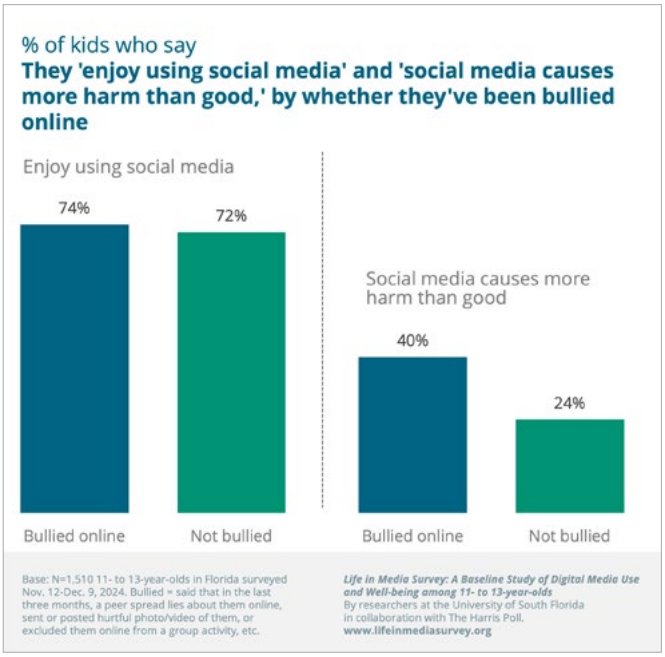


Figure 4.2

Being bullied online does not appear to deter kids from enjoying social media. Kids who were bullied online were as likely as those who were not bullied to say they enjoy using social media (74% and 72%, respectively). However, as we'll see, many bullied kids said social media cause more harm than good.

The perceived technological impairment (PTI) scale (Burnell et al., 2023) measures a person's perception that technology impairs their daily lives. Having a stronger recognition of one's own problems, i.e., technological impairment, is important for two reasons. First, research shows that recognizing one's media use predicts more self-control over media behavior as adolescents grow older (Burnell et al.). Second, the relationship between media use and adolescent depression or anxiety aren't always as apparent or direct as one might think. The relationship between the amount of media use and mental well-being is often very nuanced. We (Song et al., 2025, under review) found that the recognition of the problems in their own behavior, hence PTI rather than depression, is more consistently related to the amount of media use. In turn, PTI also strongly predicts adolescent depression and anxiety. This means that it is the recognition of a problematic media experience that is positively associated with depression and anxiety, not the sheer amount of media use. Thus, heavy media users may not feel depressed or anxious if they do not think their behavior is problematic.

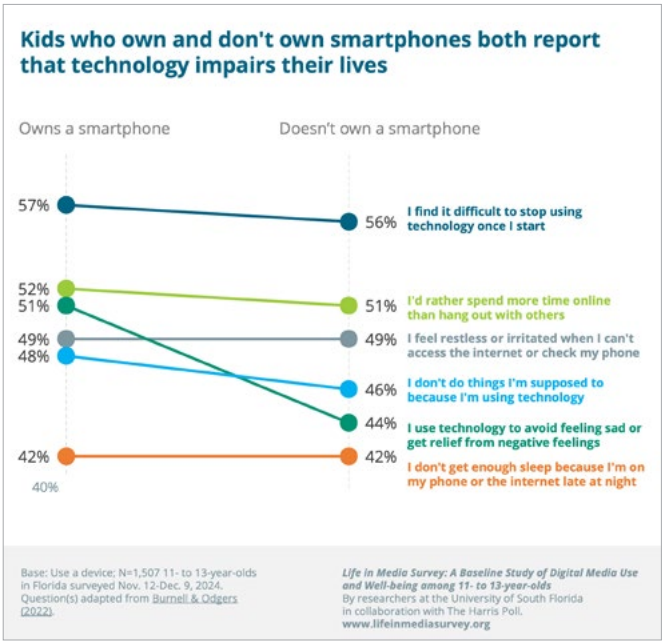


Figure 4.3

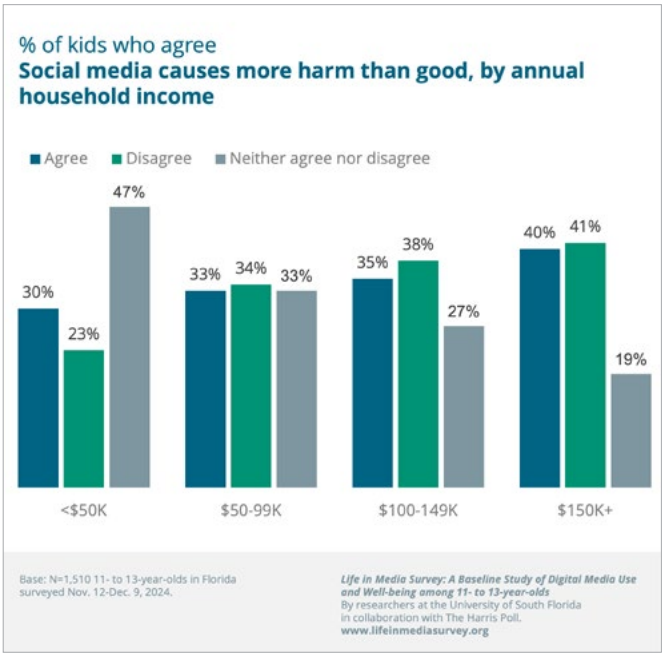


Figure 4.4

Overall, an alarming number of kids reported adverse effects of technology in their daily lives. Around half of the kids reported that they felt digital technology interferes with their daily activities (Fig. 4.3). This pattern was almost consistent regardless of whether they own a smartphone. This parity may exist because it takes less than having a smartphone to experience the negative influence of media technologies. Among the kids who did not have their own smartphones, many of them reported that they share a phone with someone or regularly use someone else's phone. Many kids without a smartphone also own, borrow, or share other digital devices—tablets, for example—years before they own a smartphone. This suggests that simply limiting or delaying ownership of a smartphone may not be an antidote to unhealthy media use.

One notable difference between owners and non-owners of smartphones, albeit small, was that kids who owned a smartphone were more likely to use technology to avoid feeling sad or get relief from negative feelings (51% vs. 44%). The difference in using technology for mood management is possibly because such use is more easily achieved when an individual has private and easy access to their own device.

Kids from greater-income homes tended to have stronger opinions about social media (Fig. 4.4). As household income increased, kids were less likely to have neutral opinions about social media being harmful. Kids were more likely to either agree or disagree that social media causes more harm than good as household income increased, from 30% (agree) and 27% (disagree) at $50,000 or less to 40% and 41%, respectively, at $150,000 or more. This result is interesting, particularly when compared to the higher likelihood of greater-income household kids posting publicly online (Fig. 2.9) and reporting social media as their most-used apps (Fig. 2.8).

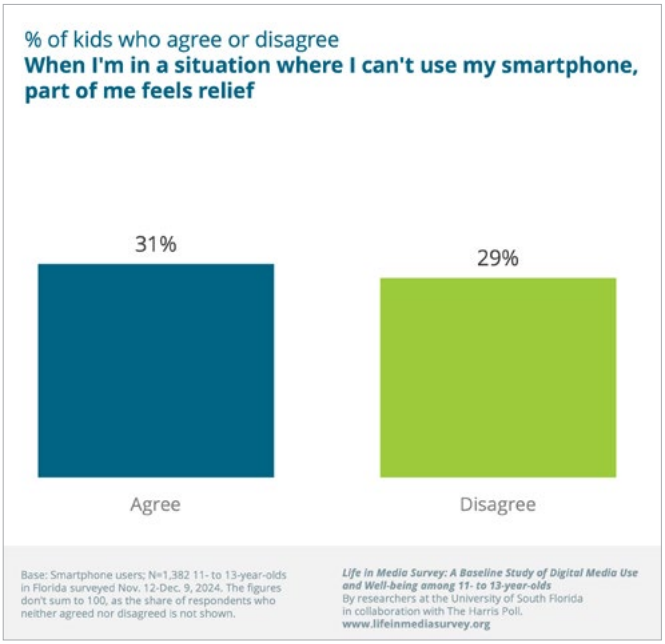


Figure 4.5

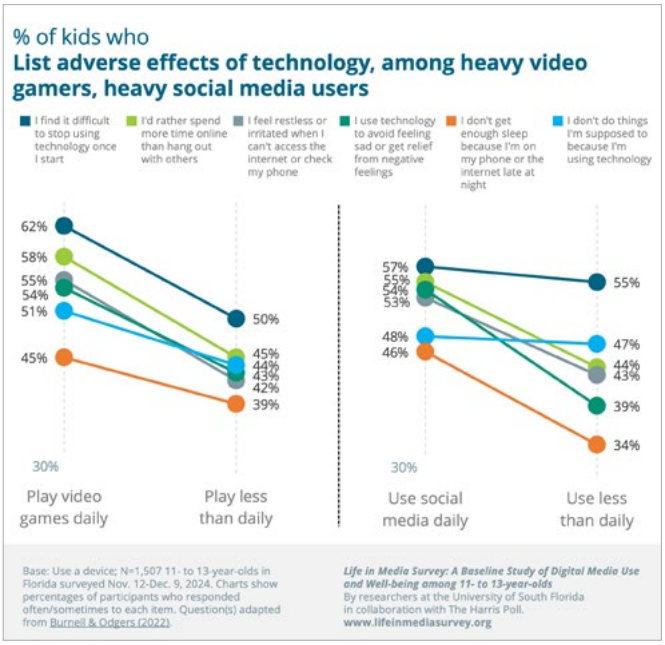


Figure 4.6

Nearly one-third of kids (31%) admitted that they felt relief when they were in a situation where they could not use their smartphone. This means that a substantial number of kids who agreed with this statement may not have the willpower to fight the urge to use their smartphones, and such lack of control leads to a counterintuitive sense of relief when they're kept from their phones.

Assuming increased use of video games and social media eventually becomes problematic, research predicts that kids using media more frequently are more likely to report adverse emotions or effects caused by technology. This was indeed the case for both video games and social media use overall—those who game or use social media daily were more likely to report experiencing negative effects of technology.

Kids who had been bullied online were more likely than un-bullied kids to report that their daily lives were negatively affected by technology, consistently for all the impairment questions that we asked. The magnitude of differences between bullied and un-bullied kids was large as well—bullied kids were between 40% and 130% more likely than un-bullied kids to be negatively affected by technology.

This result does not mean that bullied kids perceive media technologies more critically, nor does being bullied halt kids from using media technologies. According to our data, bullied and un-bullied kids similarly enjoy using social media and spend similar amounts of time per day on digital devices. Figure 4.7 shows that bullied kids are significantly more likely to prefer to stay online than to spend time with others in-person.

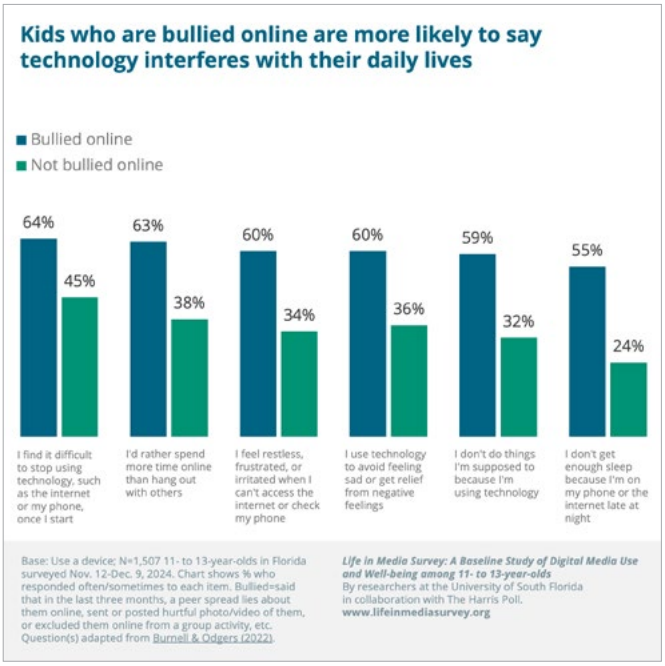


Figure 4.7

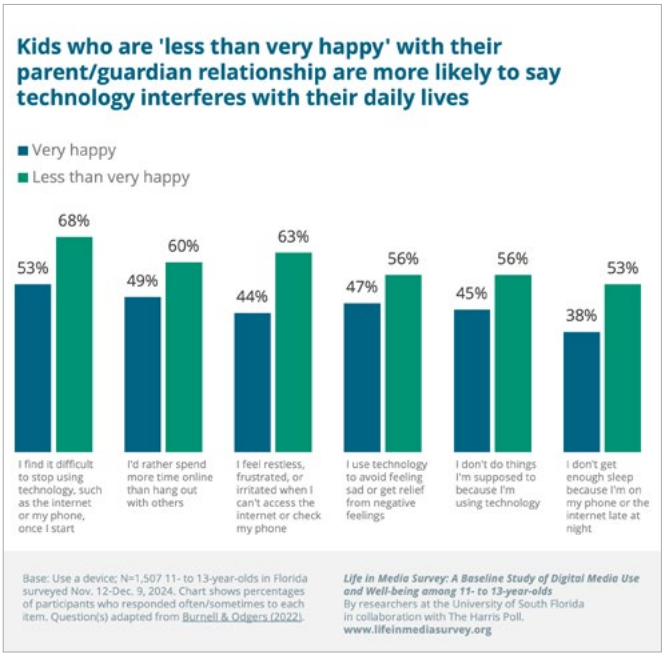


Figure 4.8

We find that kids who were bullied online have a stronger, and more fraught relationship with technology compared to those who were not bullied. Those who were bullied online were more likely to say they find it difficult to stop using technology; would rather spend more time online than with others; feel restless, frustrated, or irritated when they can't be online; use technology to avoid negative feelings; fail to meet their obligations due to their technology use; and sleep less because they are online at night.

Kids who reported being less than "very happy" with their relationships with their parents were more likely to report having adverse emotions or effects of technology compared to those with stronger parental relationships. The causality of this correlation is likely dependent on different circumstances: some kids may use technologies to escape unsatisfactory relationships with their caregivers, while other kids may feel less happy about their parents because they are told they use technology too much, which often by itself is a cause of parent-child conflict. We speculate that for many kids, the causality is reciprocal; they are in the beginning, or in the middle of, a negative loop between increased technology use and parent-child conflict created by such increased use.

5. NEWS

Trust in journalists varies by race and socioeconomic status.
Half of kids say they sometimes or often avoid news.
Cyberbullied kids are more likely to follow news than un-bullied kids.

Children are often assumed to be passive news consumers, non-consumers of news, or even proactive news avoiders, and some evidence supports these perceptions (The News Literacy Project, 2024; Lowensetin-Barkai & Lev-on, 2022). Due to such assumptions, though, news consumption among children is understudied. Research that has studied news consumption among adolescents often focuses on how their relationship with news is shaped by parents, teachers, and other adults in their lives. News use among 12- to 14-year-olds in Sweden was found to be shaped—researchers even used the word "restricted"—by their parents and schools (Frei et al., 2024; see also Edgerly et al., 2018), while peers significantly influence news use among older teens.

Socialization forces are surely at work in news use among children, but kids nonetheless have considerable agency in their lives to avoid, consume, ignore, or share news, especially as the vast majority of kids in our sample are walking around with smartphones—digital news receivers—in their pockets.

Hoping to add both clarity and specificity to our knowledge about how and under what conditions young adolescents engage with news, or don't, we asked respondents a wide array of questions about their news habits. Results do not necessarily paint the 11- to 13-year-olds in our sample as rabid newsjunkies, but they also do not depict young adolescents as news avoiders across the board.

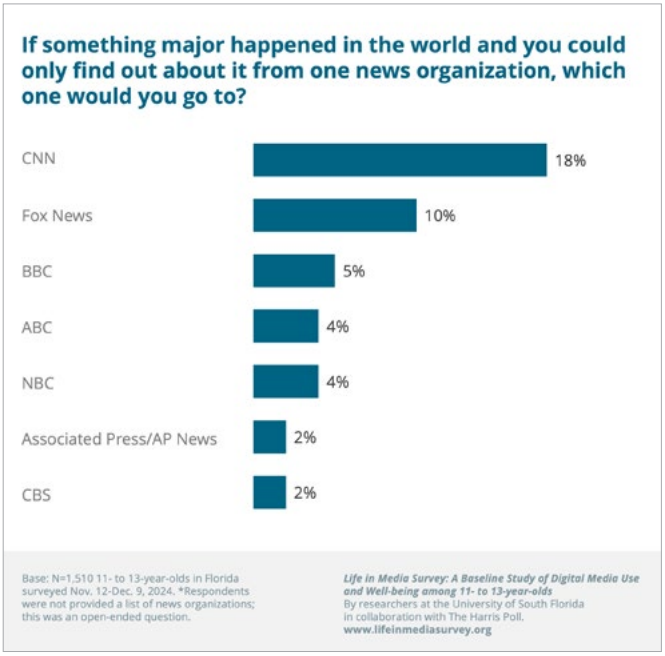


Figure 5.1

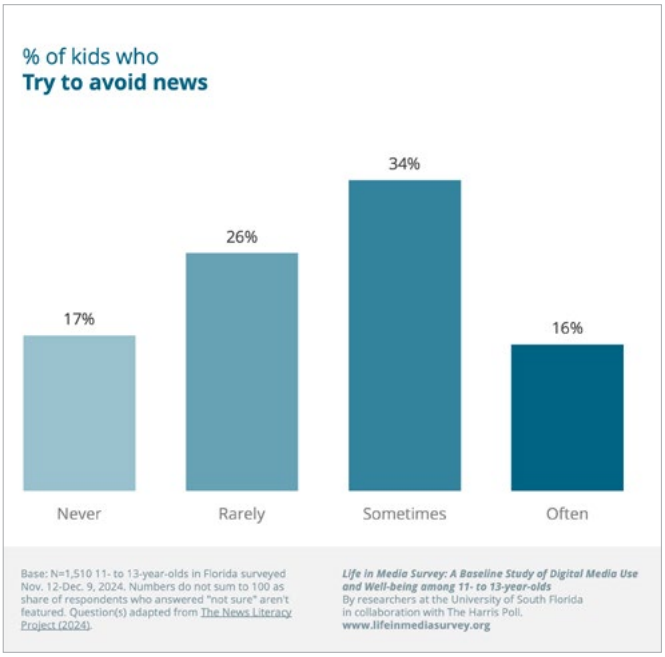
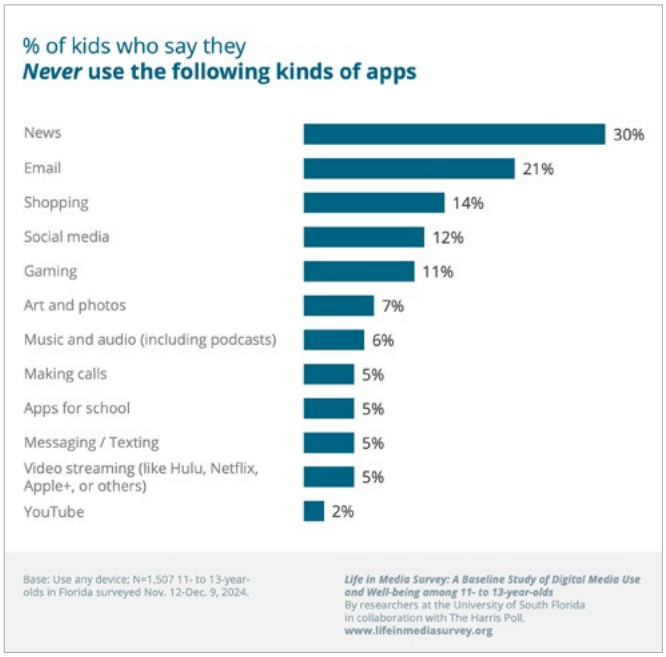


Figure 5.2

Let's start with breaking news. We told respondents to consider a scenario when something major happened in the world and they could only learn about it from one news organization, and asked them which news outlet they would utilize. While small percentages wrote simply "the internet" or "Google," a majority of kids named known news brands: four in 10 respondents said CNN, FOX News, BBC, ABC, or NBC (Fig. 5.1).

While this needn't indicate that respondents regularly get news from these outlets, it shows at least that, to both researchers and kids as young as 11, "news organization" means roughly the same thing, and that, amid a major breaking news story, most kids would know where to get some information.

Still, half of kids in our sample said they try to avoid news sometimes or often (Fig. 5.2). While this figure seems high, some of it may have been driven by the timing of our data collection, which commenced a week after the 2024 U.S. presidential election, and the bombardment of news coverage, political ads, news coverage of political ads, and so on that consumers in Florida endured during the campaign. In a 2024 survey, The News Literacy Project also reported that about half of kids say they sometimes or often try to avoid news (we adapted and used The NLP's news avoidance question in our survey).



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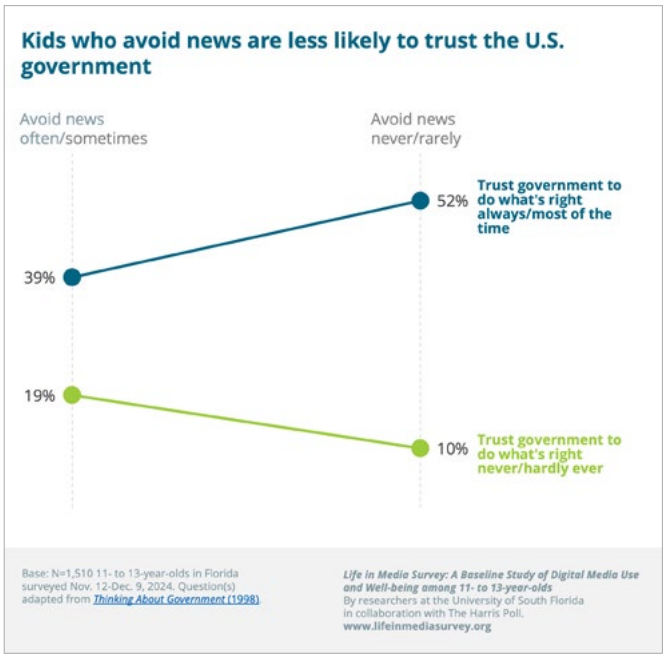
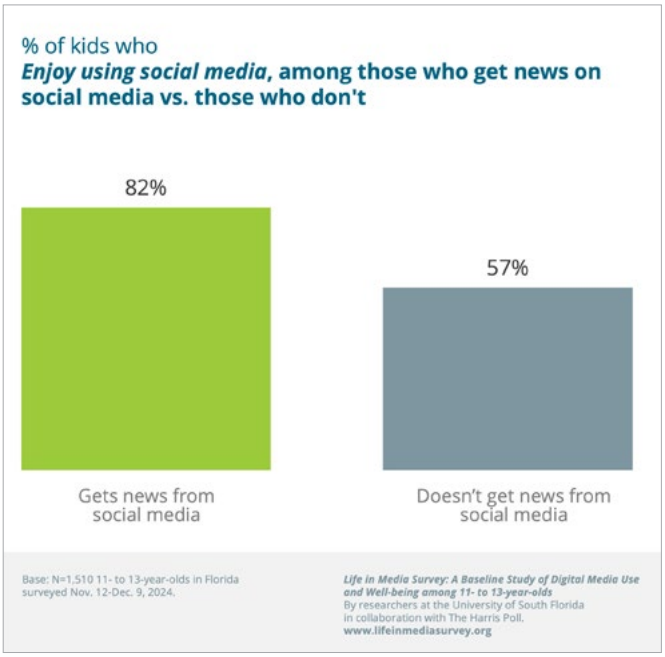


Figure 5.4

In addition to participants reporting their news avoidance, we also have a concrete measure of eschewing news; 30% of kids in the sample said they never use news app(s), the highest such percentage for any of the app categories we queried (Fig. 5.3). The only other app category that comes close is email, which 21% of kids say they never use. One in eight kids say they never use social media apps.

News avoiders were far less likely to say they trust the U.S. government than respondents who don't avoid news, partly contravening a prior research finding that news consumption positively predicts political cynicism (Cappella & Jamieson, 1996). Rather than news consumption alone driving political cynicism, political cynicism may contribute to news avoidance.



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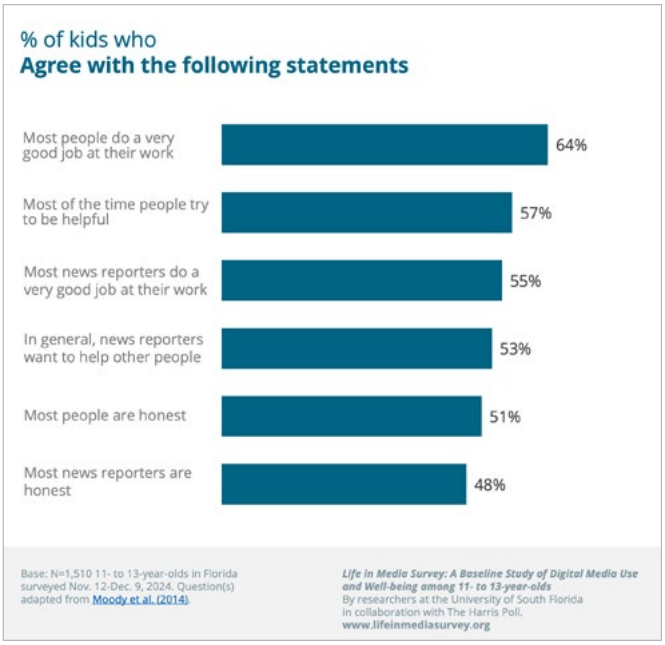
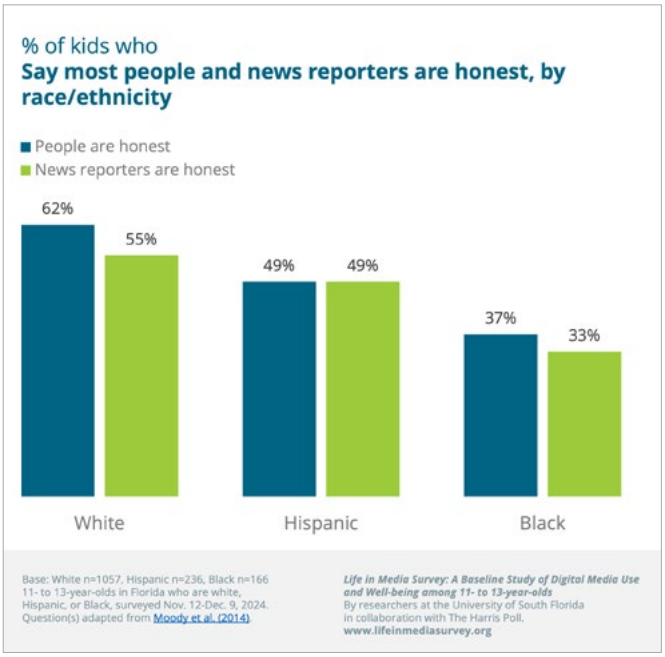


Figure 5.6

If consuming the endless social comparisons children are exposed to on social media causes them any distress, getting news from social media apparently does not. Kids who get news from social media were far more likely than kids who don't to say they enjoy using social platforms (Fig. 5.5). Whether consuming news itself leads to a more favorable evaluation of social media or a break from the social aspects of networking platforms account for the difference, delivering age-relevant news may be something social networks should do more often, even for audiences as young as 11- and 12-years-old.

And children may be receptive to more news in their social media feeds and reels; half or more kids sampled said news reporters are honest, that they generally want to help others, and that they do a good job at their work (Fig. 5.6).



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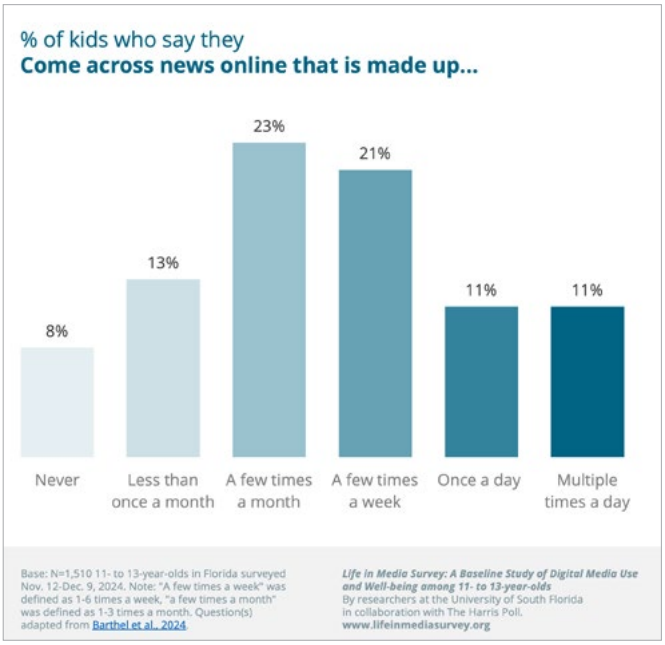


Figure 5.8

While many kids view news and journalists in a favorable light, there are stark differences by race and ethnicity (Fig. 5.7). Solid majorities of white respondents said that both people in general and news reporters are honest, though slightly fewer respondents were confident in the honesty of reporters. Half of Hispanic respondents said both reporters and people can be trusted, while just one in three Black children said the same.

Regardless of race, many respondents said they frequently encounter news online they believe is fake (Fig. 5.8). Four in 10 respondents said they come across online news that is made up a few times a week or more.

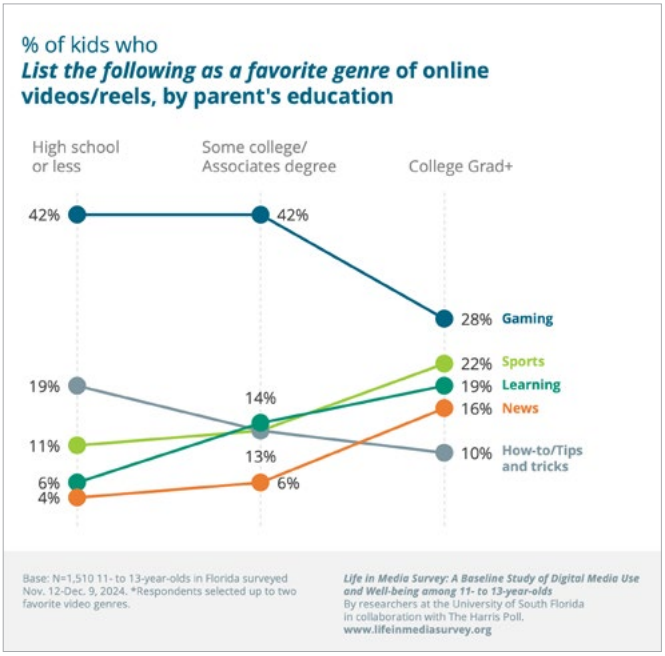


Figure 5.9

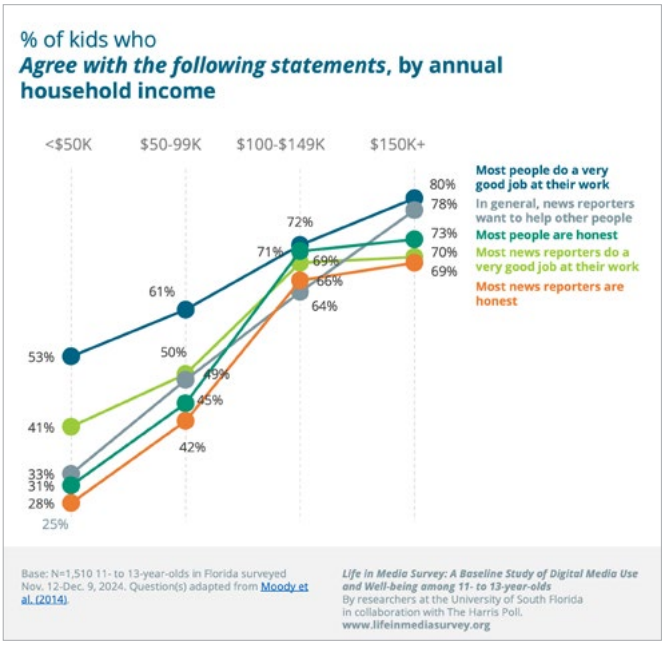


Figure 5.10

Among many kids in the sample, news consumption and attitudes about journalism differ according to some of the characteristics of their parents or guardians. Viewing videos or reels about gaming and how-to tips/tricks are less popular among kids whose parents reported higher levels of education (Fig. 5.9). Kids of highly educated parents were more likely to list news, learning videos/reels, and sports among their favorites.

Children from wealthier homes expressed more faith in journalists and people generally than did children from households with less income (Fig. 5.10). If wealthier adults feel the system is working pretty well for them, their kids may feel similarly.

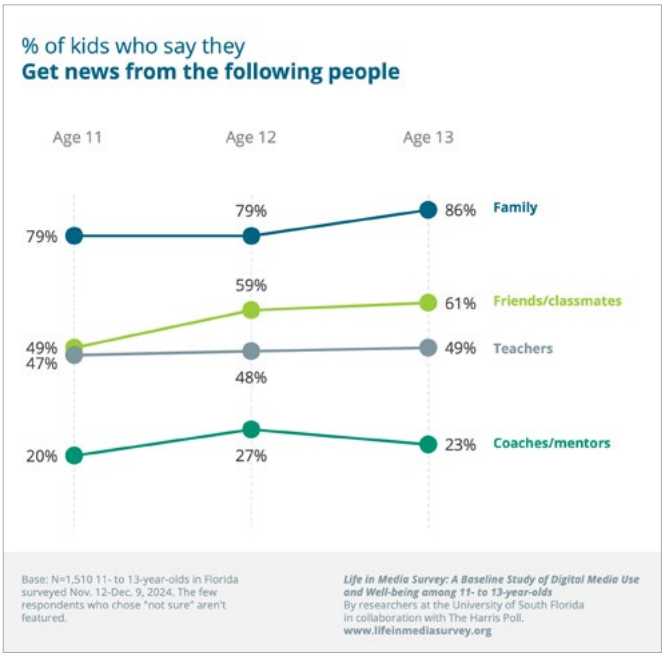


Figure 5.11

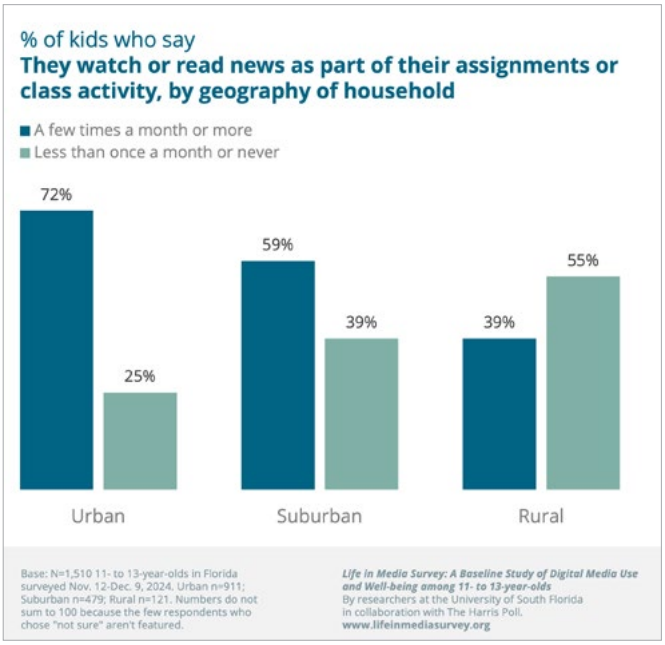


Figure 5.12

More of the older kids than younger kids in our sample reported getting news in-person from family and from friends but getting news from teachers and coaches and mentors did not change much across the age groups (Fig. 5.11). As kids enter puberty, they may be more likely to rely on news from friends and less so from teachers and coaches.

News and current events appear to be part of school curricula, exposing kids to news at school if not at home, but there are wide differences by geography. Seventy-two percent of kids living in urban areas said they read or watch news at school a few times a month or more as part of their assignments and class activity, but only 39% of kids in rural settings said the same. This reflects recent research findings on "news deserts," which chronicles the closure of local news outlets in rural and poor areas and what the losses mean to those communities (Abernathy, P.M., 2018).

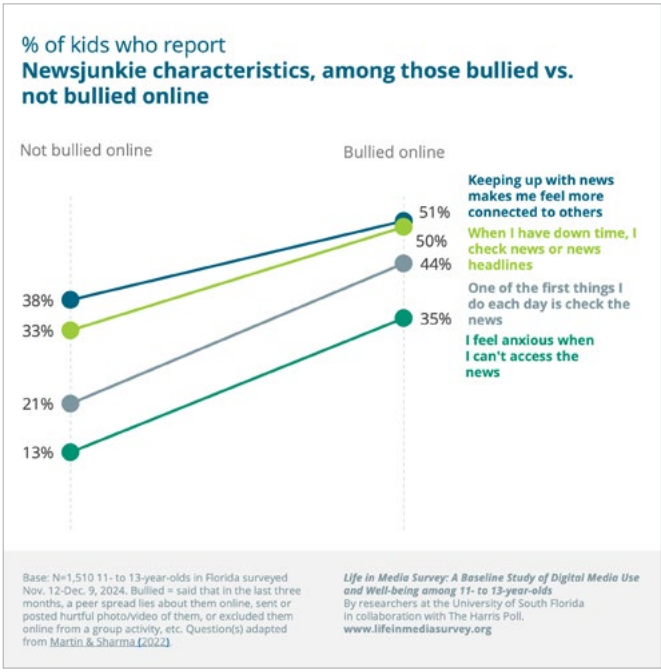


Figure 5.13

News consumption habits appear to differ according to how kids are treated online by their peers. Children who are cyberbullied scored higher on each of four measures of the "newsjunkie" index (see Martin & Sharma, 2023) than kids who aren't suffering cyberbulling (Fig. 5.13). Cyberbullied children in our sample were those who said they endured one or more specific harms in the prior three months, such as a peer spreading lies or rumors about them online, having hurtful photos or videos of them disseminated among their peers, or being excluded from an online peer activity. Cyberbullied kids were more likely than non-bullied kids to say that keeping up with news makes them feel more connected to other people; that they check news in their downtime; that they check the news first thing each day; and that they feel anxious when they can't access news.

In a cross-sectional survey, we are unable to determination the direction of this correlation, though it's likely bi-directional: kids who are digitally bullied and excluded by their peers may consume news as a distraction from their mistreatment, while kids who are heavy consumers of news and know a lot about current events may be perceived by their peers as uncool, and then subjected to bullying. That more bullied than non-bullied kids said keeping up with news makes them feel more socially connected, though, may indicate that many bullied kids consume news to fit in more with adults or precocious peers.

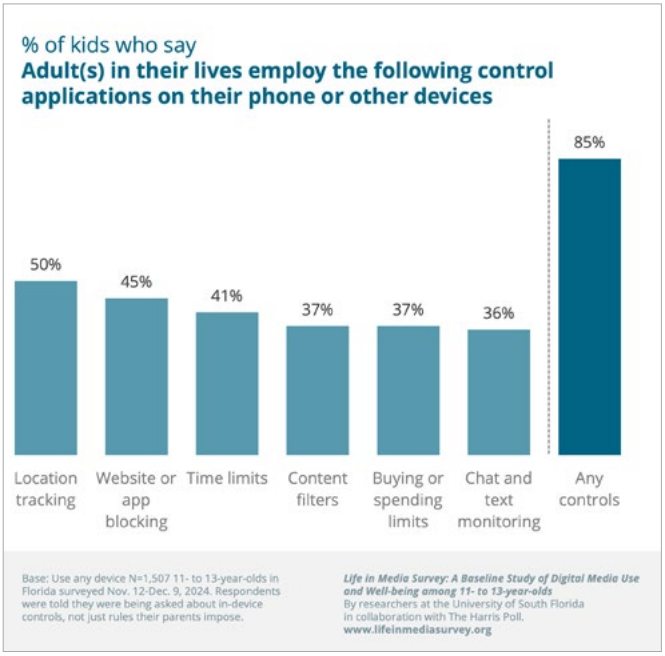
6. PARENTS AND SCHOOLS

Kids limited by parental device controls report less satisfaction with relationships with their parents.

Kids who face strict media controls are more likely to create multiple social media accounts.

Many kids in public schools say social media aren't blocked at their school, which violates Florida law.

Parents and schools are typically the main sources of control and supervision over children's digital media use. Accordingly, there has been a push from both the scientific community and popular media to encourage parents to regulate and restrict their children's media use (Haidt, 2024), with many parental control apps now available to aid this process. Likewise, more than a dozen U.S. states have now enacted restrictions or bans on cell phone use in schools (Boran, 2024), and even in states without such policies, individual districts and schools often place limits on access to cell phones and social media on school grounds. While parental digital media monitoring is often linked with positive youth outcomes (Chen & Shi, 2018; Collier et al., 2016), the results are mixed and often depend on the ways in which monitoring is enacted, with app-based parental controls appearing potentially problematic (Ghosh et al., 2018a). Moreover, research on the effects of school cell phone bans on student achievement is limited and inconclusive (Kemp et al., 2024; Kessel et al., 2020; Beland & Murphy, 2016). We therefore sought to examine the types of parental and school digital media controls that children in our sample reported, as well as how those controls are linked with specific digital behaviors.



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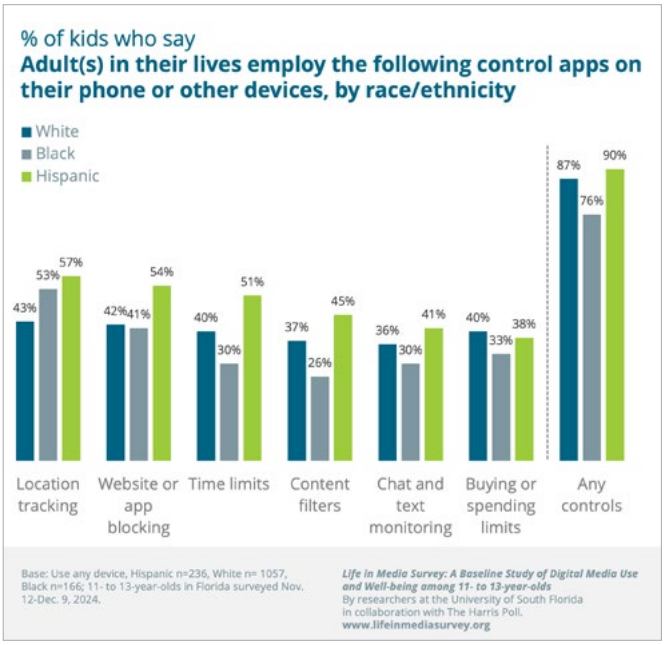


Figure 6.2

The vast majority (85%) of kids surveyed reported that an adult in their life uses at least one parental control app or feature to monitor their device use (Fig 6.1). Location tracking was the most common form of parental control, followed closely by website blocking and time limits. Chat and text monitoring was the least frequently cited parental control feature but was still mentioned by over a third of kids in the survey.

However, there were some notable racial and ethnic differences in the use of parental control features (Fig 6.2). Overall, Hispanic kids were slightly more likely than white kids to report parents using control apps on their devices, and Black kids were the least likely to report such controls. This pattern was particularly apparent for automated time limits, content filters, and chat and text monitoring, which aligns with evidence that Hispanic parents in the U.S. are more likely than parents of other ethnic or racial groups to worry about their children facing physical risks (Pew Research Center, 2023) and risks online (Pew Research Center, 2022). The major exceptions to this pattern were the use of buying and spending limits, where white children reported more controls, and location tracking, where white children reported less controls compared to either minority group, perhaps due to racial and ethnic differences in household income and neighborhood safety.

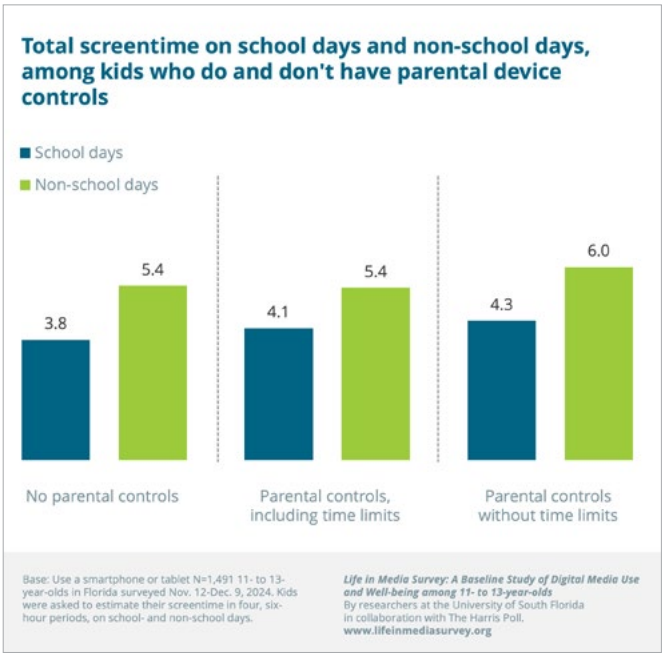


Figure 6.3

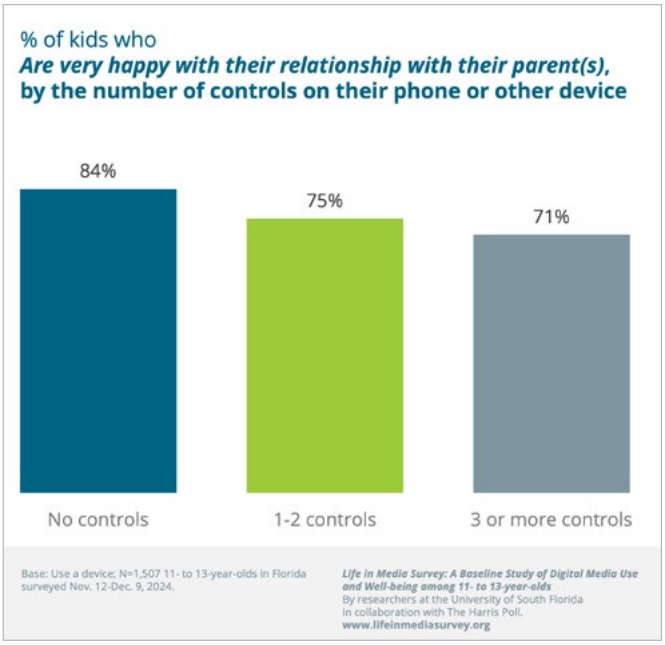


Figure 6.4

The use of parental control apps also showed an inverse relationship with kids' total screentime (Fig 6.3). Among kids who use a smartphone or tablet, those who have parental control apps on their device(s) (e.g., content filters, chat/text monitoring, location tracking) but no automated time limits spend about 35 minutes more time per day on their device(s) than those with no parental controls. Moreover, even kids with a time-limiting app on their device(s) spend 20 minutes more on their phone or tablet on school days than those with no control apps. Although potentially counterintuitive, these findings could indicate that parental control apps may act as a "crutch" for some parents, enabling them to feel comfortable allowing their kids to use devices for long periods because the child behaviors are "monitored." Such an explanation aligns with findings that adolescents sometimes believe parental control apps are a sign of "lazy" parenting (Ghosh et al., 2018b). Alternatively, it may be that parents respond to their children's tendency to engage in extended device use by incorporating parental control apps to make the experience seem safer.

Kids with more parental control applications on their device(s) were less likely to report being "very happy" with the relationship with their parents (Fig 6.4). This aligns with research showing that parental control apps may damage trust between children and parents (ScienceDaily, 2018). Importantly, automated time limits, content filters, and chat and text monitoring seem to be driving these effects; enacting location tracking on devices does not appear to be linked with parent-child relationship quality. We speculate that families may consider location tracking to be more an issue of maintaining children's physical safety than controlling their behavior, and thus children may perceive it to be more within parental rights and a sign of love and care than mistrust (Smetana, 2012). Alternatively, it may be that so many phones now come with location tracking built in (e.g., iPhone's Find My Phone feature), that the presence of that feature on a child's phone reflects less of the parent-child dynamic than other parental control applications. Also notably, the poorer parent-child relationships appeared only relevant to the use of automated parental monitoring applications. We also asked kids to indicate how much their parents/guardians generally limit their time spent on devices and the content they can see or use and found no such relationship quality differences there, highlighting the importance of in-person parental digital monitoring, which is likely to be more tailored and feel less covert.

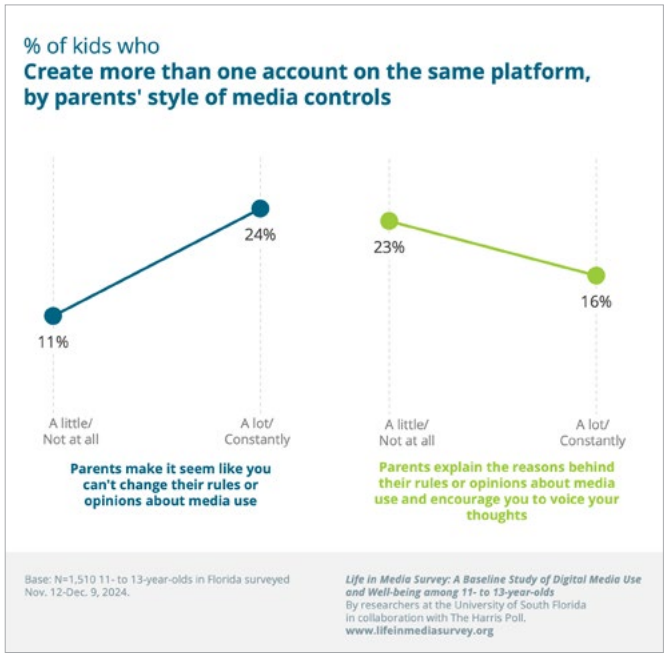


Figure 6.5

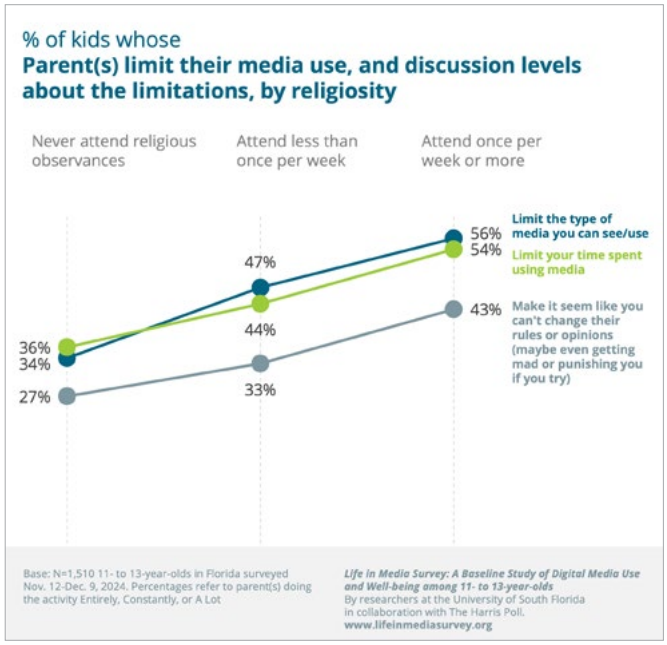


Figure 6.6

Among our sample, flexible application and discussion of limits appeared to be an important aspect of effective parental digital monitoring. We asked kids in the survey to indicate how often their parents enacted digital limits in autonomy supportive ways (by explaining the reasons behind their rules and encouraging discussion) or in a more controlling manner (making it seem like their rules and opinions can't be changed). We found that the existence of digital media limits was not associated with children creating multiple accounts on the same platform, but children's perceptions of their parents' inflexibility regarding those limits were. Kids who said that their parents frequently "make it seem like you can't change their rules or opinions about digital media use" were more than twice as likely to create more than one account on the same platform to "protect their privacy," compared to kids whose parents never or rarely do so. (Fig 6.5). Similarly, kids who said that their parents frequently explain the reasons behind their rules and encourage discussion were one-third less likely to make a second account compared to kids whose parents rarely do so.

Children in the study from religious families were about 50% more likely to report strong limits on their digital media use, as well as more inflexible enactment of those limits (Fig. 6.6). This finding aligns with evidence that religious parents tend to make more unilateral decisions (without child input) about their children's media exposure and friendships (Kim & Wilcox, 2014). Regardless of religiosity, however, most children—about six in 10—reported that their parents explained the reasons behind their digital rules and opinions "constantly or a lot."

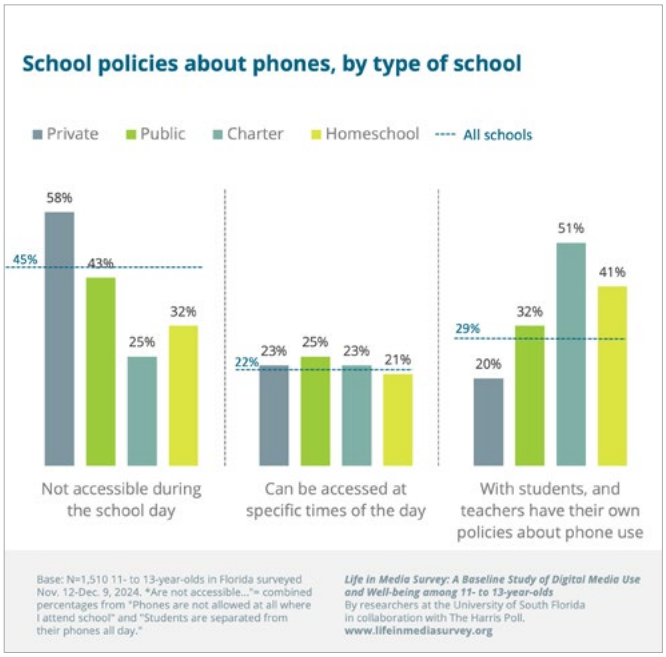


Figure 6.7

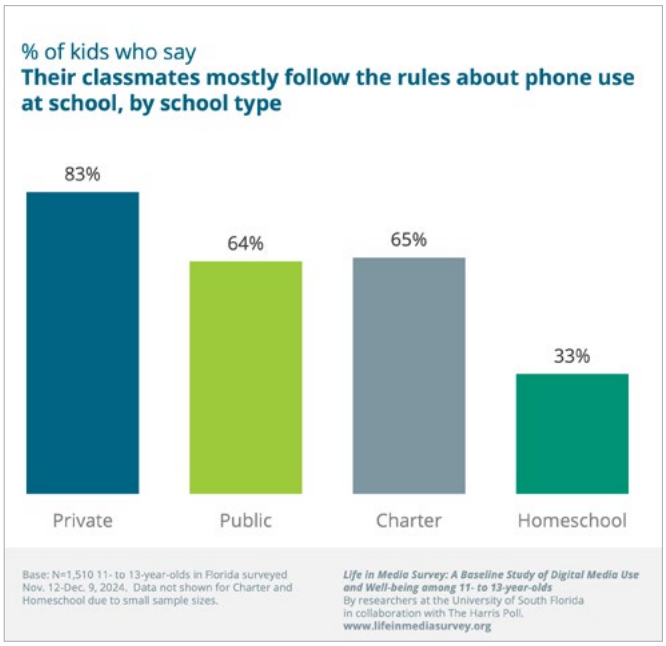


Figure 6.8

In 2023, Florida enacted a state-wide policy for K-12 public schools banning the usage of cell phones during class time, except when expressly directed by a teacher for educational purposes (Florida House of Representatives, 2023). However, there is considerable variation among schools and districts in how they enact this policy, ranging from students being allowed to keep phones with them throughout the day (with teachers setting specific rules within each class) to a complete ban of phones on school property. We asked the middle school-aged children in our sample to report how phones were being handled in their schools.

A plurality of kids reported that they weren't allowed to access phones at all during the school day (45%), but many kids were also able to access phones at specific times of the day (22%) or always have them, subject to specific teacher policies (29%). When school type was considered, the picture became more complex. Most private school students reported no access to phones throughout the day whereas the majority of charter school students stated that they were able to keep their phones at all times, subject to individual classroom policies. Public school students were the most evenly split between options, with somewhat more reporting no access throughout the day than other policies (Fig. 6.7).

We also asked children to report whether students in their school tended to follow school rules regarding cell phone use. We found that the majority of children reported that their classmates followed school rules about phone use, but that the percentages were higher among kids attending private schools than public or charter schools (Fig 6.8). Although most homeschooled children in our sample reported some rules about cell phone use during school hours, they also reported the lowest percentage of students following such cell phone rules, highlighting potential difficulties of enforcing cell phone rules in a home classroom.

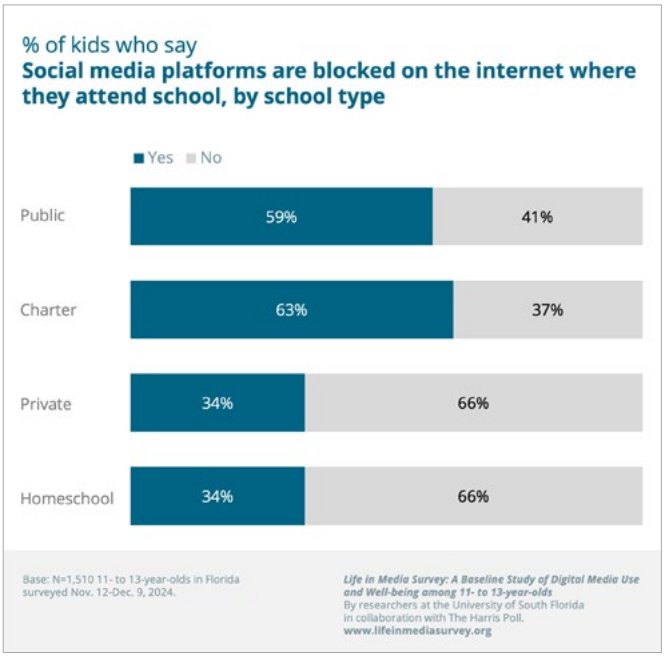


Figure 6.9

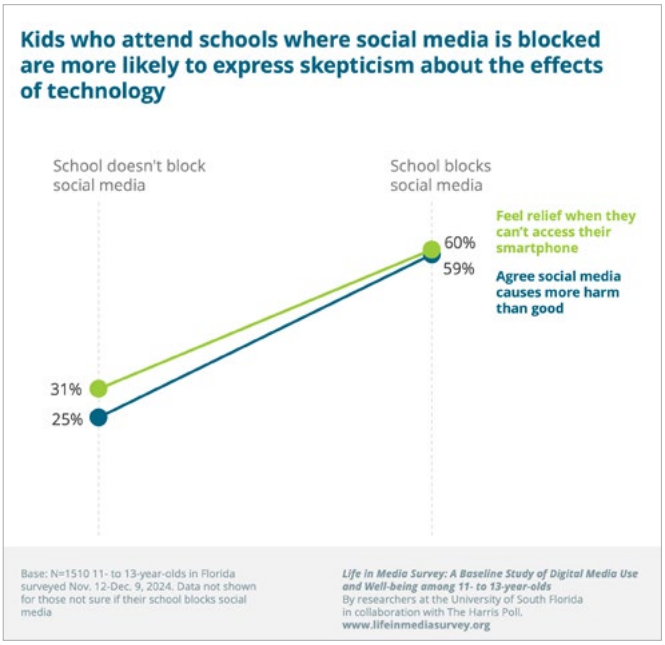


Figure 6.10

The same Florida law that banned cell phone use during school instructional time also required that publicly funded schools prohibit access to social media platforms on their school-provided internet (Florida House of Representatives, 2023). Interestingly, although this law went into effect in 2023, by November 2024, when our survey took place, over one-third of students attending public and charter schools still reported that they could access social media platforms on their school internet network (Fig 6.9). These numbers were even higher among students attending private schools or being homeschooled, where the Florida school law does not hold sway.

Restricting access to cell phones and social media at school may provide children with the necessary distance to recognize their problematic effects. Students who attend schools where social media are blocked on the internet were about twice as likely to agree that social media causes more harm than good and to state that they feel relief when they can't use their smartphone (Fig 6.10). A similar, though less drastic, pattern was observed for school policies on phone use; students who are separated from their phone all day were more likely to agree with both statements than students who go to schools where they are sometimes or always allowed access to phones.

7. ATTITUDES ON ETHICS, FREEDOMS, AND RIGHTS

Kids report mixed support for freedom of expression.

Nearly 45% of kids worry about their online privacy, especially kids from wealthier families.

More kids in Republican homes are supportive of free speech than kids in Democratic or mixed homes.

Like adults in the U.S., children tend to show support for freedom of expression and other rights and freedoms. Also like adults, children at times report attitudes about certain rights that contradict each other. And, despite a common supposition, support for freedom of expression in the U.S. is not universal. For example, in one 2017 survey, seven in 10 Americans said people should be free to criticize governments online—a large majority but far from unanimous (Dennis et al., 2017). While Americans tend to express broad support for freedom of speech, they nonetheless often support censorship of expression they find objectionable. Eight in 10 Americans, for example, said the government bears some responsibility for blocking the spread of fake news online (Dennis et al., 2018).

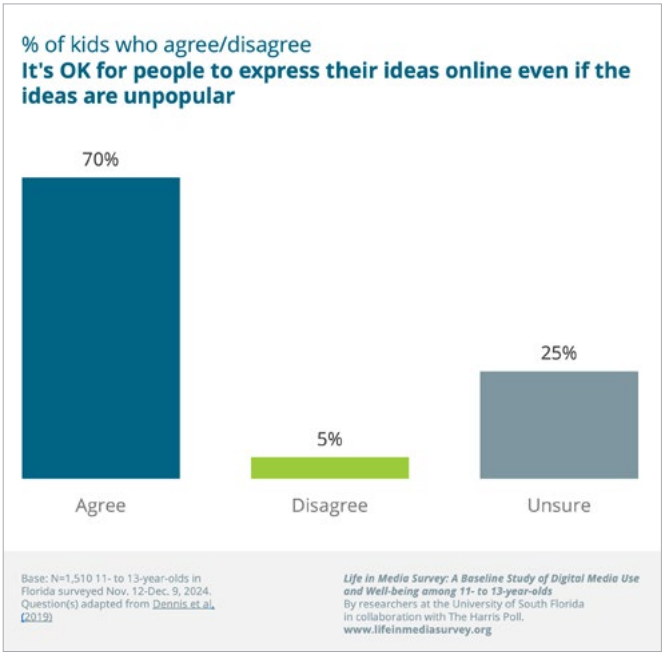


Figure 7.1

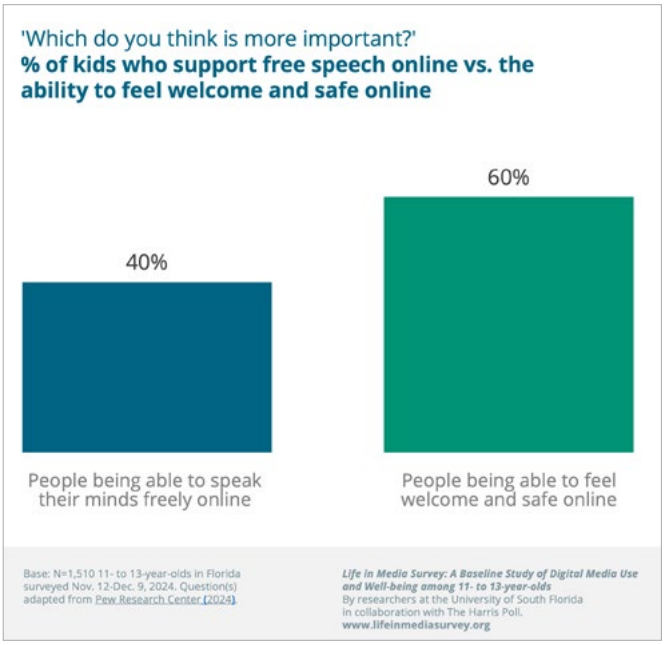


Figure 7.2

Kids in our survey also expressed conflicting sentiments about freedom of expression at times. Seventy percent agreed with the statement, "It's OK for people to express ideas online even when those ideas are unpopular" (Fig. 7.1), the same as the percentage of aforementioned adults in the U.S. who expressed support for the right to criticize governments online.

At the same time, children in our sample also largely reported that feeling welcome and safe online is more important than freedom of speech online. When asked which of two statements they agreed with more, six in 10 kids said, "People being able to feel welcome and safe online" trumps "People being able to speak their minds freely online" (Fig. 7.2).

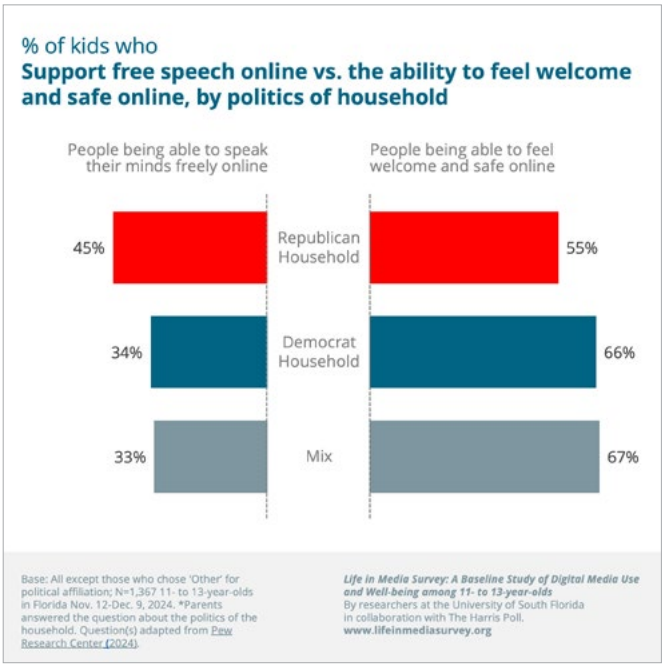


Figure 7.3

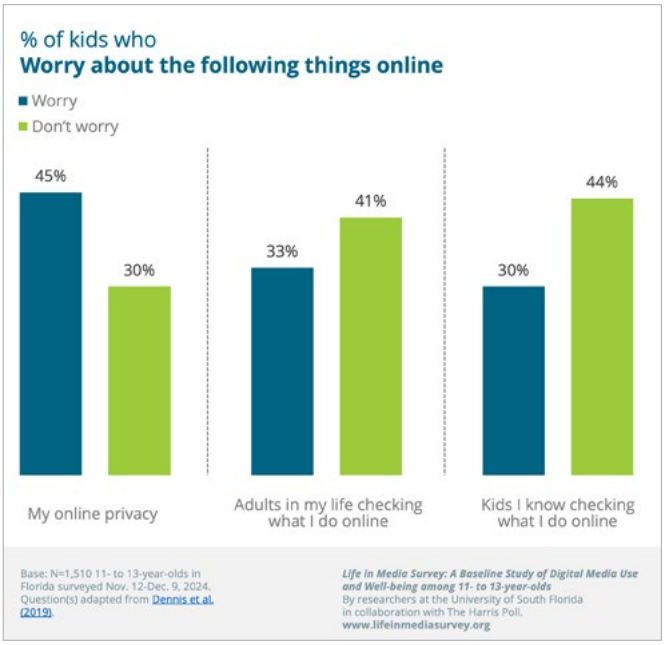


Figure 7.4

Responses to this question differed by the politics of respondents' households. In addition to obtaining parents'/guardians' consent for their child to complete the survey, we asked parents about a few demographic matters, like income and education. We also asked about the political leanings of adults in the household, if any, and specifically if they tend to lean Republican, Democrat, or whether the household is mixed. Kids from Republican-leaning households were more supportive of online freedom of expression. While most of these kids (55%) still said feeling safe online is more important than getting to speak one's mind, the share supporting the latter was 45%, compared to 34% for kids from Democrat-leaning homes and 33% from mixed homes.

In addition to querying kids' assessments of the public rights of others, we also asked them about their personal rights. "Every teenager wants privacy. Every single last one of them, whether they tell you or not, wants privacy," (pseudonymous internet commenter "Waffles," quoted in Marwick & Boyd, 2014). If Waffles was right about teens, he may also be right about the pre-teens in our sample. Forty-five percent of all kids in our sample agreed with the statement, "I worry a lot about my online privacy,"—not a majority, though a plurality; only 30% of kids disagreed with the statement (the balance said they neither agree nor disagree) (Fig. 7.4).

Figure 7.5

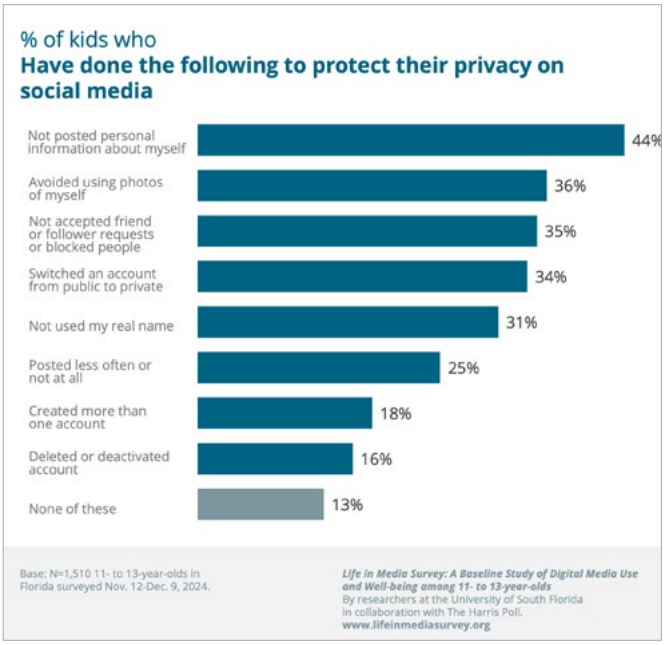


Figure 7.6

Concern about online privacy is more likely at higher levels of income. Nearly half of kids from households earning $150,000 or more worry about their online privacy, compared to just 19% of kids from households drawing less than $50,000 annually (Fig. 7.5). Concern about online privacy is something of a luxury; it's likely hard to have bandwidth to worry about privacy when one worries instead about food insecurity or the electricity staying on.

Beyond attitudes about digital privacy, we also asked children in the survey about concrete behaviors relating to privacy—specifically, things they've done, or haven't, to protect their privacy on social media (Fig. 7.6). While one in eight respondents said they haven't taken any of the actions we offered, sizable minorities of kids did report taking privacy-protective measures. One in five kids said they'd created more than one account on the same social media platform to bolster their digital privacy. This aligns with data we collected on major social media platforms, in which between 7% and 10% of kids said they maintained multiple accounts.

Figure 7.7

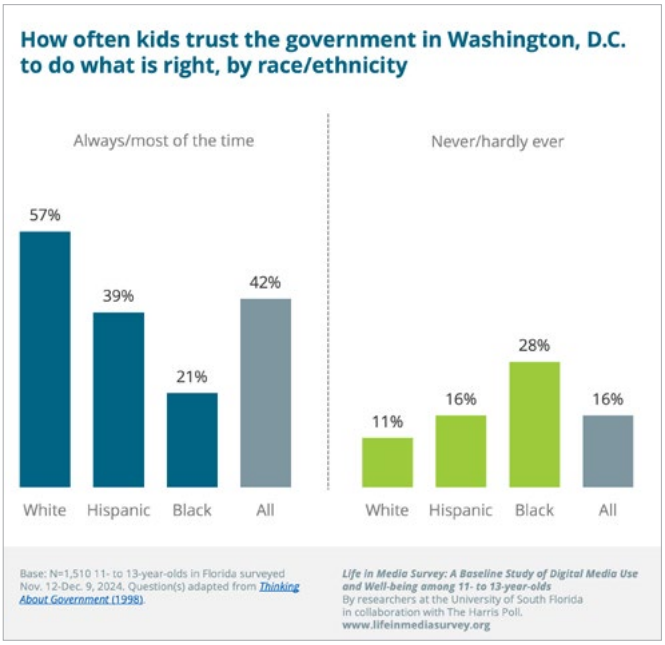


Figure 7.8

As many as four in 10 kids said they've avoided using photos of themselves and posting personal information about themselves at times. Three in 10 kids said they've avoided using their real name—a figure that might not be low-ish just because some kids eschew pseudonyms, but also as some major platforms, like Facebook, block or remove accounts that don't feature users' real names. One in three kids said they've switched one or more of their accounts from public to private, probably the easiest measure, technically speaking, one can take to protect their digital privacy short of deleting an account. One in six kids said they'd deleted or deactivated one or more of their accounts. While these figures are not insignificant—many kids are taking measures to shore up their privacy—roughly 1,000 of the 1,510 kids we sampled are 11- or 12-years old, younger than the age of internet adulthood of 13, and so kids could be educated more about simple ways they can better safeguard their information, and, potentially, reduce the likelihood of cyberbullying or other digital menaces.

There were compelling differences in worry about online privacy by gender and age (Fig. 7.7). Among 11-year-olds, more girls than boys said they "worry a lot about my online privacy." That trend reversed among 12- and 13-year-olds, and at the latter age boys were 50% more likely than girls to express fear for their online privacy. Boys' slower cognitive development may help explain this difference, but the change is so stark, there are likely other factors at work. At or around age 13, boys may be more likely than girls to view adult content online or engage in adult activities, like online gambling.

Parts of our survey focused on attitudes about powerful institutions, like the press, and we also asked kids about the level of trust they place in the U.S. government in Washington, D.C. In line with respondents' trust in journalists, many kids also expressed trust in the federal government. A plurality of respondents, 42%, said they trust the U.S. government to do the right thing "always" or "most of the time," while just 16% of respondents selected "rarely" or "never."

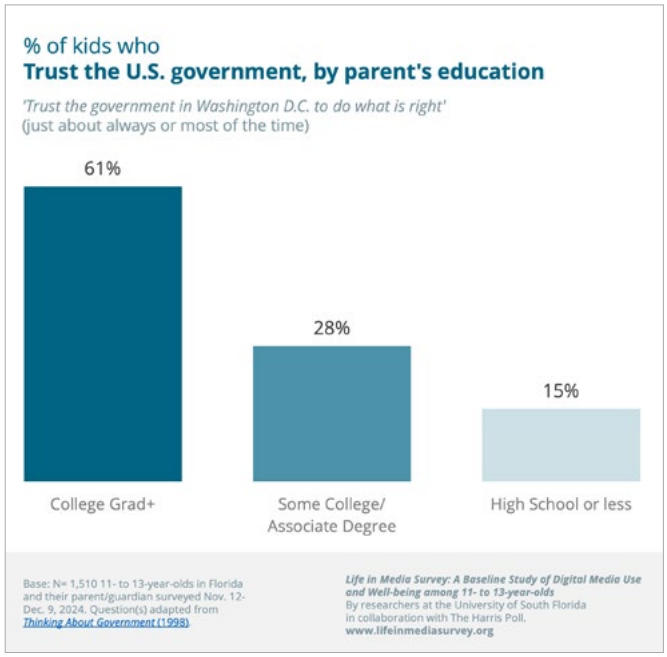


Figure 7.9

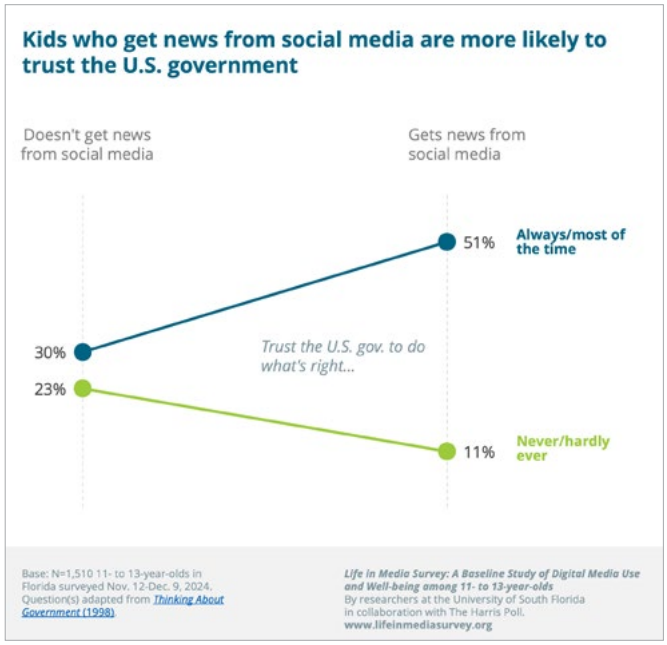


Figure 7.10

However, there were massive differences by race/ethnicity. A clear majority of white children, 57%, said they always/mostly trust the U.S. government to do what's right, a number that fell to 39% among Hispanic children and plummeted to 21% for Black children. Given gaps this large, minority children in the U.S. likely express routinely lower trust for the national government, but the timing of our data collection should also be considered: data collection commenced a week after the U.S. declined to elect a Black woman as president. However, we also found that kids who consume news have more favorable views toward the U.S. government than kids who don't.

There were also large differences by parent's education (Fig. 7.9). Six in 10 kids whose parents have a college education trust the U.S. government. This plummets to 28% among kids with parents with some college or associate degree and 15% among those who parents have a high school degree or less.

Kids who get news from social media were far more likely to say they trust the U.S. government to do what's right than kids who do not get news from social media (51% vs. 30%). This may be due to children following pro-U.S. news outlets on social platforms. One in 10 kids, after all, listed FOX News as their go-to news outlet during a breaking news situation, while one in seven kids said they have and use a Truth Social account (with 7% saying they operate more than one account on Truth Social).

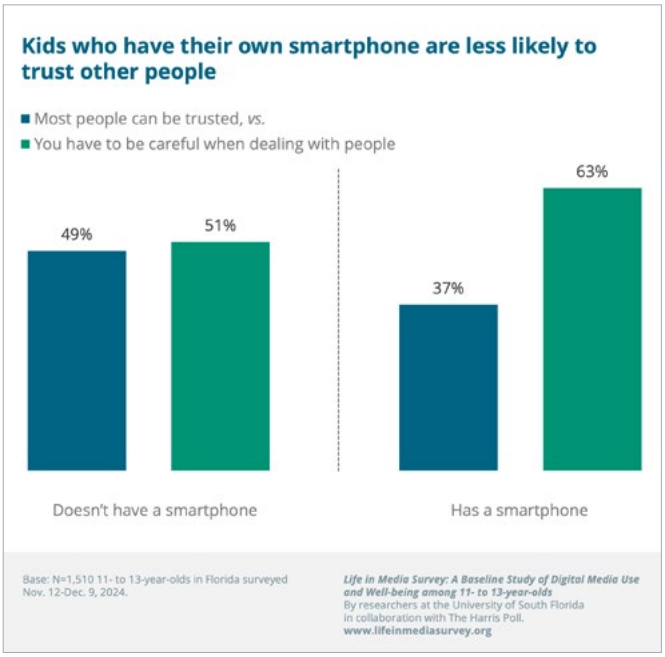


Figure 7.11

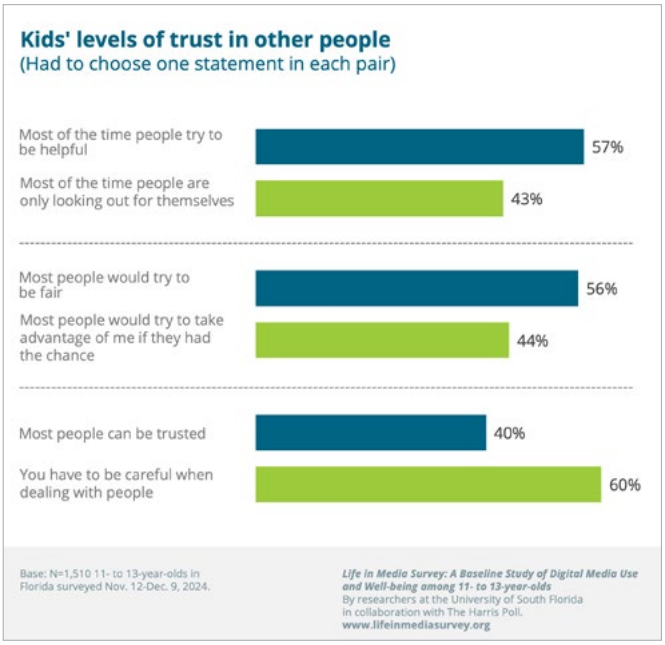


Figure 7.12

In addition to assessing trust in powerful institutions, we also asked kids about their trust in other people generally, and examined how it differs by certain kinds of media use. Kids were asked which statement they agree with more: "Most people can be trusted," or "You have to be careful when dealing with people." Roughly half of kids without a smartphone chose the latter statement, but some 63% of those with their own smartphone chose "You have to be careful…" (Fig. 7.11)

Potential reasons for this difference are numerous: kids with smartphones being warned about the dangers of communicating online with strangers; observing in video reels or other online spaces anti-social behaviors by some people; having negative experiences with others online; or some combination thereof. Typically, social scientists view a generalized lack of trust as a negative; for example, distrust is high in France (OECD, 2024), making contracts and other negotiations difficult and often expensive. However, among children with smartphones, broad skepticism of others may be a good thing, leaving them less vulnerable to harm.

Broadly, though, kids in our sample expressed trust in other people. Nearly six in 10 chose "Most of the time people try to be helpful" over "Most of the time people are only looking out for themselves," and 56% of kids said, "Most people try to be fair" versus "Most of the time people would take advantage of me if given the opportunity" (Fig. 7.12). But most kids also chose "You have to be careful when dealing with other people" over "Most people can be trusted." So, they seem to acknowledge other people are trying to do good but fall short.

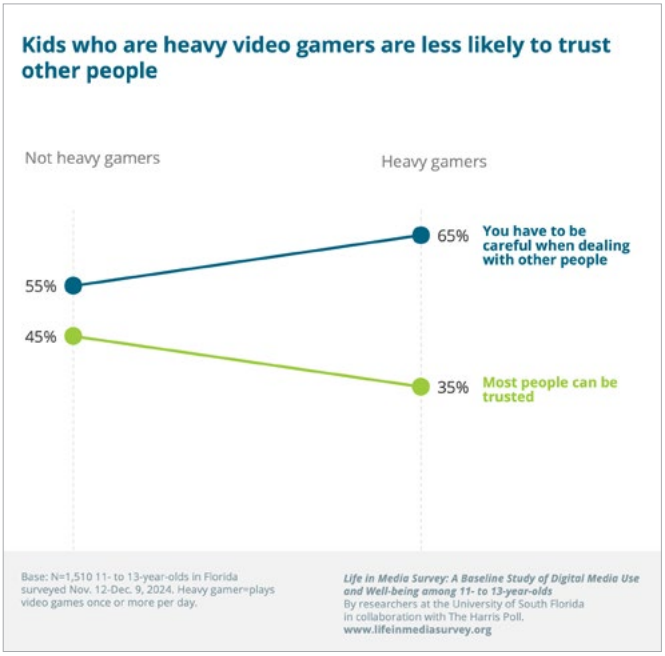


Figure 7.13

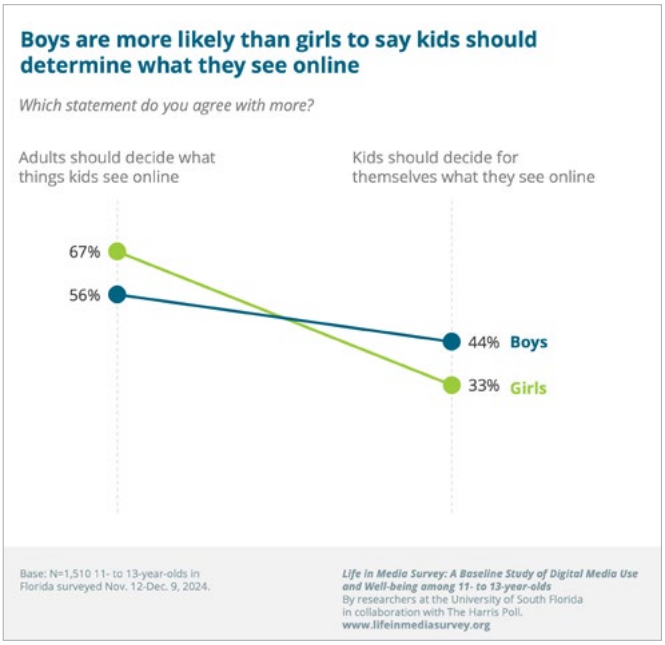


Figure 7.14

While most respondents agreed with the statement "You have to be careful when dealing with other people," we see some differences by media use; heavy video gamers are more likely to distrust others than light gamers or non-gamers (Fig. 7.13).

Despite generalized distrust in others, kids in the sample trust adults to dictate what they see online. Sixty-one percent of respondents said adults should decide what kids see online, while just 39% said kids should be able to make the determinations themselves. We see noticeable gender differences here, though, with boys more likely than girls to support autonomy for kids (Fig. 7.14).

8. A.I.

A third of kids say A.I. is harmful.
Many kids say its OK for A.I. to complete their schoolwork.

So far reaching is artificial intelligence (A.I.) that it's existed as an academic discipline for decades, and the last five years have seen an A.I. boom sparked by the development of sophisticated deep learning models and tremendous financial investments (Russell & Norvig, 2021). Rudimentary A.I. technologies created in the 1960's paved the way for generative A.I. models like ChatGPT, Gemini, and DeepSeek, which use existing data to create new text, images, videos, and music. Millions of Americans have embraced this technology, with nearly 40% of the U.S. population aged 18-64 using A.I. in their professional and private lives (Bick et al., 2024). So far reaching are the tentacles of artificial intelligence that they've found their way into our homes, hospitals, supply chains, government offices, and classrooms.

Like their adult counterparts, a growing number of American kids are hopping aboard the A.I. train and using platforms like ChatGPT to help with homework, write essays, and combat boredom. A study by the non-profit Common Sense Media found that 70% of teens aged 13 to 18 have used at least one generative A.I. tool, and 40% have reported using generative A.I. for school assignments (Madden et. al., 2024). Some studies highlight A.I.'s potential as a tool that can promote personalized learning and increased engagement in the classroom (Baidoo-Anu & Ansah, 2023; Walter, 2024). However, one quarter of public K-12 educators view A.I. as something with a greater potential to do harm than good, while 35% are uncertain (Pew Research Center, 2024).

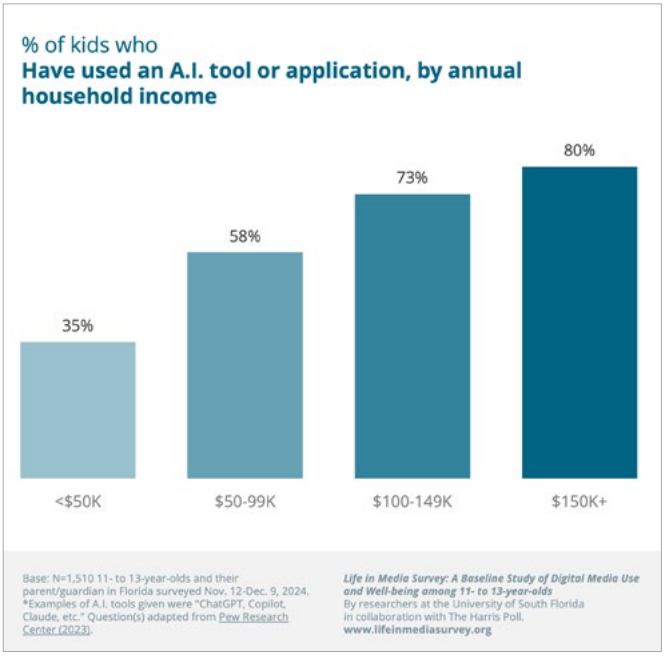


Figure 8.1

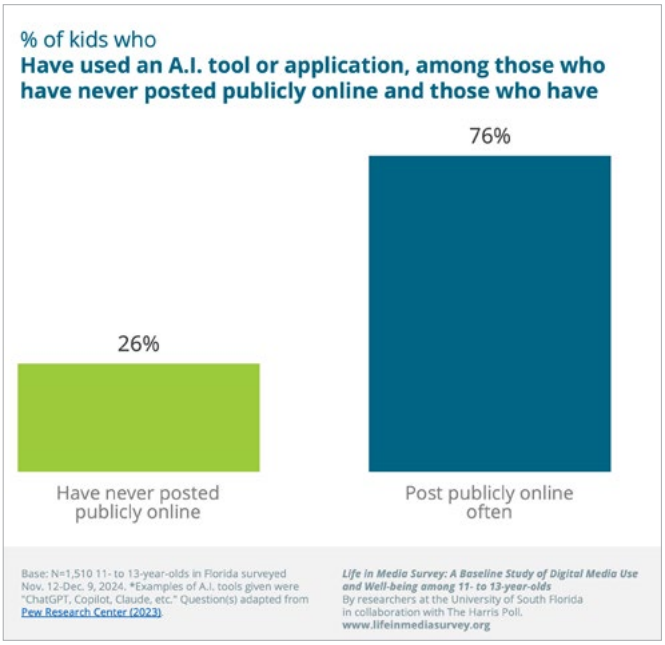


Figure 8.2

Kids from households with lower annual incomes were less likely to report using A.I. tools compared to kids from wealthier households. Over twice as many kids in the largest household income category ($150,000 or more) said they have used A.I. tools compared to those in the lowest household income category (<$50,000). This is particularly interesting given data from previous chapters showing that children in households with less annual income are more likely to have smartphones than children in affluent households (see Fig. 1.9). Many popular A.I. tools, including ChatGPT, are accessible on desktop web browsers and through dedicated smartphone apps. These responses suggest that financially influenced factors other than smartphone access may determine which kids use A.I. and which do not.

While more kids in lower income households have smartphones than those in affluent households, they may have reduced access to things like high-speed internet and cellular data needed to use A.I. tools. Kids from more affluent households may also have more exposure to A.I. through educational opportunities or extracurricular activities that promote digital literacy, contributing to differences in A.I. use between low-income and high-income households.

Kids who've posted publicly online often were significantly more likely to report using A.I. compared to kids who've never posted online. Posting publicly online may indicate a certain level of savvy or comfort with using digital technology. It follows that a child's willingness to use A.I. may be supported by a general level of comfort with using digital platforms. Public online posters may also be more exposed to digital trends, and therefore more knowledgeable about A.I. Additionally, children may use A.I. to compose or edit things they post to social platforms.

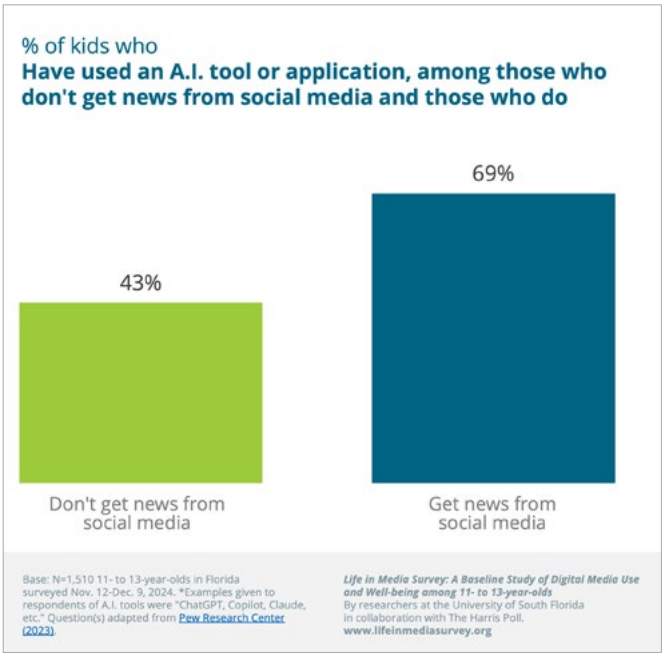


Figure 8.3

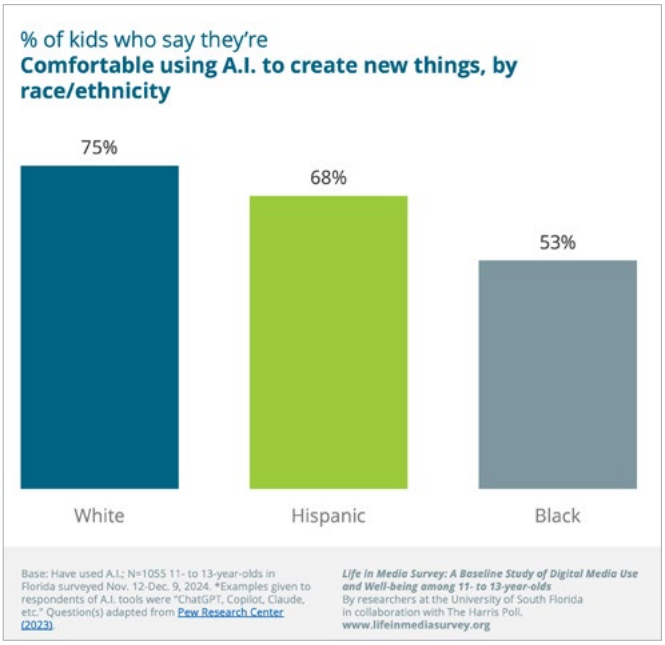


Figure 8.4

Kids who get news from social media reported using an A.I. tool or application more often than kids who don't get news from social media. Like the previous figure, accessing news through social media platforms may demonstrate a certain degree of familiarity and comfort with using digital technology, leading to an increased likelihood of using A.I. Additionally, with growing public interest surrounding A.I. ethics and development, it's also possible that kids who get news from social media are more frequently exposed to stories about A.I. As a result, they may have greater familiarity with A.I. tools and be more likely to experiment with their use.

While 75% of white respondents indicated that they were comfortable using A.I. to create new things, this percentage fell to 68% for Hispanic respondents and 53% for Black respondents. Lower levels of comfort among Hispanic and Black respondents may be attributed to several factors, including disparities in access to A.I. tools (or the broadband needed to access these tools), aversion to biases that may be present in A.I.-generated content, and cultural differences in how A.I. is perceived.

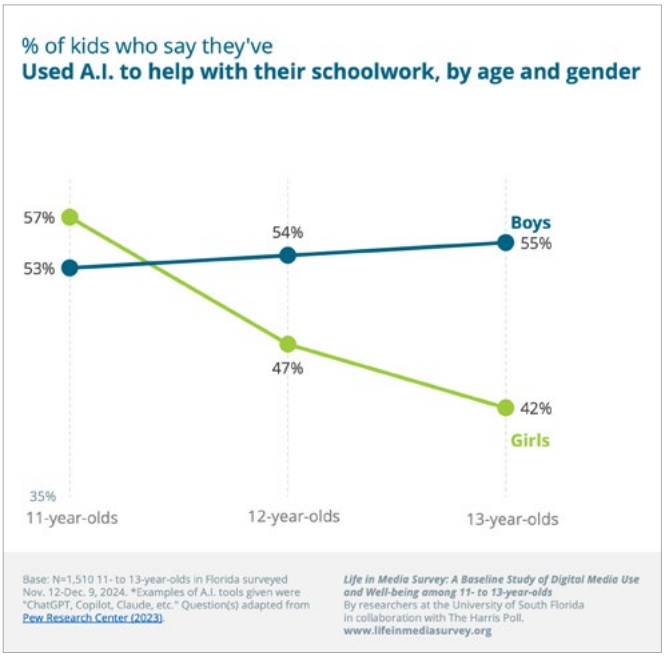


Figure 8.5

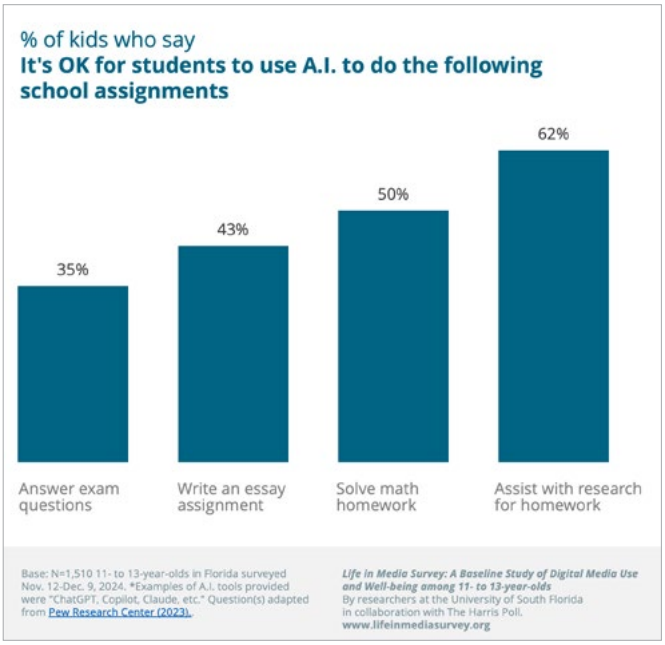


Figure 8.6

We observed considerable differences by age and gender for kids who have used A.I. to help with schoolwork. Overall, boys' A.I. use remains relatively stable across age groups. Meanwhile, girls' A.I. use declines steadily from 57% among 11-year-olds to 42% among 13-year-olds, resulting in a significant difference between boys and girls who reported using A.I. to help with schoolwork at age 13.

Respondents had varying views on whether or not it's okay to use A.I. for different school-related tasks. Kids gave the most approval for using A.I. to assist with research (62%), followed by using A.I. to solve math homework (50%). Fewer indicated approval for using A.I. to write an essay assignment (43%), and fewer still said it was okay to use A.I. to answer exam questions (35%). This suggests that kids are more likely to view A.I. as a tool for gathering information (assisting with research, e.g.) rather than something that should be used to replace their efforts entirely (answering exam questions, e.g.). A significantly lower percentage of approval for using A.I. to answer exam questions suggests that many kids perceive a clear distinction between using A.I. to assist with problem solving and using A.I. to cheat. That being said, it's also noteworthy that over one third of respondents did in fact indicate that it was okay to use A.I. to answer exam questions.

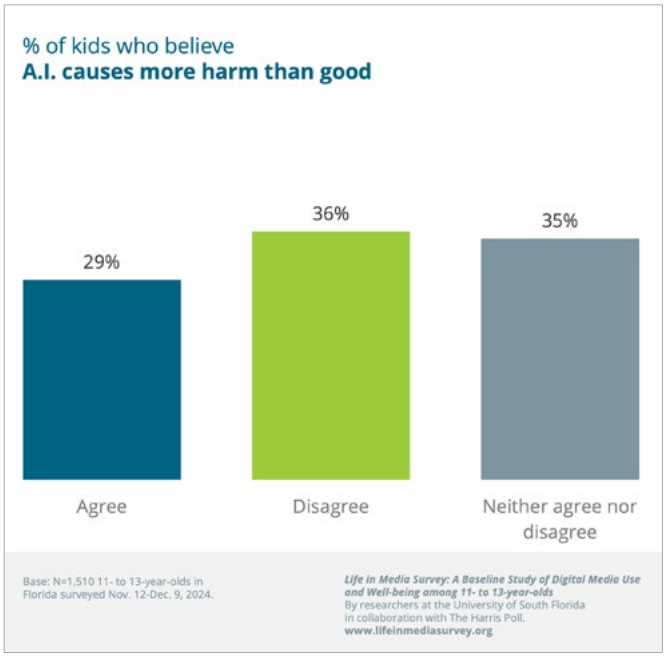


Figure 8.7

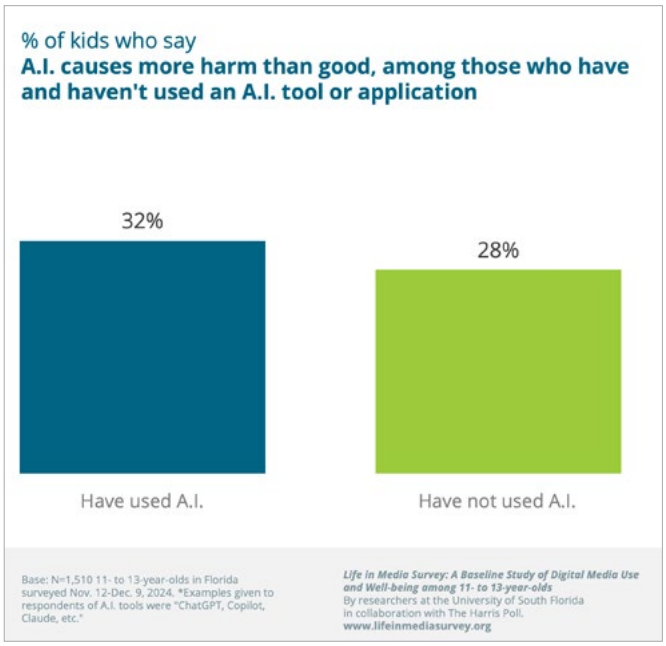
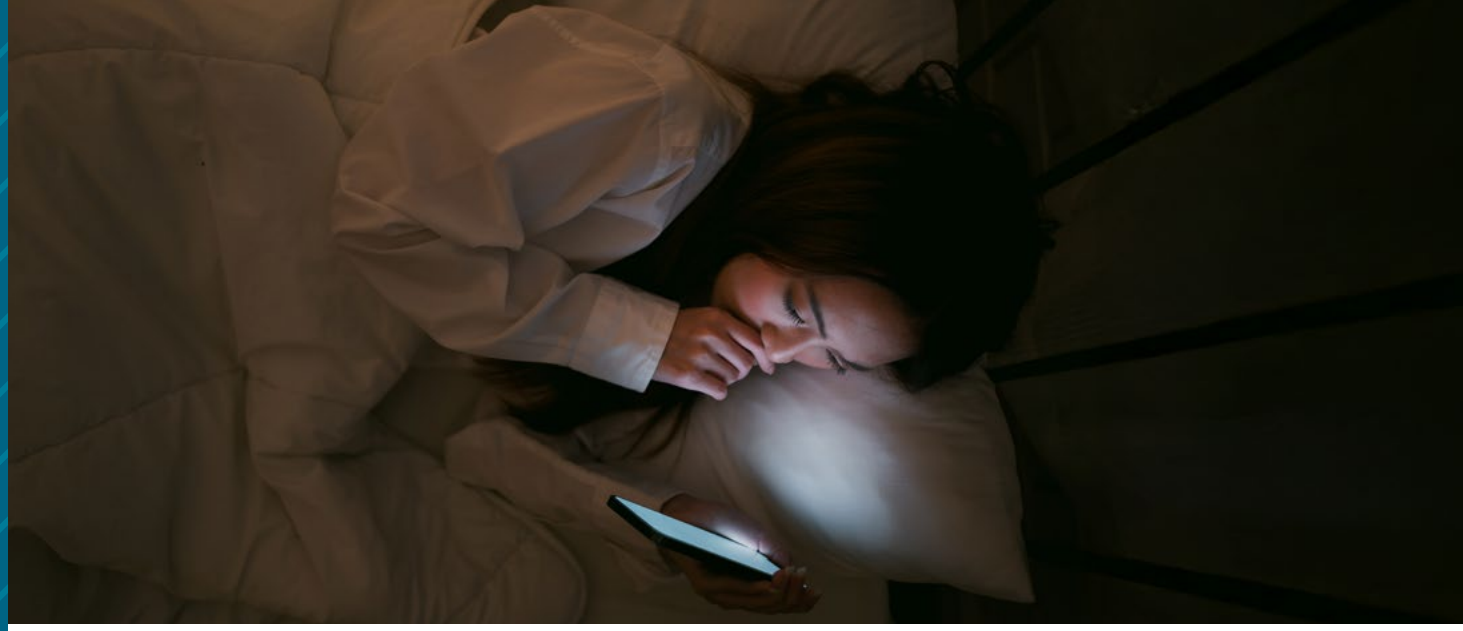


Figure 8.8

A smaller number of kids agreed that A.I. causes more harm than good compared to those who disagreed (29% vs. 36%). The remainder (35%) neither agreed nor disagreed.

While a smaller number of kids agreed than disagreed that A.I. causes more harm than good, it's not insignificant that nearly one third of respondents believe A.I. to be harmful. Like certain adults who express concerns about A.I. (Qi et al., 2024), it's possible that some kids associate A.I. with broader concerns about privacy, online safety, and misinformation. The sizable portion of respondents who neither agreed nor disagreed with A.I. causing more harm than good may indicate that some kids lack sufficient knowledge or understanding of A.I. to form strong opinions.

We also considered the question of A.I. causing more harm than good from the perspectives of kids who have and have not used A.I. tools or applications. Thirty-two percent of respondents who have used A.I. believe that this technology causes more harm than good, compared to 28% of those who have not used A.I. Using A.I. does not lead to greater approval of A.I. tools.



9. WELLNESS

Heavy social media users are more likely to exercise daily.
Kids who frequently post publicly online score higher on depression and anxiety.
1 in 5 kids agreed with the statement, "Life often feels meaningless."

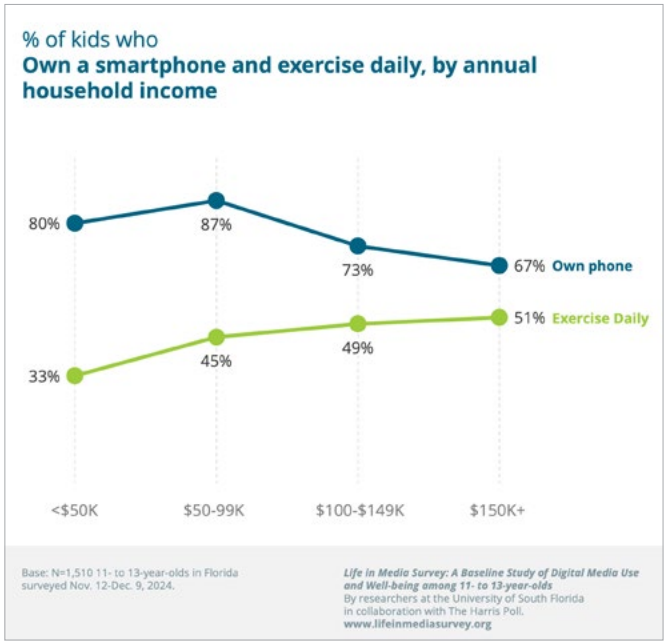


Figure 9.1

Smartphones provide children with endless applications and opportunities to engage in sedentary activities, displacing time they can spend on physical activity. However, some adolescents may also use their smartphones to listen to music while walking or running, which attenuates some of the negative effects of smartphones. Our data show that the proportion of kids who exercise or play sports every day is similar for those who own or don't own a smartphone (44% and 42%, respectively). This raises the question of whether socioeconomic status may influence both smartphone ownership and physical activity, concealing their true association. When examining the distribution of both variables across parental income categories, we found that while smartphone ownership is higher in low-income families (80-87% in families

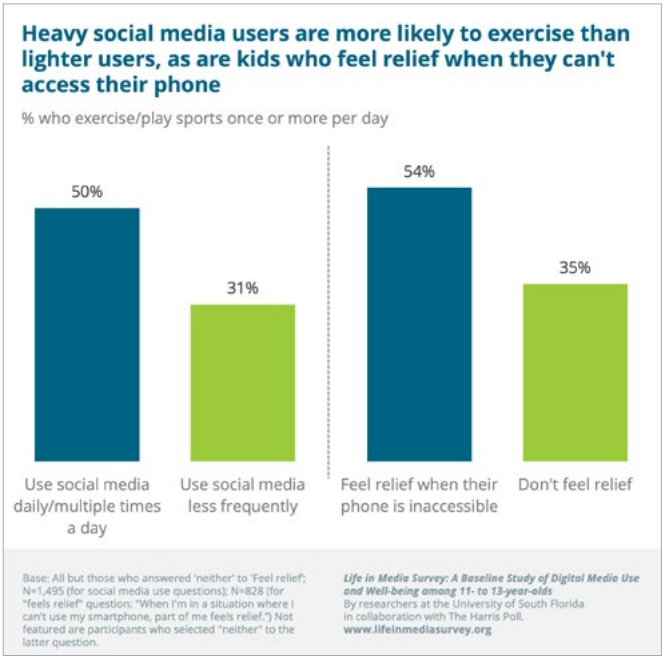


Figure 9.2

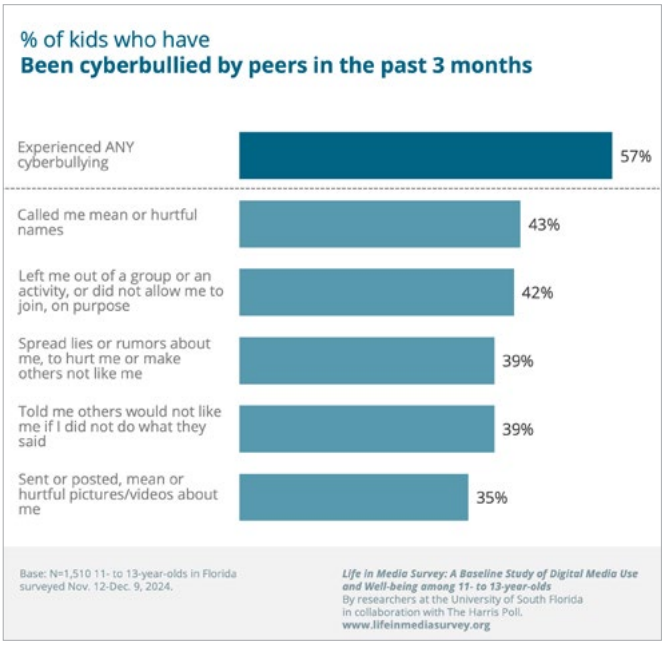


Figure 9.3

with an annual income less than $100,000 vs. 67% among those making $150,000 or more), the proportion of children who exercise regularly increases with parental income (33% among those making less than $50,000 vs. 51% among those making $150,000 or more).

Surprisingly, heavy social media users are more likely to exercise or play sports once or multiple times each day, compared with those who use social media less than daily (50% vs. 31%). A possible explanation for these results is that adolescent children who are part of a sports team are likely to have more friends and are motivated to use social media to connect with them. Another explanation may be that heavy social media use induces symptoms of anxiety or depression, motivating the children (and their parents) to resort to exercise to alleviate some of these symptoms. This is supported by our finding that children who say they feel relief when they can't use their smartphone are more likely to exercise daily compared with those who don't feel such relief (54% vs. 35%).

Exposure to cyberbullying can leave children at risk of depression and anxiety. A staggering 57% of kids in the sample experienced some form of cyberbullying in the past three months. This includes being called mean or hurtful names (43%), being left out of a group or activity on purpose (42%), someone spreading lies or rumors about them (39%), being told others would not like them if they did not do as told (39%), and someone sending or posting mean or hurtful pictures or videos about them (35%). Moreover, one in five said they have experienced these forms of cyberbullying once a week or more often in the past three months.

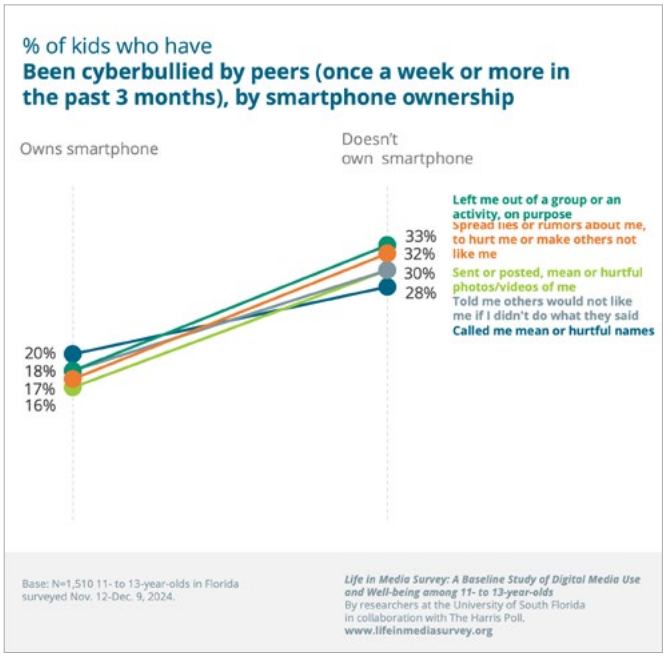


Figure 9.4

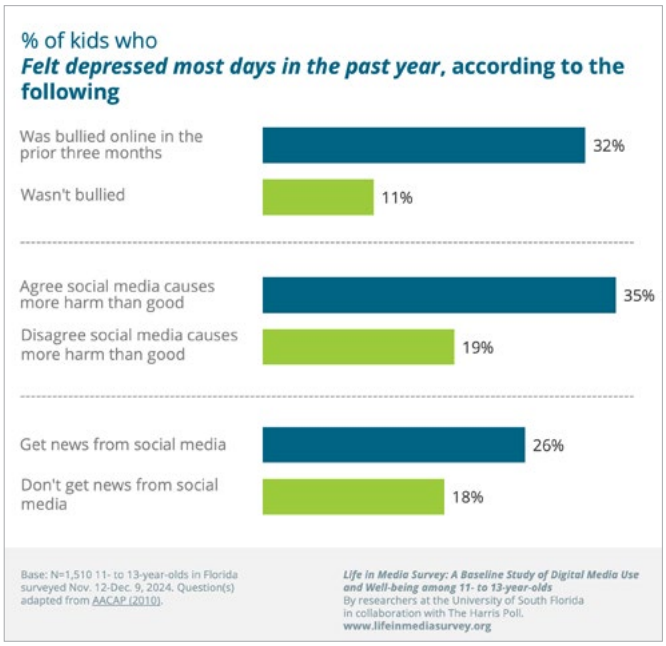


Figure 9.5

Contrary to what we expected, we found that children who own a smartphone are less likely to experience cyberbullying affronts compared with those who do not own a smartphone (Fig. 9.4). This may be explained by socioeconomic conditions affecting smartphone ownership and vulnerability to bullying, or by reverse causation, where parents of children who have experienced cyberbullying, or are most vulnerable to bullying, hesitate to give them a smartphone for fear of exposure to further cyberbullying.

Previous studies demonstrate that social media use and cyberbullying increase the risk of depression in children (Hu et al., 2021; Vidal et al., 2020). This was clearly observed in our sample, as children who reported being bullied online in the past three months were more likely to report feeling depressed most days, compared with those who were not bullied (32% vs. 11%). Additionally, adolescents who agreed that social media causes more harm than good were more likely to report feeling depressed most days (35% vs. 19% of those who disagreed), and depression was more common among those who get news from social media compared to those who don't (26% vs. 18%).

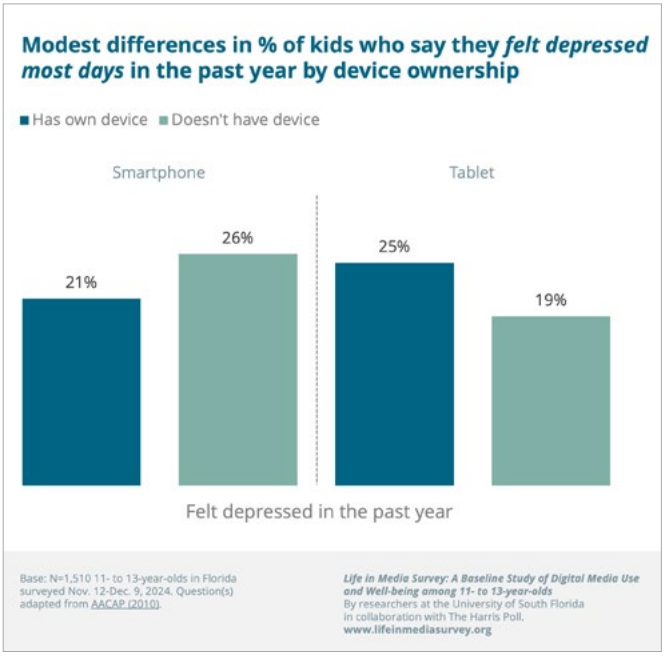


Figure 9.6

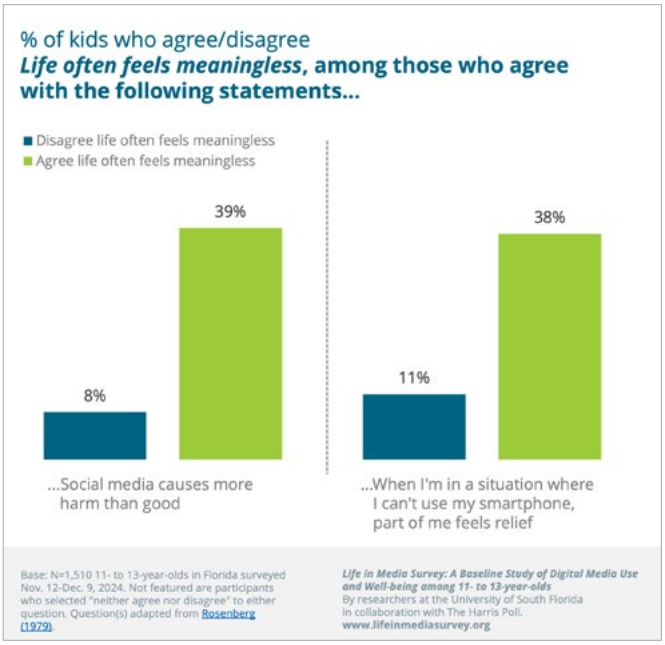


Figure 9.7

Similar to the pattern observed with online bullying, kids who own a smartphone are slightly less likely to report feeling depressed most days compared with those who don't own a smartphone (21% vs. 26%), which may be due to socioeconomic status affecting smartphone ownership and depression, or to reverse causation, where parents of children with depression may be less likely to give them a smartphone to protect them from the harmful effects of digital media use. By contrast, children who own a tablet are more likely to report feeling depressed compared to those who don't (26% vs. 19%).

A fifth of respondents agreed with the statement "Life often feels meaningless." This agreement was higher among boys than girls (23% vs. 16%), and among children whose parents have higher income and education levels (31% in households making $150,000 or more vs. 10% in households making less than $50,000; 29% among children of a college graduate vs. 5% among children whose parent has a high school degree or less). Agreement that life often feels meaningless is also higher among children who agreed that social media causes more harm than good (39% vs. 8% of those who disagreed), and among those who said they feel relief when they can't use their smartphone compared to those who do not feel relief (38% vs. 11%). This may be an indication that social media use is a source of stress affecting some children's mental wellbeing.

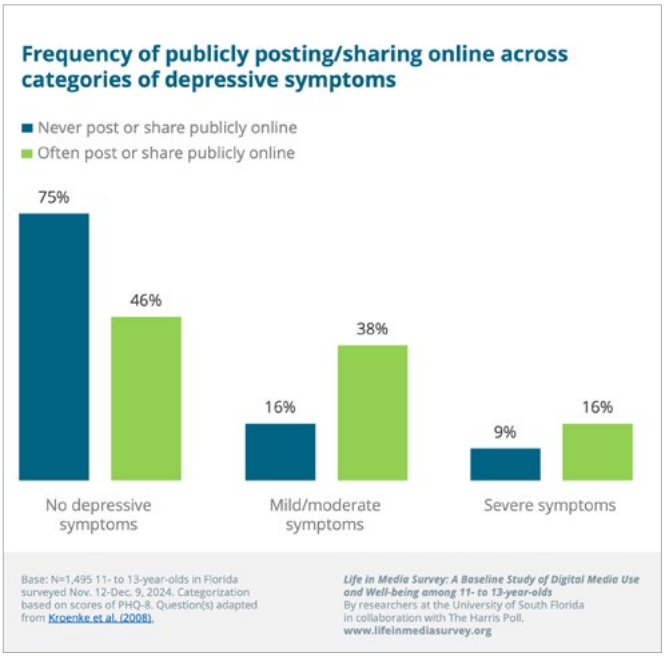


Figure 9.8

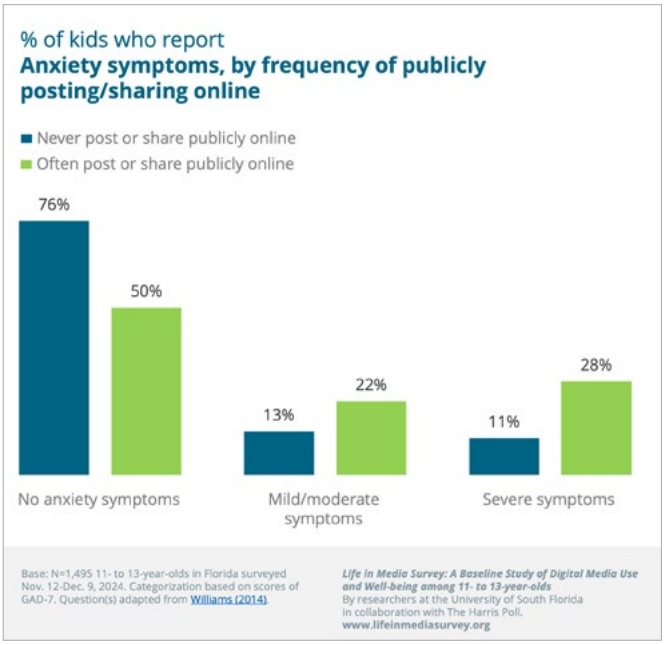


Figure 9.9

Children in our sample answered a series of questions that indicate symptoms of depression based on the Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-8) (Kroekne et al., 2009). For each question, they reported feeling this way not at all, several days, more than half the days, or nearly every day in the past two weeks. Responses were scored from 0 (not at all) to 3 (nearly every day). Scores were added across the eight questions, with a range from 0 to 24, and further categorized according to the guidelines to: no depressive symptoms (0-4), mild-moderate symptoms (5-14), and severe symptoms (15-24) (Kroenke et al., 2010; SPHSOutcomes). The results showed that 11% of the children in our sample had severe depressive symptoms, 31% had mild-moderate symptoms, and 57% had no symptoms of depression. The proportion of participants with severe symptoms was higher among those who often post or share publicly online (16% vs. 9% of those who never do), and a similar pattern was observed for mild/moderate symptoms (38% of those who post/share publicly often vs. 16% of those who never do). This further demonstrates the impact of public posting on social media on children's mental well-being. Having a phone and access to social media may not be harmful to kids, while posting things online and receiving comments may be.

We used the same method above to calculate a cumulative score of anxiety symptoms based on the Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD-7) instruments and guidelines, leading to a cumulative score that ranged from 0-21 (Casares et al., 2024). The results showed that 19% of participants had severe anxiety symptoms (total score 15-21), 18% had mild or moderate symptoms (total score 5-14), and 63% had no symptoms. Similar to what we observed with depressive symptoms, among children who often post or share publicly, 28% had severe symptoms and 22% had mild-moderate symptoms, compared with 11% and 13%, respectively, among those who never post or share online publicly.

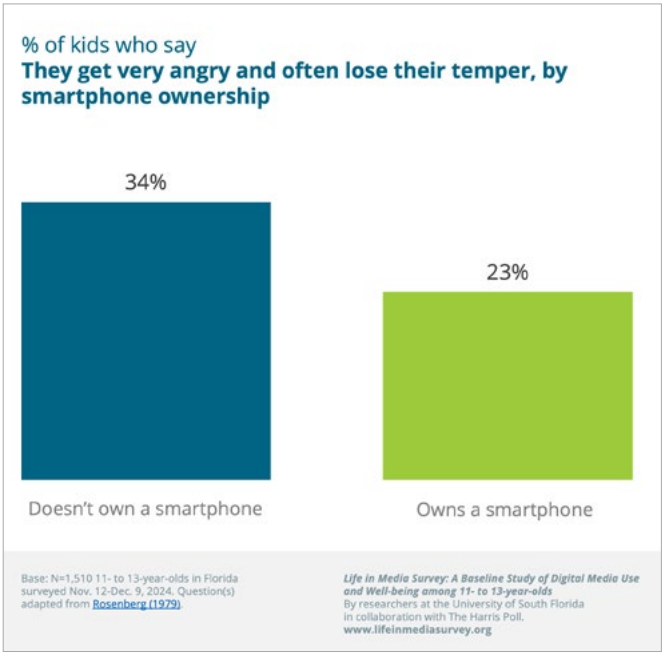


Figure 9.10

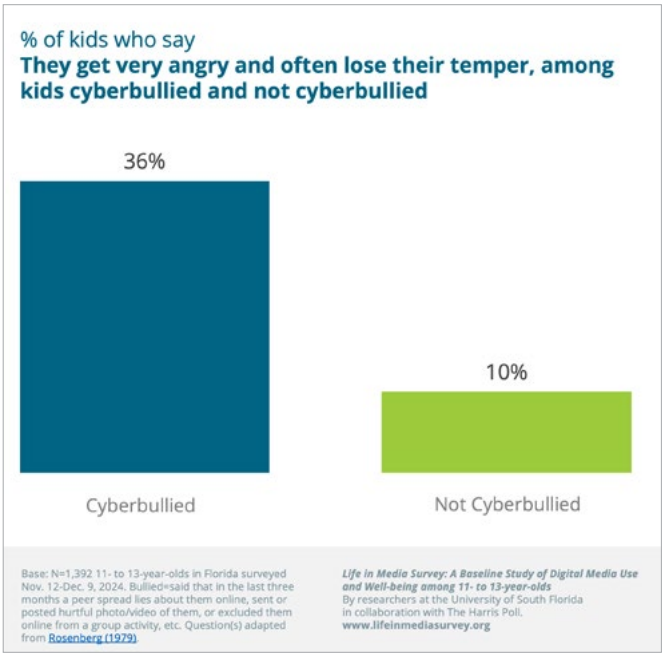


Figure 9.11

Smartphone ownership (or lack thereof) among adolescents was also associated with a tendency to get very angry and often lose their temper. A third of those who don't own a smartphone reported this tendency compared to nearly one in four who do own a smartphone (34% vs. 23%) (Fig. 9.10). A possible explanation may be related to parental education and income, given that smartphone ownership is more prevalent among those at lower income and education levels. Online bullying also plays a role in anger and loss of temper, as seen in Figure 9.11, where 36% of children who experienced online bullying report getting very angry or losing their temper, compared with only 10% of those not bullied.

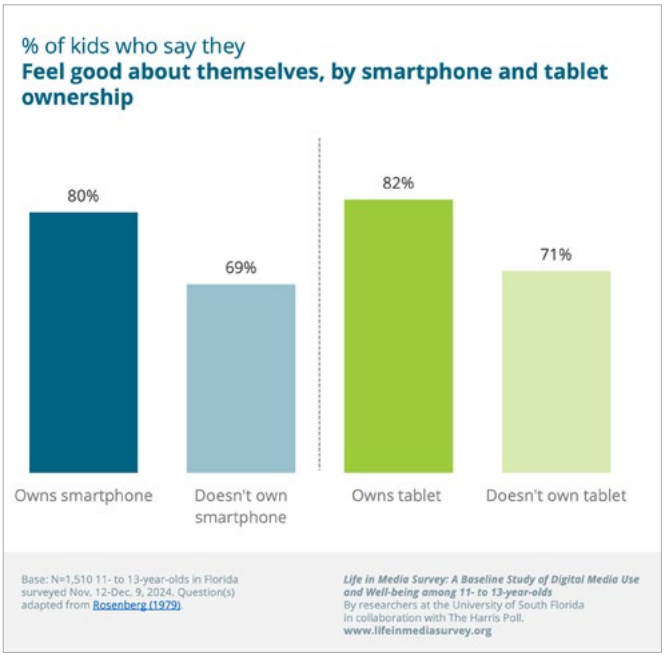


Figure 9.12

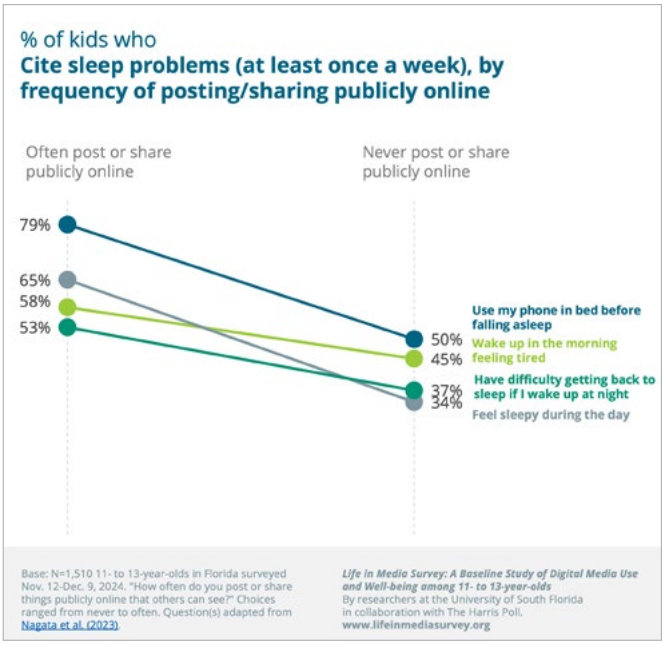


Figure 9.13

Despite the harmful effects of smartphone use observed in some studies (Vidal et al., 2020), children who own a smartphone or a tablet were more likely to report feeling good about themselves than those who don't, with 80% of smartphone owners and 82% of tablet owners, respectively, saying they feel good about themselves, compared with 69% of those who don't own a smartphone and 71% of those who don't own a tablet.

Sleep deprivation is one of the worst effects of digital media use in children. Our survey revealed alarming trends that raise concerns about the health and wellbeing of adolescents. Overall, 69% of surveyed children said that they use their phone in bed before falling asleep, and about half said they wake up in the morning feeling tired (54%), feel sleepy during the day (51%), and have difficulty getting back to sleep when they wake up at night (48%). These numbers varied by race/ethnicity, with Black children most likely to use their phone in bed (75% vs. 66% white and 71% Hispanic), and Hispanics most likely to wake up in the morning feeling tired (58% vs. 54% white and 47% Black) and feel sleepy during the day (56% vs. 51% white and 43% Black).

The prevalence of the above sleep issues at least once a week is significantly higher among children who often post publicly on social media, with eight in 10 (79%) using their phone in bed before falling asleep, and two-thirds (65%) feeling sleepy during the day. Additionally, more than half of this group said they wake up in the morning feeling tired and have difficulty getting back to sleep if they wake up at night (58% and 53%, respectively). By comparison, the prevalence of these issues among those who don't post publicly is much lower (Fig. 9.13). This may be due to public posts generating negative reactions and comments, leading to notifications, and motivating adolescents to check their phones repeatedly for new interactions.

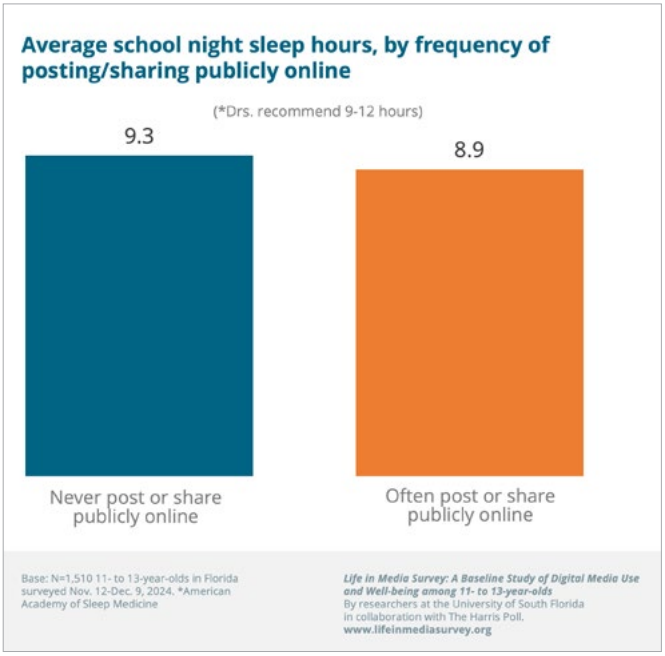


Figure 9.14

The National Sleep Foundation and the American Academy of Sleep Medicine recommend that children 6-13 years old get 9-12 hours of sleep per night. Children in our sample got an average of 8.9 hours per school night and 9.6 hours on non-school nights, with 43% of our participants getting less than 9 hours of sleep on school nights. These numbers vary by several factors, including the frequency of posting on social media, where those who never post get an average of 9.3 hours of sleep on school nights, compared with 8.9 hours for those who post often—the difference of sufficient and insufficient sleep.

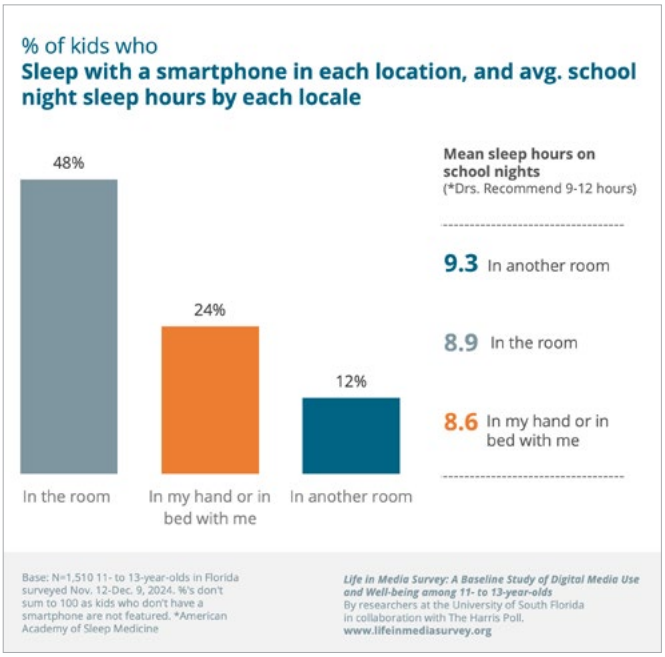


Figure 9.15

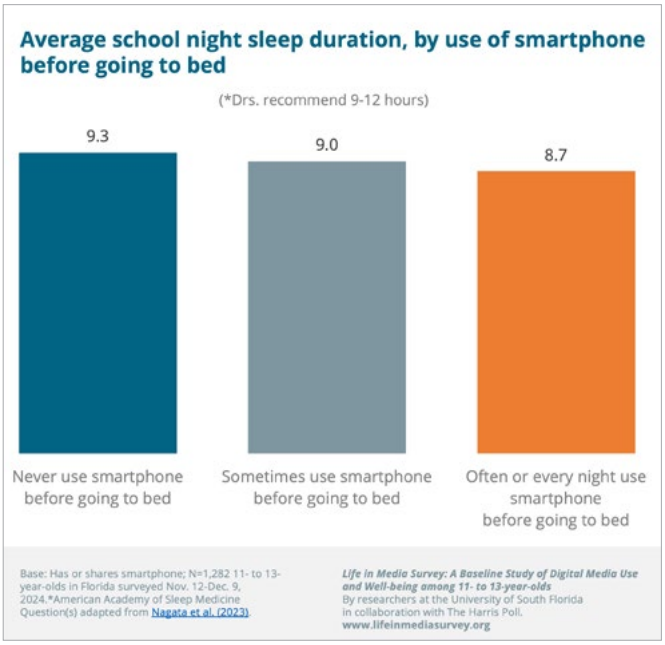


Figure 9.16

Likewise, children who sleep with their phone in their hand or in bed with them get an average of 8.6 hours of sleep on school nights, while those who have their phone in the room but not within reach get 8.9 hours and those who sleep with their phone in another room get 9.3 hours of sleep (Fig. 9.15), This clearly shows that smartphones are at least partially responsible for sleep deprivation among 11- to 13-year-olds. Furthermore, those who often or always use their smartphone before going to bed get an average of 8.7 hours of sleep, while those who never use their smartphone before going to bed get an average of 9.3 hours of sleep (Fig. 9.16).

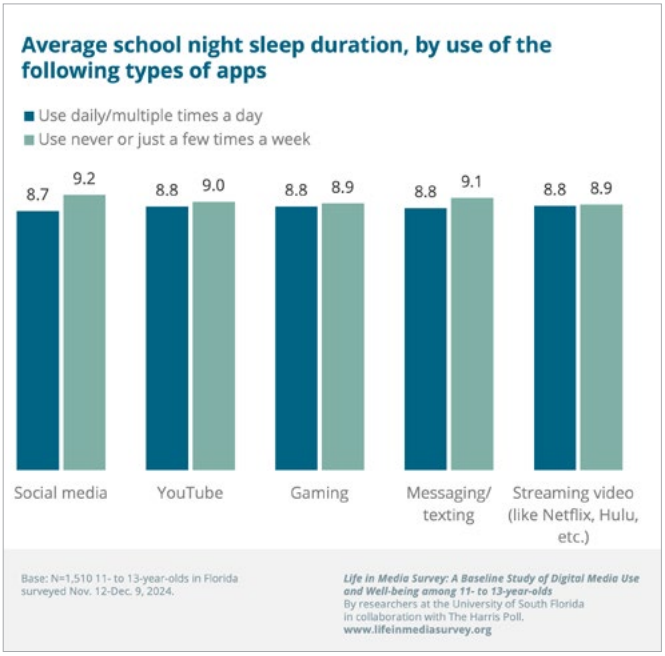


Figure 9.17

Average sleep duration also varies by the type of smartphone applications used, with social media showing the greatest difference in sleep duration among those who use them daily compared with less often or never (8.7 hours vs. 9.2 hours). Daily use of messaging/texting apps is also associated with lower average sleep duration (8.8 hours vs. 9.2 hours among those who use these apps less often or never). YouTube, gaming, and streaming videos daily are less likely to impact sleep duration, with only small differences in sleep duration between children who use them daily and those who use them less frequently or never (Fig. 9.17). It appears that apps that involve interaction with others are the most likely to impact sleep duration in children.

SURVEY METHOD

The results of the ***Life in Media Survey*** conducted by The Harris Poll are based on 1,510 online surveys with young people ages 11-13 who reside in Florida. Respondents were recruited and given permission to participate by their parent or legal guardian. The survey was conducted November 12 to December 9, 2024. The survey took about 25 minutes to complete, on average. Respondents who qualified and completed the survey were offered compensation via a points value that can be redeemed as a cash equivalent gift card (such as a Visa gift card) or as another retail gift card.

Most of the questions in the survey are original and were crafted by the authors and may have never been asked of children before. About 30%-35% of questions were replicated or adapted from prior research. In cases where we've used questions from other researchers, they're cited in the chart where their question(s) appears and the full citation is in the references list.

Prior to the child taking the survey, the parent or legal guardian was asked a series of demographic questions, some of which were used for sub-group analysis in this report. These questions included: parent/guardian age and gender; the level of parent/guardian education; annual household income; number of adults and children in the household; political leanings of the adults in the household; and urbanicity of the household (urban, suburban, rural). These questions were asked of the parent/legal guardian due to concern that participating children wouldn't be able to accurately provide this information about their parent/guardian or their household.

Data for the 11- to 13-year-olds in this study were weighted where necessary by the parent's/legal guardian's education, household income, household size, child's age by gender, and child's race/ethnicity to bring them closer in line with their actual proportions in the Florida population.

Participation Rate: The participation rate for this survey was 87%, based on the AAPOR standard definition for non-probability online samples. The formula used for participation rate—the percentage of respondents who completed the survey from the pool of qualified respondents who entered—is Completes/(Completes + dropouts who passed the screener + IR*dropouts who hadn't passed the screening questions).

Sampling Precision: Respondents for this survey were selected from among those who have agreed to participate in Harris Poll surveys. The sampling precision of Harris Poll online polls is measured by using a Bayesian credible interval. For this study, the sample data are accurate to within + 2.9 percentage points at a 95%-level of confidence. This credible interval will be wider among subsets of the surveyed population.

This report includes analyses by several demographic and behavioral subgroups. The unweighted sample sizes of these groups are provided below

DEMOGRAPHIC SUBGROUPS	UNWEIGHTED SAMPLE SIZE
Age	
11-year-olds	500
12-year-olds	503
13-year-olds	507
Gender Identity*	
Boy	935
Girl	572
Race/Ethnicity	
White	1057
Hispanic	236
Black	166
Annual Household Income	
Less than $50,000	264
$50,000 - $99,000	491
$100,000 - $149,000	449
$150,000 or more	306
Parent's Education	
High school degree or less	87
Some college/associate degree	564
College degree or more	859
Geography of Household	
Urban	1045
Suburban	361
Rural	104

DEMOGRAPHIC SUBGROUPS	UNWEIGHTED SAMPLE SIZE
Political Leaning of Household**	
Democrat	561
Republican	634
Mixed	172
Type of School Attended	
Public	829
Private	556
Charter	62
Homeschool	54
Own Smartphone	
Yes	1186
No	324
Own Tablet	
Yes	854
No	656
Attendance at Religious Observances	
Never	404
Less than once a week	667
Once a week or more	418

*N=3 identified as gender non-conforming or non-binary or preferred not to answer
**N=143 said "None of these"

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