COMMISSION INTO COUNTERING ONLINE CONSPIRACIES IN SCHOOLS

Pears Foundation

Star



PARENTS AS PARTNERS:

UNDERSTANDING PARENT PERSPECTIVES ON TACKLING ONLINE CONSPIRACIES, MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION AMONGST YOUNG PEOPLE

MICHAEL KANE, SALLY BURTONSHAW, HOLLY PAPWORTH,
ED DORRELL, AMY BRAIER.

NOVEMBER 2026

PF Global
Advice | Research | Argument



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The Commission is facilitated by Public First, and we would like to thank Dr. Sally Burtonshaw, Ed Dorrell, Michael Kane, Holly Papworth, George Ryan and Meg Price for their work.

Most importantly, we are deeply grateful to the parents who gave their time to share their experiences and insight to help us better understand how misinformation, disinformation and conspiracy belief are shaping their world, and their children's.



EXPERT ADVISORY GROUP

To support research, the Commission convened experts across research, practice and policy, from the digital world to parental engagement in education. We are grateful to the members of this Expert Advisory Group, who helped guide and shape this work throughout.



Maggie Mitchell, Head of Family Intervention, School-Home Support



Professor Philip Shaw, Director, King's Maudsley Partnership for Children and Young People



Andy Burrows, CEO, Molly Rose Foundation



Rhiannon Evans, Head of Public Affairs and Communications, Mumsnet



Jemma Levene, COO, Centre for Countering Digital Hate



Dr Lucy Foulkes, Prudence Trust Research Fellow and NIHR Senior Research Fellow, University of Oxford



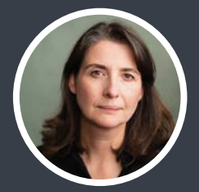
Heather McGowan, Headteacher, St Antony's Catholic Primary School



Dr Kaitlyn Regehr, Associate Professor of Digital Humanities, UCL and Global Fellow, Schwartz Reisman Institute for Technology and Society, University of Toronto



Rachel Huggins, CEO, Internet Matters



Dr Katharine Smales, Senior Research Fellow, Critical Digital Literacy for Young People, UCL

About the Commission into Countering Online Conspiracies in Schools

The Commission into Countering Online Conspiracies in Schools was established by Pears Foundation and Public First in March 2024 to build the evidence base on how conspiracy belief, misinformation and disinformation are affecting young people and school communities, and to translate that evidence into practical action. Since then, the Commission has published two reports: our Launch Report in 2025 with our initial findings and recommendations, and further Research Insights in 2026.

Find out more about the Commission, the Commissioners and Advisory Board, here.

With thanks to Pears Foundation

Pears Foundation is a family foundation supporting organisations that help people and communities flourish. The Foundation's philanthropy is built on long-term partnerships, backing organisations and their expertise while creating opportunities for people to participate, contribute and connect with one another. Its work is broad-ranging, spanning education, mental health, poverty alleviation, social action, civic engagement, social cohesion and the intersection between these issues. The Pears family has given more than £500m to charitable causes since the Foundation was established.



FOREWORD

FROM THE COMMISSION'S CO-CHAIRS:

When Pears Foundation launched this Commission, the evidence on how online conspiracy belief, misinformation and disinformation were manifesting in schools was limited. Teachers and school leaders had largely been left to tackle this rapidly evolving challenge alone.

Our research showed that young people consistently trust their parents above anyone else, yet parents were just as vulnerable to misleading content as their children. We also found a gap in understanding between teachers and parents, alongside uncertainty about who should take responsibility for teaching young people about misinformation and disinformation.

Parents clearly have an essential role in helping young people navigate the online world. But what support do they need, and what do they expect from schools? We wanted to hear directly from parents to better understand their perspectives.

This report is the Commission's first piece of research conducted exclusively with parents. It explores how they think misinformation and disinformation affect their children, how they approach these issues at home, and how they believe schools can help.

The research reveals considerable common ground between parents and schools, as well as differences that need to be understood and addressed. It offers insight into how schools and families can work together, and where further support is needed to equip young people for lives in which the online and offline worlds are increasingly intertwined.

I am grateful to the parents who gave their time to take part and to the Expert Advisory Group who helped shape and inform this research.

The task now is to use these insights to inform practical support for schools. Pears Foundation is committed to taking this work forward with our fellow Commissioners, educators, policymakers and partners.

Sir Trevor Pears CMG
Chair of Pears Foundation, Co-Chair of the Commission into Countering Online Conspiracies in Schools



Earlier this year the Commission published what school staff, parents and young people told us about conspiracy belief, misinformation and disinformation in their schools.[1] One particular finding surfaced a challenge for those of us who lead schools; teachers described parents as one of the main obstacles to the work they were trying to do to tackle misinformation.

That account deserves to be taken seriously. The sector will recognise the rumour that moves through a parent group chat faster than the school can respond, the lesson undone by something a child was told at home, and the families who school staff find impossible to reach.

Schools are being asked to deal with a set of risks that rapidly evolve, that sit outside the curriculum, and for which there is almost no training and very little evaluated practice. This is a gap in the system and not a failure of school leadership – and this is why the Commission was established.

This report takes the next step by asking parents what they think is happening. We spoke only to parents, we did not ask them to respond to what teachers told us, and nothing here should be read as the Commission's verdict on schools. What the resultant insights offer is a clearer view of how the families we serve understand these issues and the words they use to describe them.

Read that way, it is more encouraging than our previous research might lead colleagues to expect. Parents are not rejecting a role for schools – many are in fact asking for one. They want to be treated as partners rather than instructed, and they want to be approached about the concerns they already hold, which are about safety and, increasingly, about artificial intelligence. They are also, by their own account, struggling to keep up with the technology in much the same way schools are.

The report therefore points towards partnership rather than conflict as the most promising response.

My hope is that colleagues see this report as evidence that parents are not standing apart from schools, but alongside them. At a time when misinformation, conspiracy theories and rapidly changing technologies present new challenges for all of us, the strongest response will be one built on trust, dialogue and a genuine partnership between schools and the families they serve.

Sir Mufti Hamid Patel
CEO of Star Academies, Co-Chair of the Commission into Countering Online Conspiracies in Schools



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Commission into Countering Online Conspiracies in Schools was established by Pears Foundation and Public First in March 2024 to build the evidence base on how conspiracy belief, misinformation and disinformation are affecting young people and school communities, and to translate that evidence into practical action for schools and policymakers.

The Commission's first two reports, published in 2025 and in 2026, set out the scale of the problem.[2] Over the last two years we have undertaken nationally representative polling with over four thousand school aged young people, four thousand parents of school aged young people and over a thousand school staff. We have run an extensive qualitative research programme to deepen understanding of these issues spanning twenty two focus groups and drawn on interviews with dozens of experts in the field.

Our research demonstrated the scale of the challenge; **71% of young people, 78% of parents and 85% of school staff felt it was becoming harder to tell what is real and what is fake online.[3]**

The research also demonstrated a clear tension:

That young people trust their parents above anyone else as a source of information (90% completely or moderately trust a parent, ahead of scientific research at 76% and teachers at 75%), but that trust does not equate to expertise: 66% of parents themselves agreed it is difficult to tell what is true and false online, and 54% believed a conspiracy theory can be true.[4]

Moreover, teachers told us that parents play an active role in the spread of conspiracy belief, misinformation and disinformation amongst young people and that this both compounds the challenge and complicates schools' own ability to address it.[5]

This report attempts to understand this tension in greater depth. It draws on twelve focus groups with the parents of primary and secondary school children across England, across a range of socioeconomic backgrounds. In addition, it uses expert insight from ten experts who formed our Expert Advisory Group to provide wider context and commentary to this work.

The culmination of this is seven insights to help schools and the wider education sector to support and work in partnership with parents to ensure that young people receive the support they need to understand and navigate online conspiracy belief, misinformation and disinformation:

1. **INSIGHT ONE:** For many families the online world is no longer separate from everyday life.

2. **INSIGHT TWO:** Parents see themselves as primarily responsible for helping their children navigate online information, but welcome other trusted partners to support them.

3. **INSIGHT THREE:** Parents tackle misleading content through open dialogue and discussion.

4. **INSIGHT FOUR:** Parents see schools as partners, but report varied experiences of support.

5. **INSIGHT FIVE:** Parents understand the risks of misleading information online through the lenses of online safety and artificial intelligence.

6. **INSIGHT SIX:** Parents see the ability to navigate the online world as an essential life skill.

7. **INSIGHT SEVEN:** There is a lack of consensus about when educating young people about the online world should begin.

Within each insight we offer qualitative insight from parents as well as a brief commentary informed by our Expert Advisory Group. This report does not purport to provide concrete solutions; there are currently no evaluated models for how schools should approach this work and much is happening across the sector. It is important we acknowledge the specific contexts in which schools work and the communities they serve will drive individual school responses.

In totality, what is clear is that despite the tension between schools and parents, both share a desire to engage and recognise the need to support young people together. What has been missing is a shared set of terms to build that partnership on. This research hopes to support this work going forward.

Definitions:

Throughout this report, we have used the following working definitions of each of the three key technical terms that we are investigating as part of this research:

CONSPIRACY THEORY
IS A PROPOSED EXPLANATION OF HISTORICAL, CURRENT, OR SPECULATIVE EVENTS IN TERMS OF THE SIGNIFICANT CAUSAL AGENCY OF A RELATIVELY SMALL GROUP OF PERSONS – THE CONSPIRATORS – ACTING IN SECRET.

MISINFORMATION
IS INCORRECT, MISLEADING, OR FALSE INFORMATION THAT STEMS FROM ERROR OR MISUNDERSTANDING.

DISINFORMATION
IS MISINFORMATION THAT HAS BEEN SPREAD DELIBERATELY.

INSIGHT 1

FOR MANY FAMILIES THE ONLINE WORLD IS NO LONGER SEPARATE FROM EVERYDAY LIFE.

SUMMARY

- The online world is evolving rapidly. For families, online and offline life are increasingly intertwined. Digital technology runs through daily routines, including social, play, work and family time for parents and children.
- As a result, the opportunity for exposure to harmful content is vast.
- Education technology increasingly plays a role in supporting and enhancing learning while simultaneously contributing to increasing children's time online.
- Parents recognise that they face many of the same challenges they are trying to help their children navigate.





Parent Insights

The Commission's previous research identified growing concern across parents, teachers and young people themselves about the impact of what young people consume online.[6] Now parents are clear that there is no longer a distinction between the 'online' and 'offline' worlds. Instead, families increasingly experience them as intertwined and inseparable parts of everyday life.

"I don't even use my laptop anymore. That's how much my phone does everything for me. And my little boy calls me a doom scroller."

Unemployed (D), Primary, Father of 9-year-old, London

Digital technology runs through daily routines, including social, play, work and family time for both parents and their children. Parents described young people who were spending a large period of their day online doing different activities including speaking to friends, playing games, doing homework as well as consuming social media content.

"We are using it [phones] in the evening when we come home from school and work. We all use it. My oldest daughter goes to school on the bus, so she'll use it there when she's at school."

Construction worker (D), Secondary, Father of 16-year-old and 9-year-old, West Midlands

INSIGHT 1 - FOR MANY FAMILIES THE ONLINE WORLD IS NO LONGER SEPARATE FROM EVERYDAY LIFE.

"Yeah I think everything nowadays pretty much online. So, the homework is always online. My son's really quick with being able to change the kind of screen [back onto his homework]"

Train driver (D), Secondary, Mother of 16-year-old, 14-year-old, 12-year-old, 10-year-old, 6-year-old and 4-year-old, London

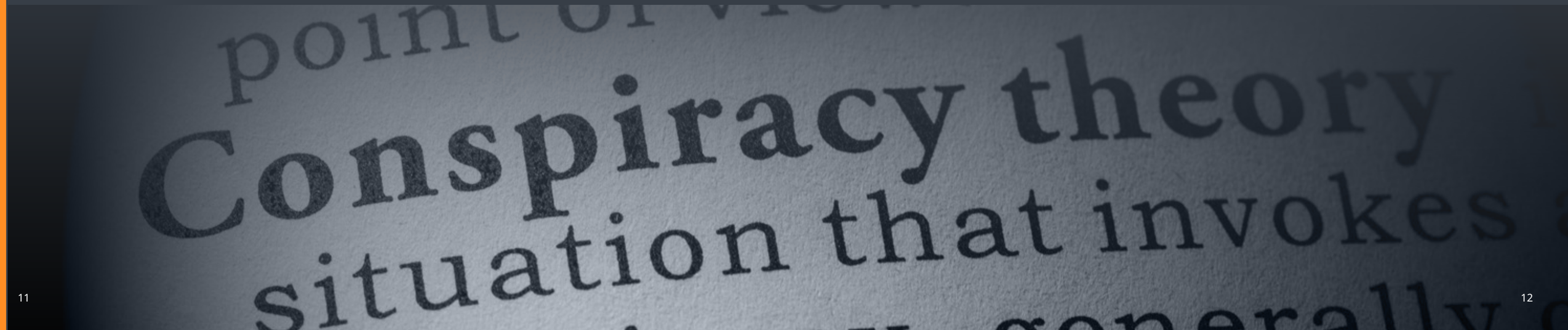
Parents highlighted the use of education technology, including homework platforms, which increased the amount of time young people were spending on digital devices and made limiting their use more difficult. This was a consistent theme across the socioeconomic spectrum, raised by parents in professional, clerical and manual occupations alike.

"My daughter's doing GCSEs and homework, you try and limit screen time, but everything that the school sets has to be done online homework wise it seems. We've got apps for every different subject. So if you try and count down on screen time, they [young person] just throw the homework card at you"

Consultant (C1), Secondary, Father of 16-year-old and 13-year-old, West Midlands

"I think they [young people] must do all their own work on the computers now."

Steel worker (D), Secondary, Father of 13-year-old, South Yorkshire



"But when they [young people] come home from school, then it is homework time, which is on the devices. It's all online. There is no paper homework."

Finance consultant (B), Secondary, Father of 13-year-old and 11-year-old, West Midlands

"Everything after COVID has gone online. So especially the homework and everything... Most of his work, I would say 95% of his work is online now."

Nursery assistant (C1), Primary, Mother of 11-year-old, 9-year-old and 5-year-old, Southeast

Parents had nuanced perspectives on online access, with some providing examples of the benefits of being online for their children.

"On the positive, it's made it easier to connect with families all over the world with social media. You can post something and then your whole family can see it and things like that, which we never had before growing up."

Disparities specialist (B), Primary, Mother of 18-year-old, 16-year-old and 8-year-old, London

However, parents cited significant concerns, replicated across the Commission's wider research, regarding the challenges this online time presented. This included disruption to family time (e.g. meal times) and sleep, as well as accessing misinformation and harmful content. The nature of these concerns appeared to vary by social grade. Parents from more affluent households tended to frame screen time as a question of balance, play and family time, whereas parents from lower social grades more often described acute problems such as addiction and disrupted sleep.

"My daughter is a million times worse…if her phone breaks, she has a breakdown. So yeah, it's a big thing in my daughter's life, her phone and in my life."

Admin assistant (C1), Secondary, Mother of 14-year-old, West Midlands

"Our biggest challenge at the moment is more just screen time and trying to get her to play rather than want to be on the TV or on the apps all the time."

Business analyst (B), Primary, Father of 4-year-old, West Yorkshire

INSIGHT 1 - FOR MANY FAMILIES THE ONLINE WORLD IS NO LONGER SEPARATE FROM EVERYDAY LIFE.

"Lately I have started bringing him [son] off the computer a lot earlier because he was on the computer until bedtime and then it wasn't good. It was having nightmares and stuff. So, we've just recently cut down his screen time quite a bit because he was addicted. He was just on it all the time."

Steel worker (D), Secondary, Father of 13-year-old, South Yorkshire

Moreover, parents shared a feeling of powerlessness over their children when it came to online access, describing problems with removing devices from children or conflict around limiting the time they spent online. This was particularly the case for older children and those from poorer socioeconomic backgrounds.

"Yeah, now she [daughter] has got a phone. They're on social media and FaceTime. It's a lot and it's really hard to limit at that age, I think."

Hairdresser (D), Secondary, Mother of 17-year-old and 15-year-old, London

"I do try to limit it to a certain time in the evening, so maybe like an hour, but then that turns into two sometimes and then they try and take the mick. Trying to enforce it sometimes is a bit difficult, but I do try."

Unemployed (E), Primary, Father of 10-year-old, London

"When I did take my son's phone, when he eventually had ways of buying stuff, he went and bought himself another phone anyway. So, it's so difficult."

Train driver (D), Secondary, Mother of 16-year-old, 14-year-old, 12-year-old, 10-year-old, 6-year-old and 4-year-old, London

"I put the parental controls on for my daughter's phone and she found every way to get past it. I thought I'd mastered it and then I went on and looked at the screen time and I could see she'd been on Snapchat at 11pm when it should go off at 8pm. I have no idea how she did it."

Water analyst (C2), Secondary, Mother of 14-year-old and 10-year-old, West Midlands

A key concern parents raised was that the sheer volume of online time created many more opportunities for exposure to this type of content.

"I'm worried about the content… that he's viewing and that he can be making decisions or I've got no real sort of control. The only control I've got over it is through using the Family Link app that I use, which obviously I can see the sort of stuff that he's looking at, but I do at least once or twice a week check his phone to make sure that there's nothing on there that's untoward."

Civil servant (C1), Secondary, Father of 12-year-old, West Midlands

"My concern is how it [screen time] is affecting their brain. I suppose a good point about the shorts is that their [young person's] attention span is 10 seconds and then they're onto the next thing."

Florist (D), Primary, Mother of 10-year-old, East of England

Parents were quick to point out, unprompted, that they struggle with their own online habits too, and described how the difficulty of switching off was affecting the time and quality of their interactions with their children. This compounded the issues they had in asserting boundaries with their children.

"There's so much we do through our phones that it's really difficult I find to separate making sure you spend that time with your children. And they [young people] see us doing lots of things through our phone, taking a phone call, calling the doctors, calling them… It feels like it becomes like another part of your life that is really difficult to disassociate with."

Photographer (C2), Primary, Mother of 11-year-old and 8-year-old, South East

INSIGHT 1 - FOR MANY FAMILIES THE ONLINE WORLD IS NO LONGER SEPARATE FROM EVERYDAY LIFE.

Expert Commentary

The ubiquitous nature of the online world was acknowledged across our Expert Advisory Group, who agreed with parents that this posed many interrelated challenges in navigating online access and content for young people. Dr Lucy Foulkes (Prudence Trust Research Fellow and NIHR Senior Research Fellow, University of Oxford) highlighted the 'embedded' nature of the digital world in young people's lives as key to understanding how misleading content influences young people. Andy Burrows (CEO, Molly Rose Foundation) stressed that the inseparable nature of online and offline worlds for families was 'foundational', both in how these issues manifest, and in how they should be addressed.

Moreover, there was wider acknowledgement over the overwhelming nature of managing access to online content and the multifaceted nature of online access. As Rachel Huggins (CEO, Internet Matters) set out, *"there's a sense of complete overwhelm from parents. Technology is advancing so rapidly, and they are faced with complex parental control tools to manage their children's experiences. In a digital world, parents feel that the onus is very much on them to keep their children safe, and it shouldn't be. They need support to know where to start, to understand what is available, and have the right conversations with children."*

Dr Katharine Smales (Senior Research Fellow, Critical Digital Literacy for Young People, UCL) contextualised parents' concerns about the role of so called 'ed tech' – platforms used by schools to support and promote learning. Her wider research demonstrates the tension between ed tech as a tool for learning and as a gateway to the wider online world:

"The way that AI was introduced to their kids was through institutions. It was through school. It was through homework channels. And what parents felt was that there was then very little opportunity for them to set, for example, parental controls, for them to look at the terms and conditions around data and privacy – they're not getting that visibility."[7]

Against this backdrop it feels unsurprising that parents see schools as part of the challenge as well as the solution.



INSIGHT 2

PARENTS SEE THEMSELVES AS PRIMARILY RESPONSIBLE FOR HELPING THEIR CHILDREN NAVIGATE ONLINE INFORMATION, BUT WELCOME OTHER TRUSTED PARTNERS TO SUPPORT THEM.

SUMMARY

- Parents were clear that responsibility for helping their children navigate online information starts at home, with them.
- This commitment stemmed from a variety of factors including a belief in parental autonomy, knowledge of their individual child and, for a minority, a wider distrust of government.
- However, parents do not want to do this in isolation and welcome partners that they trust to help and support them.



Parent Insights

Parents across the socioeconomic spectrum were clear that responsibility for how children navigate the online world should sit with parents. This was driven by a number of different factors, although the most dominant was a belief in the autonomy of parents to make decisions for their children. This was particularly the case because parents felt that this was a contested space where parents and schools may not always be aligned.

"The final say on your child is you… I think it lies on the parents… It's good to have support from school or other outside influences, but what the school might think is correct, us as parents might not think are correct. It might not align with our views… not necessarily just on online, but just on everything as a whole. And I think certain things should come from parents"

Delivery driver (D), Primary, Mother of 10-year-old, 8-year-old and 7-year-old, London

"Ultimately I personally believe that that responsibility is down to the parent."

Admin assistant (C1), Secondary, Mother of 14-year-old, West Midlands

Some parents felt that they could make more nuanced decisions which were specific to their child, rather than the blanket approach which would be necessary in school.

"I think the school has to understand that they can only instil certain things and ultimately it is down to the parents how they take care of their children and very rarely can school intervene with that."

Unemployed (D), Primary, Father of 9-year-old, London

A vocal minority talked about their desire for autonomy in decision making in the context of a wider distrust of government to act in their children's interests. Here, schools were often seen as agents of state intervention. This appeared to be more prevalent amongst parents from poorer socioeconomic backgrounds.

"I don't like to rely on the government or the school because it's my child and it should start at home and then they should support… I think there's too much emphasis on the government and the school. … Let's be honest, the government don't care."

Unemployed (E), Primary, Father of 10-year-old, London

INSIGHT 2 - PARENTS SEE THEMSELVES AS PRIMARILY RESPONSIBLE FOR HELPING THEIR CHILDREN NAVIGATE ONLINE INFORMATION, BUT WELCOME OTHER TRUSTED PARTNERS TO SUPPORT THEM.

"The teachers are there to teach the main subjects that our kids are going to need later on in life, science, English, maths. Yeah, maybe the one lesson. There's not really much to keep going over with the phones is my opinion. A teacher is there to teach the main subjects, I think it's more our role to show our children that it [misinformation and disinformation] wrong. The teachers do more than enough."

Unemployed (E), Secondary, Mother of 12-year-old, West Midlands

Some felt that making the decision as a parent to grant access to the online world - to buy a phone for example - brought with it a personal responsibility to help their child navigate it and the consequences of this decision shouldn't fall to schools.

"Ultimately, the schools don't buy the kids the phones… I've seen parents that buy their kid a phone and don't restrict, have no age restrictions on it whatsoever."

Property developer (A), Primary, Father of 16-year-old, 14-year-old and 10-year-old, East of England



While this sense of responsibility was shared across the socioeconomic spectrum, the reasons parents gave for it differed. More affluent parents tended to frame responsibility as a consequence of their own decisions, such as choosing to buy their child a phone, and were quick to contrast their own approach with that of other parents. Parents from the poorest households, by contrast, more often grounded their position in a distrust of government and a view that teachers should focus on core subjects rather than wider parenting decisions.

However, it was clear that parents did see a role for schools as a partner in educating and supporting their children online and many were actively seeking this support.

"We are the parents and it's our responsibility, but it would help to have the government and schools"

Hairdresser (D), Secondary, Mother of 17-year-old and 15-year-old, London

"There definitely needs to be a collective action, I think it's important that the school communicates with the parents."

Hairdresser (C2), Primary, Mother of 5-year-old, London

"Maybe there's something in the tone in which they send that message out or that they try and collaborate with parents to make it feel like we're all in this together and we all want the best for the children rather than we're going to tell you how, what difference you need to make."

Gardener (C2), Primary, Mother of 10-year-old, 6-year-old and 4-year-old, South East

"It's our responsibility then to obviously sit down with our child, to explain stuff and so us [the parents] and the school are on the same page."

Healthcare (C1), Primary, Mother of 11-year-old, East of England

INSIGHT 2 - PARENTS SEE THEMSELVES AS PRIMARILY RESPONSIBLE FOR HELPING THEIR CHILDREN NAVIGATE ONLINE INFORMATION, BUT WELCOME OTHER TRUSTED PARTNERS TO SUPPORT THEM.

Expert Commentary

The role of both parents and schools in supporting young people to navigate the online world was highlighted by our Expert Advisory Group who reflected both the primacy of parents and the need for school-parent partnerships in this space. Rhiannon Evans (Head of Public Affairs and Communications, Mumsnet) was clear that:

"There's a lot of discussion around where responsibility lies [and] the thing that comes across is that parents recognise their own responsibility and want to do something, but they know that they can't do it alone. The valuable role for schools in assisting with that is really important to them, as well as the wider perspective around government intervention and responsibility by platforms."

Moreover, Dr Katharine Smales (Senior Research Fellow, Critical Digital Literacy for Young People, UCL) sets parental autonomy in the wider context of the narrative around online access:

"I think it's important to stand back for a moment and just remember that major tech companies – they all present these parental controls as, 'we're going to empower parents, we're going to guide you about how these platforms and systems work in your home'. And what they are doing is creating this idea that this is parents' responsibility. They are, almost by designing these tools into their platforms, handing over the responsibility for managing these risks to parents, and that's a design choice on their part."

Maggie Mitchell (Head of Family Intervention, School-Home Support) stressed that School-Home Support's programmes demonstrate that partnership is desired by parents and that the starting premise of all such partnerships should be that "parents fundamentally want the best for their children, and so do schools."



INSIGHT 3

PARENTS TACKLE MISLEADING CONTENT THROUGH OPEN DIALOGUE AND DISCUSSION.

SUMMARY

- Parents rely on open dialogue and discussion with their children as their main tool to tackle misleading content and this approach was almost universally adopted.
- Parents do not report using external resources or fact checkers to support them in having conversations with their children.
- Parents recognise the fallibilities and limitations of this approach – including their own vulnerabilities.



Parent Insights

Parents told us that open dialogue and discussion with their children is the main tool they have when misleading content reaches the home. Virtually every participant recalled discussing the online world with their children, from topical fake news stories to the financial incentives for content creators to mislead.

"There's child content creators out there as well… I did explain to him a lot of these contents are being created for views. He understands that to get subscribers and the more subscribers they get, the more money their parents make. So sometimes what he hears, it's not necessarily always the truth."

Security guard (C2), Primary, Father of 8-year-old and 2-year-old, East of England

They did not report using external resources or fact checkers to support them in having these conversations with their children. Instead, it was clear this dialogue was fitting into daily life and conversations at home.

"So we sat down, and we had a conversation about it, but I think a massive factor is open communication with your kids so that they are actually able to come home to you and be like, 'look, this is what I've seen, or this is what my friends are talking about. What is this?'."

Senior administrator (C1), Primary, Mother of 8-year-old, East of England

"So, I think we're pretty good on everything, but with the online world, I'm just going to watch the 12-year-old and see how it goes. And just tell her that anything you need to know or you don't be ever scared to ask us and then if we don't know the answer to that, then we'll look up what we need to look up."

HGV driver (D), Secondary, Father of 18-year-old, 12-year-old and 9-year-old, West Midlands

INSIGHT 3 – PARENTS TACKLE MISLEADING CONTENT THROUGH OPEN DIALOGUE AND DISCUSSION.

Most parents were, perhaps surprisingly, confident in having these conversations with their children. Yet they also spoke about their own vulnerabilities in judging what was real. Parents from higher social grades most often voiced doubts about their own ability to judge what was real, or about the influence of algorithms on what their children saw.

"I think it's quite hard to determine what's real and what isn't. I think when I'm viewing things online or when my daughter is and we're discussing it together, we do it with a healthy dose of scepticism."

Travel consultant (C1), Secondary, Mother of 11-year-old and 8-year-old, South West

"I've got a 13-year-old daughter who's [has SEND], who's probably quite naive. I don't quite know how I tell her what is genuine and what isn't. It's a really hard one."

Project manager (B), Secondary, Father of 13-year-old, East Midlands

Parents recognised the limits both of their own ability to spot inaccurate content and of their influence over their children. Open dialogue, they accepted, is not sufficient on its own.

"Obviously my daughter may see something inappropriate [online]. She will explain to me, 'I saw this or she's not sure what it's about.' We can have that open conversation, but obviously sometimes she may see something, but we [as parents] don't always know about it. But there are certain videos that my kids see due to the algorithm where I am a bit spooked."

Operations manager (B), Secondary, Father of 16-year-old, 14-year-old, 13-year-old and 4-year-old, North West

"I have had this conversation with my children before about misinformation and loads of things have happened in the past…but I find it [misleading content online] very dangerous".

Chef, (C2), Secondary, Mother of 16-year-old and 13-year-old, West Midlands



IT IS CLEAR THAT REGULATION IS THEREFORE ONLY A PARTIAL ANSWER. WHATEVER RESTRICTIONS FOLLOW, THERE WILL BE A CONTINUED NEED FOR SCHOOLS AND PARENTS TO WORK TO SUPPORT YOUNG PEOPLE TO DEVELOP MEDIA LITERACY SKILLS AND TACKLE ONLINE HARM.

Expert Commentary

Open dialogue between trusted adults and young people was seen as integral to combatting misinformation, disinformation and conspiracy belief. Crucially, Andy Burrows (CEO, Molly Rose Foundation) made clear that there is an important distinction between what it is possible for parents to achieve and what is beyond their sphere of influence:

"Parents who are doing open dialogue, who are trying to build those trusting conversations and relationships, are doing exactly what they should be doing. Parents' job is not to police the internet, but to be helping to empower and build those relationships of trust. But there is that sense of, is it enough… and I think that goes back to that underlying point of helplessness here, and the lack of clarity around roles – is it the job [of parents] to police the internet, rather than being about upskilling and empowering children and young people to navigate their digital lives."

Rachel Huggins (CEO, Internet Matters), highlighted the strain that AI-generated content was adding to these conversations, "it's positive that open conversation is happening in many families but it's also clear that parents find it challenging when AI-generated content increasingly blurs the lines of what is real and what isn't. This points to the need for clearer signposting of this type of content and to sources of high-quality trusted information."

This focus on process rather than specific platforms or publications was particularly important, both in terms of transferability and in building trust between young people and the adults in their lives. Dr Kaitlyn Regehr (Associate Professor of Digital Humanities, UCL and Global Fellow, Schwartz Reisman Institute for Technology and Society, University of Toronto) summarised this as a focus on *"stepping away from the actual content itself, and not so much talking about the publication of that content, but rather talking about the process of dissemination. This means upskilling young people to understand how algorithms prioritise engaging content, and that can include content which promotes hate, harm and disinformation…"*

Jemma Levene (COO, Centre for Countering Digital Hate) also stressed the value of a low-stakes starting point. Beginning with content that does not challenge a parent's or child's existing views makes it easier to practise the habits of questioning that can later be applied to more contested material:

"You can make more progress by starting with something fun and safe, rather than something that challenges a parent's or child's views. Our 'deepfake or real?' quiz uses pictures of kittens and puppies. You're not saying, 'You are wrong'; you're saying, 'Oh my gosh, I never would have guessed.' That opens up a safer conversation."

And crucially, in a period of ongoing discussion about the role and extent of regulation surrounding social media and online content, Andy Burrows (CEO, Molly Rose Foundation) was clear that the role of open dialogue and the need for media literacy was only growing, but that any legal ban on young people on social media could undermine this open dialogue as they would know that any activity would be legally prohibited[8].

"It is very likely that we're entering a period where the conditions are not necessarily conducive to those open conversations, if we are heading towards a ban and the challenges of navigating that and implementing that. And I think there is something about reasserting that this is not problem solved, and that having those conversations and doubling down on the importance of those is probably now more important than ever, as we go through a difficult transition and implementation period."

Regulation is therefore only a partial answer to the challenges facing young people online.

INSIGHT 4

PARENTS SEE SCHOOLS AS PARTNERS, BUT REPORT VARIED EXPERIENCES OF SUPPORT.

SUMMARY

- Parent-school interactions regarding online activity should be seen within the context of wider parent-school relationships.
- Whilst parents see themselves as primarily responsible for the decision making surrounding their children's online use, they are generally receptive to support framed as partnership rather than instruction.
- Parents had highly varied experiences of school involvement in this space.
- Some parents were sceptical about the efficacy of school involvement given the all encompassing nature of online access.



Parent Insights

In our 2026 Research Insights report, teachers told us that they felt that parents were impeding schools' efforts to address conspiracy belief in the classroom. The difficulties they described were a symptom of a wider weakening of the social contract between schools and families since the pandemic.[9]

In this research, it is clear those tensions are not driven by a wholesale rejection of school involvement. Parents were generally receptive to support framed as partnership rather than instruction, which fits their wish to retain primary responsibility.

"So, I think schools do have a sense of responsibility as well to make sure children are safe [online], provide information and guidance towards that type of thing."

Painter and decorator (D), Primary, Father of 9-year-old and 7-year-old, London

"I definitely think that schools could work more with parents. In the past, I've had leaflets sent through newsletters saying, look at this IT, this is what we're going to focus on this week - like a newsletter. But apart from that, there's not really anything that I can see that relates to interaction between kids and educating parents."

Civil servant (C1), Secondary, Father of 12-year-old, West Midlands

There is an opportunity here to work together – however, neither side is finding it easy. First, parents' experience of the support schools offer varies considerably.

Experience varied a great deal from one school to the next. And where there had been no contact on the issue at all, some parents were clearly anxious about carrying it alone.

"Schools are a little reactive. They're a little bit behind the curve. They're not massively forward-looking. So like you say, they're learning very much the same things that we learned when we were kids."

Project manager (C1), Secondary, Father of 18-year-old and 15-year-old, West Midlands

INSIGHT 4 – PARENTS SEE SCHOOLS AS PARTNERS, BUT REPORT VARIED EXPERIENCES OF SUPPORT.

Of those who had received some support, many were sceptical about how effective it was. They pointed to sessions scheduled during the working day, and to offers that did not reach parents who do not already see this as a priority. Some doubted schools' ability to act proactively on such a fast-moving issue and said the support on offer belonged to an analogue age. The nature of this scepticism appeared to differ by social grade. Parents from wealthier families more often questioned whether school staff had the expertise to keep pace with the technology, while parents from less affluent households more often pointed to practical barriers, such as sessions held during working hours, or doubted whether support was reaching the families who needed it most.

"I think staff at schools don't always have the experience…they haven't got the experience of what to do on certain social media."

Operations manager (B), Secondary, Father of 16-year-old, 14-year-old, 13-year-old and 4-year-old, North West

"They're always during the working day. I don't know what happens at the sessions because I've never been able to get to one because I'm always at work."

Gardener (C2), Primary, Mother of 10-year-old, 6-year-old and 4-year-old, South East



"Obviously the people that turn up are already interested in this anyway, they might not be the ones that necessarily need the help the most. I went to one a few weeks ago and…there's probably a few hundred kids there and we had about 25 parents there. But as I say… it's probably the parents that are not really focused on it that would be the ones that might benefit the most."

Travel agent (D), Primary, Father of 11-year-old and 7-year-old, London

Schools need to give parents confidence that they have a grip on this. This matters for parental buy-in to what happens in the classroom and for parents' willingness to reinforce it at home.

However, the variation in provision is understandable - schools have been given very little to work with. Media literacy and the online information environment are not yet implemented in the statutory curriculum, there is no established framework for engaging parents on these issues, and there is very little accredited training. In addition, the technology itself is changing at an unprecedented pace. The pace of change inhibits the production of guidance, which inevitably lags behind technological innovation.

Moreover, our previous research found that there are significant differences between the apps used by young people and adults.[10] Adults are therefore siloed away from young people, often unaware of the changes to apps they do not use.

The Curriculum and Assessment Review endorsed the Commission's recommendation that schools strengthen their work on media literacy, with curriculum changes rolling out from 2028 - but until then, schools are improvising.

There are also no evaluated models for how schools should do this. It is not reasonable to hold schools to a standard of practice that does not yet exist. Building it, and the training that goes with it, is what this Commission was established to do.



INSIGHT 4 – PARENTS SEE SCHOOLS AS PARTNERS, BUT REPORT VARIED EXPERIENCES OF SUPPORT.

Expert Commentary

There is a lack of robust evaluation regarding school-based interventions to address misinformation, disinformation and conspiracy belief. However, there is a raft of activity happening in schools. Schools are reacting to the needs of their communities and this organic activity should be better understood and, where effective, scaled across the sector. As Heather McGowan (Headteacher, St Anthony's Catholic Primary School) articulated, *"we just need to be really open and honest with parents [about the challenges]."*

However, the variability between schools has created what Rachel Huggins (CEO, Internet Matters) has described as a 'postcode lottery' of provision:

"It's a real postcode lottery in terms of where you live and what school your child goes to which defines the amount and quality of education they receive around online safety, and the engagement you get as parents. We know media literacy needs to be effectively embedded in the curriculum, but progress is slow and tech moves quickly, so this absolutely needs to be prioritised."

Discussions between schools and parents regarding online content do not exist in a vacuum and is influenced by wider school-home relationships. Clear evidence suggests that these relationships and the 'home-school contract' has been under increasing strain, compounded by the pandemic, and trust between parents and schools is no longer an accepted norm.[11] Rachel Huggins (CEO, Internet Matters) was clear on the need for a 'reset', and the uniting principles underpinning this:

"We're all on the same side, we all want the best for our children, we all want them to live in a world where they can feel safe, whether that's online or offline, and we need to work quickly and effectively together towards this goal. The upcoming changes to children's access to online spaces gives us an important moment to do that."

Maggie Mitchell, (Head of Family Intervention, School-Home Support) conveyed the urgency felt by many experts addressing this issue: *"The time is now. We can't sit and wait on this… both parties need to understand that actually they will achieve more if only they would partner with one another… parents fundamentally want the best for their children, and so do schools."*

Similarly, Andy Burrows (CEO, Molly Rose Foundation) called for, *"a clear partnership with clear parameters – the roles of schools and the roles of parents - in a sense that this is part of a cohesive whole…"* in order to ensure a far more comprehensive approach. Making clear the role of parents and schools in this space – as well as government and technology firms - was seen as critical to creating a positive partnership in the future.

However, Jemma Levene (COO, Centre for Countering Digital Hate) cautioned that a focus on the partnership between parents and schools should not obscure the responsibility of technology companies themselves. She suggested that many parents may not realise how little independent scrutiny can lie behind platforms' safety claims:

"When you buy something for your child, you assume someone has tested it and that there are rules about how it works. I don't think parents necessarily realise that platforms' safety assurances can rest on the companies' own audits."

INSIGHT 5

PARENTS UNDERSTAND THE RISKS OF MISLEADING INFORMATION ONLINE THROUGH THE LENSES OF ONLINE SAFETY AND ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE.

SUMMARY

- Parents do not use academic terminology such as ‘misinformation, disinformation and conspiracy belief’ to describe online activity, but they are concerned about these issues.
- There was huge concern about the growing and evolving challenges of AI, which parents felt ill-equipped to address.
- Parents saw all types of online activity as linked; online safety, cyberbullying, misinformation and disinformation and AI.



Parent Insights

Our 2025 Launch Report found that academic definitions of conspiracy theory, misinformation and disinformation are not understood in the same way by young people, parents and school staff.[12]

In this research we further tested this academic terminology, finding that for parents across the socioeconomic spectrum 'misinformation' 'disinformation' and 'conspiracy' content are not part of their everyday lexicon. Many did not recognise the terms at all. This did not mean that their experience or understanding of these concepts was absent, but rather that they described such activity in very different terms.

"I can say a lot of people might not know what's difference between fake news and misinformation, disinformation."

Unemployed (E), Primary, Father of 10-year-old, London

A consistent picture emerged across all parent demographics – that parents are primarily worried about online safety, and that is the issue they prioritise.

"My major concerns are really about inappropriate content and cyberbullying because I can't exactly control the sort of contents my kids consume and I can't be there with them all the time."

Electrician (C2), Secondary, Father of 12-year-old, South West

"I probably don't know still all the apps that they can access…like Roblox was a thing where that was being hacked by groomers."

Team leader (B), Secondary, Mother of 17-year-old and 13-year-old, West Midlands

The threat of harm through online contact or inappropriate content felt more pressing than misleading information - which in isolation did not seem to carry the same risk.

INSIGHT 5 – PARENTS UNDERSTAND THE RISKS OF MISLEADING INFORMATION ONLINE THROUGH THE LENSES OF ONLINE SAFETY AND ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE.

"Occasionally there'll be something where my lad will maybe say something about, 'Oh, I saw that on TikTok the other day and I'll know it's not real.' And I'll just go, 'Oh, so it must be right then if it was on TikTok and we just laugh about it.'"

Mechanic (C2), Secondary, Father of 16-year-old and 14-year-old, West Midlands

"There's that fear of that existing in that online world, stranger danger, as well as just maybe doing or posting something that you might regret. That's more of an issue for me than the harmful content, even though I do still think that's an issue."

Gardener (C2), Primary, Mother of 10-year-old, 6-year-old and 4-year-old, South East

Asked about misinformation and disinformation, parents turned almost exclusively to AI. They spoke extensively about their own experiences of being deceived by misleading content and their concerns about identifying it online.

"When you said misinformation, I was thinking more like videos using AI or using stuff that isn't really real"

Chef (C2), Primary, Father of 8-year-old, London

"AI-generated content now, it's really hard to tell what's real and what isn't."

Mechanic (C2), Secondary, Father of 16-year-old and 14-year-old, West Midlands

"If you look at comment sections, a lot of people actually think these [AI] videos are real and it is quite shocking how easy it is to fool the masses."

Train operator (D), Secondary, Father of 16-year-old and 13-year-old, London

Whilst they did not see it as an issue specific to young people, parents were deeply concerned both about their children's vulnerability to misleading content and feeling ill equipped to help. There was some indication that this concern was expressed differently by social grade. Parents from more affluent backgrounds tended to describe AI in broader terms, as unregulated or frightening in principle, while it was more often parents from lower social grades who admitted to having been personally deceived by AI-generated content.

"I think it [AI] is not really regulated right now and it's just difficult [to tell what is real and fake online], there are grey areas and its scary."

Financial services (B), Primary, Mother of 11-year-old, East of England

Several described a role reversal in which their children had become the family's arbiters of what was real.

Clearly, parents who cannot reliably identify AI-generated content are vulnerable to believing it and to passing it on. Deferring to children who are better at spotting manipulated images, but who lack the knowledge to judge whether information is accurate, leaves both under-supported.

"I mean, I believe half of the AI stuff. My son's like, 'Mum, you do know that's not real.'"

Cleaner (D), Primary, Mother of 12-year-old and 9-year-old, East of England

"They say, don't they, a picture paints a thousand words and pictures can be literally created [using AI] without any context and that's terrifying."

Surveyor (B), Primary, Mother of 10-year-old, London

"My son always can tell me whether it's AI or not. It's me that's fooled. He's the one who usually says to me, 'Mum, that's a fake. It's not real.'"

Hairdresser (C2), Primary, Mother of 5-year-old, London

In some cases, parents had experienced first-hand the risks and potential for harm to children from misleading content. Parents understood how 'easy' it is for dangerous actors to create fake content or images online, or could point to topical cases where fake AI-generated content had been weaponised against children and schools.

INSIGHT 5 – PARENTS UNDERSTAND THE RISKS OF MISLEADING INFORMATION ONLINE THROUGH THE LENSES OF ONLINE SAFETY AND ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE.

"A kid in year eight had taken a photo of my daughter who's in year 11 and then made an AI app tool to make a video of her, which was inappropriate, but then he'd sent it around his mates."

Consultant (C1), Secondary, Father of 16-year-old and 13-year-old, West Midlands



Expert Commentary

The need to shift away from theoretical, academic language and focus on terms that are used by parents themselves is understood as critical to more successful engagement. In the words of Rhiannon Evans (Head of Public Affairs and Communications, Mumsnet):

"Framing it as an online safety issue rather than thinking or talking about misinformation or disinformation."

This was not to suggest that concerns around misinformation and disinformation are any less pressing, nor that parents are not concerned about them. Parents understood these issues through a different lens and using different wording – which should be respected and utilised by those who are partnering with them.

Rachel Huggins (CEO. Internet Matters) was clear that:

"These kinds of terms just add to that sense of overwhelm for parents – they're complicated to understand. We need to position mis and disinformation alongside their wider concerns about contact and content risks and use language that places it in a real-life context and to communicate and engage with them on the potential consequences for children from exposure to this content."

INSIGHT 6

PARENTS SEE THE ABILITY TO NAVIGATE THE ONLINE WORLD AS AN ESSENTIAL LIFE SKILL.

SUMMARY

- Parents recognise that schools provide an important foundational knowledge, particularly for those young people who may not be getting support at home.
- Parents did not see tackling online challenges as a discrete subject, but as a crosscutting and practical skillset.
- These skills were not about teaching pupils factual content about ‘what to think’ but about ‘how to think’.
- Parents broadly support greater regulation of young people’s online activity, in part because they feel they lack the expertise and time to manage these risks effectively themselves.
- Parents saw a role for state regulation of online spaces, but were clear it would not be enough on its own.



Parent Insights

Whilst parents saw themselves as primarily responsible for helping young people to navigate the online world, they valued media literacy and critical thinking as life skills which they thought should be taught in schools. They did not see this as a standalone lesson, but a skill that should be threaded through the curriculum and throughout a young person's education. The emphasis differed somewhat by socioeconomic background: parents from higher social grades tended to describe these skills in terms of critical thinking, confidence and resilience, while parents from less affluent backgrounds more often framed them as practical safety skills and the ability to spot fake content.

"I think for me, schools should actually play a very big role in making them [young people] aware, what is fake and whatnot. I think school could maybe guide them on how to actually compare news across different website and how they can actually just recognise signs of misleading content that's maybe trying to influence their opinion."

Decorator (D), Secondary, Mother of 18-year-old and 15-year-old, West Yorkshire

"So for young people to be able to identify [misinformation and disinformation online], I think is really important, especially when they're looking online versus what they actually see in reality in the real world. The two things are very different, so they need to be able to spot that."

Account manager (B), Secondary, Mother of 14-year-old and 10-year-old, West Midlands

"I think it would be better to educate our kids [about the online world] rather than cut it out totally…. So for me, I think if schools could focus more on teaching about the internet and that would be great because I feel some of the stuff they learn at school doesn't always give them the life skills that they need… I think as parents as well, when your kids start nursery and they're going to teach them how in phonics they invite you in to learn about how we're going to teach your kids about phonics. And they should do something similar to that with parents around what your kids should be watching on the internet and how you can control that."

Disparities specialist (B), Primary, Mother of 18-year-old, 16-year-old and 8-year-old, London

INSIGHT 6 – PARENTS SEE THE ABILITY TO NAVIGATE THE ONLINE WORLD AS AN ESSENTIAL LIFE SKILL.

"Obviously it's education on the internet and safety. It's still part of life skills is."

Hospitality worker (D), Secondary, Mother of 16-year-old, 15-year-old, 7-year-old and 1-year-old, West Midlands

They also acknowledged that not all young people would get the same information and support at home and school could offer foundational knowledge in this space.

"Some kids get more from school than they do at home sadly. So, I do think to protect the kids who haven't got the best parents or if their parents aren't [digitally] savvy enough then I think the schools do have a part to play [in educating young people about the online world]."

HGV driver (D), Secondary, Father of 18-year-old, 12-year-old and 9-year-old, West Midlands

Whilst parents saw a role for state regulation of online spaces for young people, they were clear that this alone would not be sufficient to protect young people online.

"It is not possible to shield them [young people] from everything. And I think we've got to give them, like I said, the confidence, the resilience, the ways to find what they need online"

Team leader (B), Secondary, Mother of 17-year-old and 13-year-old, West Midlands

"I don't think you can protect and shield them from everything. Yeah, I just don't think it's possible, but I think it's important that you make them aware so they are able to make judgement and navigate what misinformation that they are seeing."

Hairdresser (C2), Primary, Mother of 5-year-old, London

Expert Commentary

The consensus on teaching media literacy and critical thinking in order to support young people to identify misinformation, disinformation and conspiracy belief was clear amongst our Expert Advisory Group. Andy Burrows (CEO, Molly Rose Foundation) highlighted the power of formal education tools:

"We like to talk about education as inoculation – the idea that we are equipping young people from an early age with fundamental life skills around critical digital literacy and the understanding of algorithms. So this is about tools rather than the formation of views. It is those tools to build that sense of critical digital literacy."

Importantly he stressed that, in providing tools rather than focusing on specific content, it reduced the tension between parents and teachers over specific subject areas. That is not to suggest that misleading content should not be addressed when young people raise it in schools, but rather that a proactive, curriculum-based response was less adversarial than the reactive responses to particular materials.

Jemma Levene (COO, Centre for Countering Digital Hate) agreed that, because technology changes so quickly, the focus should be on transferable skills rather than specific platforms or trends:

"The life skill needs to be critical thinking, adaptability and resilience, because the technology changes all the time. It's about knowing when to turn off and walk away, when to raise a red flag, and how to support a friend who might be getting drawn into something harmful."

Heather McGowan (Headteacher, St Anthony's Catholic Primary School) was also clear that a cumulative, proactive approach to embedding this learning within the curriculum was positive both for parents and schools:

"That's what I would love for my children... I want them to give them all that information in a progressive, cumulative way, so that they can make healthy choices and keep themselves safe."

INSIGHT 7

THERE IS A LACK OF CONSENSUS ABOUT WHEN EDUCATING YOUNG PEOPLE ABOUT THE ONLINE WORLD SHOULD BEGIN.

SUMMARY

- Whilst parents were clear that young people should be taught the skills to discern and scrutinise information online, they disagreed about when this should happen.
- Parents of primary aged children felt that they still had significant control over their children's online lives and were concerned that by educating their children, they were exposing them to these risks too early.
- Parents of secondary aged children were concerned that they now lacked control over their children's online lives and wished that they were better prepared.
- Transition from primary to secondary school was seen as a watershed moment in terms of young people's online access.



Parent Insights

Parents were broadly supportive of schools equipping children with the skills to discern and scrutinise information online. However, there was a clear divide between the parents of primary and secondary aged children.

Primary parents felt they had significant control over their children's online lives. They were concerned that by educating primary aged children about the online world, they were inherently exposing them to an environment and content inappropriate to their age.

"I just think it's once they start going out into the world where the age restriction is off, for example, on the YouTube and stuff like that, or adverts, that I'd be concerned about this. But I don't feel I have that concern at the minute, because for example, my son doesn't have his own mobile phone or anything like that, so he can't get access to it."

Property developer (A), Primary, Father of 16-year-old, 14-year-old and 10-year-old, East of England

"I feel like sometimes when [schools] you go too much into it [the online world], like with the primary especially…I feel like they [young people] have had to grow up a lot sooner than what I would've liked."

Salon owner (A), Primary, Mother of 10-year-old and 5-year-old, East of England

This concern about early exposure appeared to be most pronounced amongst the most affluent parents. Primary parents from poorer backgrounds did not express the same reservations about early education, although they were anxious about what the move to secondary school would bring.

In contrast, secondary parents presented the reverse case. They talked about experiencing a loss of control over their child's online world. This was attributed to increased digital access (often in the form of a child's first smartphone), increased influence of peers and a corresponding decline in family influences. Moreover, parents spoke about their children having far greater understanding of the technology they were using, with the ability to circumvent controls.

INSIGHT 7 - THERE IS A LACK OF CONSENSUS ABOUT WHEN EDUCATING YOUNG PEOPLE ABOUT THE ONLINE WORLD SHOULD BEGIN.

"I think by the time they've got to year eight, nine, ten, it's then really hard to claw anything back or change anything that you might be putting in place because they're going back to that thing where you have more control in primary school about who they're interacting with, who their friends are, you might know the family's better, but when they get to secondary school, all of that goes out the window."

Nurse (C1), Secondary, Mother of 15-year-old and 12-year-old, West Midlands

"He [son] doesn't seem to be on any WhatsApp groups at the moment, but the thing I find frustrating is that it can be added to these WhatsApp groups and we don't know how he's been added or who's managed to add him because anybody can add him. So yeah, it's quite worrying."

Civil servant (C1), Secondary, Father of 12-year-old, West Midlands

Parents of secondary aged children were clear that their children would have benefited from earlier education in this space, prior to accessing online content more autonomously. Parents from higher social grades were amongst the clearest advocates of starting earlier.

"The earlier you can catch hold, the better…if the ship has sailed, you're trying to drag it back."

Sales manager (B), Secondary, Father of 18-year-old and 15-year-old, West Midlands



"We've had the internet awareness classes [in primary school], but for secondary school, I think that's probably where it's needed the most really when they do actually have access to a mobile phone and there's a lot more freedom that comes, a lot more access that comes with, I guess, then making that jump from primary to secondary school."

Social worker (B), Primary, Mother of 11-year-old, London

The transition from primary to secondary appeared to mark a watershed moment for young people's online access, one that had taken many parents by surprise. As a result, they felt they were reactive, rather than proactive in this space.

"My only worry is that once they [young people] go into secondary school and they've got access to a mobile phone."

Delivery driver (D), Primary, Mother of 10-year-old, 8-year-old and 7-year-old, London

"I still think it's something that needs to be done in year five and six when they're getting that mobile phone, but also while they're still at a position whereby, you're able to influence them at that age - whereas when they go on secondary school, it's far harder to influence kids and parents."

Director (B), Secondary, Mother of 18-year-old and 16-year-old, West Midlands

"Yes, my children don't have a phone yet but I am conscious that they are going to secondary school at some point and I will have to watch that."

Rug maker (C2), Primary, Mother of 11-year-old and 9-year-old, West Midlands

INSIGHT 7 - THERE IS A LACK OF CONSENSUS ABOUT WHEN EDUCATING YOUNG PEOPLE ABOUT THE ONLINE WORLD SHOULD BEGIN.

Expert Commentary

The creation of age-appropriate curriculum content was a key challenge for our experts, although not an insurmountable one. Dr Kaitlyn Regehr (Associate Professor of Digital Humanities, UCL) described the tension parents feel between protecting their children's innocence and feeling it is already too late as "such a common narrative", and one she also sees in her research on AI:

"We recently did a piece of research with American mums, 2,300 American mums... they could agree on nothing. The only thing they could agree on is that only 6% thought that AI was net positive for their children's future, whilst at the same time they felt that their kids needed to learn AI in order to protect them for the future."[13]

Dr Lucy Foulkes (Prudence Trust Research Fellow and NIHR Senior Research Fellow, University of Oxford) stressed the need to see this tension in the context of adolescent development, arguing that young people's online lives carry the same tensions as their offline ones:

"At some point in adolescence it becomes appropriate for young people to have experiences and thoughts and feelings and relationships that their parents don't know everything about. And I think that's a really difficult element of this – teenagers will want privacy, but also there is so much fear from parents and wanting to protect them, that sometimes that can tip too far into not allowing the teenager to have anything happening privately with technology."

These tensions are heightened at the move from primary to secondary school, which parents in our focus groups described as a watershed. Jemma Levene (COO, Centre for Countering Digital Hate) argued that parents are rarely prepared for how much of their informal contact with school falls away at this point:

"I don't think we prepare parents enough for the move to secondary school. In primary school, you can talk to teachers and other parents and have a much clearer sense of your child's day. At secondary school, much of that informal contact disappears."

Returning to this tension, Dr Regehr suggested that the way through it may lie in teaching critical skills, such as algorithmic literacy, rather than focusing on specific content (see Insight 6):

"Focusing on the process rather than the content – so the dissemination rather than the actual piece of publication – helps you get around that issue, that tension. Because what you're doing is you're giving critical skills rather than potentially introducing children to content that parents feel they're not ready to introduce to. And that's when you can go into reception classes and use a cardboard box and a piece of string to do algorithmic literacy without actually introducing any of the concepts that we might be discussing today."



APPLYING THIS RESEARCH IN SCHOOLS

The aim of this research is to provide deep insight into parental perspectives on the challenges of tackling misinformation, disinformation and conspiracy belief amongst young people. It presents their views on how these issues are currently being addressed in schools, and how they would like it to be.

In doing so, we hope to provide schools and leaders with a better understanding of parental views. We do not suggest that parents quoted within this research represent universal opinion, nor that this research is indicative of every school context or the community they serve. Instead, we hope that it provides an opportunity for teachers, leaders and wider school communities to consider these findings in their own environment, enrich the conversations which are already occurring and supplement the work already underway across the country to support young people to navigate the online world.

Discussion Questions for Schools:

1 **INSIGHT ONE:** For many families the online world is no longer separate from everyday life.

A How do our school systems and platforms (homework apps, communication channels) add to a family's daily online load?

B Are we sending consistent messages about screen time given how much time we ask young people to spend online?

2 **INSIGHT TWO:** Parents see themselves as primarily responsible for helping their children navigate online information, but welcome other trusted partners to support them.

A How can schools support parents in this space whilst respecting their role?

B What can be learned from other topics where conversations at home and curriculum content can be a source of conflict?

C What other organisations are working on related issues locally that may be trusted partners and how could we work with them?

3 **INSIGHT THREE:** Parents tackle misleading content through open dialogue and discussion.

A How can we equip parents to feel more confident in the conversations they are having with young people at home?

B What practical tools or prompts, could we give parents to use in the moment when their child raises something they've seen online?

C What would we need to do differently if we wanted to get better at building pupils' longer-term capacity to navigate a changing information environment?

4 **INSIGHT FOUR:** Parents see schools as partners, but report varied experiences of support.

A What does our current offer to parents on this issue look like in practice?

B Are there particular parent groups who it is particularly effective at reaching or who are missing?

C How do we address scepticism from parents about whether schools have the expertise or capacity to keep pace with a fast-changing issue?



INSIGHT FIVE: Parents understand the risks of misleading information online through the lenses of online safety and artificial intelligence.

A. Are we communicating with parents in terms that reflect what they are worried about and understand?

B. Are we making links between these issues to help parents understand why they are being prioritised and discussed in school?

INSIGHT SIX: Parents see the ability to navigate the online world as an essential life skill.

A. Where do we currently teach media literacy in our curriculum?

B. Where do we currently teach critical thinking skills in our curriculum?

C. Does our curriculum reflect the 2025 Curriculum and Assessment Review's commitment to embed media literacy across the curriculum?

INSIGHT SEVEN: There is a lack of consensus about when educating young people about the online world should begin.

A. What rationale are we providing parents with for our decisions as to when and how to teach these topics?

B. How are we dealing with this topic during our transition planning from Year 6 to Year 7?

C. What are your key messages as a school and how can you work with parents to develop common message?

Resources for Schools

In our first report, the Commission into Countering Online Conspiracies in Schools recommended expert-led, research-informed and sustained continuous professional development (CPD) for teachers and school leaders.

To deliver on this recommendation, Pears Foundation has funded programmes of work with the **Centre for Digital Information Literacy in Schools** at the National Institute of Teaching, and with UCL's **Institute of Education**.

The National Institute of Teaching (NIoT) launched the Centre for Digital Information Literacy in Schools (CDILS) in July 2025. The Centre exists to tackle the growing challenge of online conspiracy, misinformation and disinformation in schools. Its work focuses on how best to help educators at every stage of their careers, from trainee teachers to senior leaders and governors, build the knowledge, confidence and tools they need to teach and lead in an age of misinformation.

NATIONAL INSTITUTE of Teaching | CDILS CENTRE FOR DIGITAL INFORMATION LITERACY IN SCHOOLS

- WHY TEACHERS CAN'T FACT-CHECK THEIR WAY OUT OF A CONSPIRACY THEORY
- NAVIGATING CONSPIRACIES IN SCHOOLS

UCL's IOE, launched its programme Responding to Misinformation, Disinformation and Conspiracy Theories in the Classroom in April 2025, to develop and roll out a research-informed and sustained CPD offer for teachers. Led by former teachers Jeremy Hayward and Gemma Gronland, authors of the Association for Citizenship Teaching's guidance on conspiracy theories in the classroom, it offers free CPD for schools and initial teacher education sessions that help primary and secondary teachers understand the problem and explore how to respond in the classroom.

UCL Institute of Education

- GUIDANCE FOR TEACHERS
- FREE CPD FOR SCHOOLS



METHODOLOGY



This research took a qualitative approach to understanding parents' views on the issues of conspiracy belief, misinformation and disinformation amongst young people. The core research was undertaken through a series of twelve independently recruited focus groups in England, conducted by Public First between May and June 2026.

Each group was held online and facilitated by an experienced Public First researcher, in a semi-structured format with key discussion questions and room for parents to lead the discussion.

These groups were structured by social group, location, the stage of education and in the final two groups, the parents' willingness to engage with school on the online world, as set out below:

FOCUS	SOCIAL GROUP/ATTITUDE	PHASE	GEOGRAPHIC AREA
NATIONAL	ABC1	Primary	National
	ABC1	Secondary	National
	C2DE	Primary	National
	C2DE	Secondary	National
CLASS DEEP DIVES	AB	Primary	South East
	AB	Secondary	West Midlands
	C1C2	Primary	South East
	C1C2	Secondary	West Midlands
	DE	Primary	South East
	DE	Secondary	West Midlands
ATTITUDES TO SCHOOLS	Mixed social group and positive towards schools	Primary & Secondary	National
	Mixed social group and neutral/negative towards schools	Primary & Secondary	National

Each group had between four and eight participants. All recruited participants had at least one school-aged child, although many had more than one.

Groups were recruited using social grade, as defined by the National Readership Survey, which classifies households by the occupation of the main income earner. It is the standard the research industry uses to structure samples of this kind.[14]

Social Grade is a classification system based on occupation and is based on the main income earner in the household. The classifications are:

SOCIAL GRADE	DESCRIPTION
A	Higher managerial, administrative and professional.
B	Intermediate managerial, administrative and professional.
C1	Supervisory, clerical and junior managerial, administrative and professional.
C2	Skilled manual workers.
D	Semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers.
E	State pensioners, casual and lowest grade workers, unemployed with state benefits only.

Safeguarding and Ethical Research:

Inherent within this research were significant ethical considerations that had to be considered and navigated in order to ensure that the research did not cause harm to any individual or groups. Public First has broad experience of undertaking research with vulnerable groups and on politically sensitive and challenging issues, including with young people, individuals with special educational needs and minority groups.

The Commission, and its research partner Public First, are committed to the very highest standards of ethical conduct in our research, and we adhere to the professional standards set out by the Market Research Society, of which we are members.[15] Specific attention was paid to ensuring that informed consent was given by all participants prior to taking part in the research.

The identifying features of all participants have been anonymised to protect their privacy. This report uses so called 'thick description' - detailed observations of characteristics and context - to narrate and interpret what has been observed and discussed within a broader context, and provides analysis based upon the voices of participants. Their words remain unchanged.

This research was not conducted in order to find out how widely held conspiracy beliefs are, or to test how believable different theories would be. Instead, our focus groups focused on the perceptions of the online world, conspiracy theories, misinformation, disinformation and how schools and parents can work together to support young people.

At all stages of the research, when specific examples of conspiracy theories were discussed, the research team made explicitly clear that these were widely discredited or had no factual basis.





ENDNOTES

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