

BACKGROUND

This research was commissioned by Childnet (as part of the UK Safer Internet Centre) and Nominet, and was carried out by Opinium.

Opinium conducted two surveys. One of them was of 2018 children aged 8-17 in the UK. The data from this survey has been weighted to be nationally representative of children aged 8-17 in the UK.

The second survey was of 2000 parents and carers of children aged 8-17 in the UK. The data from the survey has been weighted to be nationally representative of parents and carers of children aged 8-17 in the UK.

These surveys were in field 1-12th November 2025.

USAGE OF VPNS

Just over 1 in 5 children (21%) aged 8-17 have used a VPN.

- Parents and carers have a good level of accuracy on knowing whether their child has used a VPN (23% of parents think their child has ever used a VPN, and 21% of 8-17 year olds have).
- The data shows slightly more boys (25%) than girls (18%) have used VPNs.
- The number of children using VPNs increases as children get older, from 15% of 8-10s, 21% of 11-14s to 27% of 15-17s.

CHANGE IN USAGE

There was a widely reported spike in VPN use in July¹ in the media, which was linked to the coming into force of the Online Safety Act (OSA) age verification requirements on online pornography providers. From our data we found that this spike in VPN use is not attributable to children.

For parents and carers, they do not report a noticeable increase in VPN use by their children in recent months. When asked (n=461), when their child started using a VPN, highest answer was 1 year ago (25%), then 6 months (23%), then 3 months (20%).

Of children who have used VPNs (n=432), 23% said they started using VPNs in the last three months, which connects to the same time period as the introduction of the restrictions. 21% of children answered that they started using VPNs 1 year ago, and 17% answered that they started in the last 6 months. Although the highest number of children reported starting to use a VPN in the last three months, which is at the same time as this spike that was reported in the media, it is only 2% higher than the number who started 1 year ago.

[1] See the BBC, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cn72yjdj70g5o>, reporting in July an increase use of VPNs immediately following the introduction of the OSA, attributes the likelihood of the increase to people using VPNs to bypass restrictions.

While the numbers are similar between one year ago and in the last three months, and the increase is too small to be considered a 'spike', it is worth noting that there is an increase of 6% between those that started in the last 6 months and those that started in the last 3 months, so this trend should continue to be observed.

Although changes in VPN use over time by children does not look to explain the increase in VPN use widely reported in July, our data does record an increase in VPN use in the 11-14 year age group in the last three months, as well as a smaller increase in the 8-10s. There are small numbers of respondents here, so data should be seen as indicative only, but it is enough to show the value of further research in this area. There is a significant increase in VPN use reported as starting a year ago or less, with consistent data from both parents and carers (answering about when their child started using VPNs) and children on this point. 70% of children who knew when they started using a VPN, started a year ago or less.

REASONS FOR USING VPNS

Children reported using VPNs for a variety of reasons, with the main reasons being to stay safe and protect their privacy when they go online, as well as watching online content not available in their country.

A smaller proportion of children reported using VPNs to circumvent parental or school internet controls, or to access content inappropriate to their age.

(Note from Opinium, that where there are less than 50 respondents, this data should be seen as indicative only, which means under 12% here).

- The most popular reasons children gave for using a VPN were to stay safe online and protect their privacy (38%), to protect their privacy or data when using public wifi (35%), and to watch shows video or sport not available in their country (30%).
- This is reflected again when they were asked what was their main reason for using a VPN: to stay safe online and protect their privacy (25%), watch shows, videos or sport not available in their country (15%), and to protect their privacy or data when they are using public wifi (14%).
- However, 16% of children who used VPNs (n=432) said they used them to get around parental controls, and 16% said they used VPNs to get around school wifi blocks and monitoring. 10%, (an indicative only figure), said they used VPNs to look at things which they are not supposed to see for their age.
- Small numbers of children (indicative only figures) said their main reason for using VPNs was to get around parental controls (6%), to get around school wifi blocks and monitoring (5%), and 4% said they used VPNs to look at things which they are not supposed to see for their age.

Parents and carers

Has your child ever used a VPN?	% of 2,000 respondents
Yes	23%
No	58%
I don't know	19%

Young people

Have you ever used a VPN?	% of 2,018 respondents
Yes	21% (25% boys, 18% girls) (8-10 15%, 11-14 21%, 15-17 27%)
No	59%
I don't know	19%

Parents and carers

When did your child start using a VPN?	% of 461 respondents
More than 2 years ago	9%
2 years ago	9%
1 year ago	25%
6 months ago	23%
In the last 3 months	20%
I don't know	14%

Young people

When did you start using a VPN?	% of 432 respondents
More than 2 years ago	13%
2 years ago	12%
1 year ago	21% (8-10s 21%, 11-14s 21%, 15-17s 21%)
In the last 6 months	17% (8-10s 20%, 11-14s 15%, 15-17s 18%)
In the last 3 months	23% (8-10s 25%, 11-14s 27%, 15-17s 18%)
I don't know	11%
NET At least 1 year ago	47%
NET In the last 6months	41%

Young people

When you used a VPN, why did you use it?	% of 432 respondants	What is the main reason you used a VPN?
To stay safe online and protect my privacy	38%	25%
To protect my privacy or data when I am using public Wi-Fi (like in libraries)	35%	14%
Watch shows, videos or sport not available in my country	30%	15%
To stay anonymous online	26%	7%
To play games or join games servers not available in my country	24%	11%
To stop lags or buffering when playing online games or watching videos	17%	4%
To get around parental controls	16%	6%
To get around school Wi-Fi blocks and monitoring	16%	5%
To find better prices when shopping online	12%	3%
To look at things I'm not supposed to see for my age	10%	4%
Something else	2%	2%
I don't know	3%	4%
I don't want to say	0%	1%