



# PTA Digital Media

Findings from a National Survey of Public School Parents

June 2024

# Methodology

## Three Online Parent Focus Groups:

- 1 group among **Elementary School Parents** (K-5<sup>th</sup>)
- 1 group among **Middle School Parents** (6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup>)
- 1 group among **High School Parents** (9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup>)

The groups were conducted online, among parents of public school students nationwide.

Conducted February 7-8, 2024

## National Online Parent Survey:

- Nationwide sample of **1,415 parents and guardians** with children in public school, grades K-12, including
  - 663 elementary school parents
  - 330 middle school parents
  - 422 high school parents
- Fielded May 6th–23rd, 2024
- Offered in both English and Spanish
- Data were weighted to be representative of public school parents in the U.S.
- Throughout this report, **green/red** indicates statistically **higher/lower** differences between audiences.

# Top Takeaways

1

**Parents are clearly conflicted when it comes to the internet and digital media.** They understand its value and the role it plays in their children’s social lives. However, they also see its potential dangers and negative impacts. This tension lies at the core of how parents try to navigate online safety.

2

**As we heard in the focus groups, middle school represents the “launch pad” for increased access to social media and multiple platforms.** That said, parents allow a great deal of digital interaction when their children are in elementary school (or younger). In later stages, as digital media usage increases as children reach high school, parent monitoring of their children’s digital activities decreases significantly.

3

**Although parents believe they can identify appropriate content—and they trust their children online—they are open to assistance.** Majorities of parents would support PTA Connected resources shared with their children to help with online safety, and over eight-in-ten parents would be at least somewhat interested in guidance on what mental health services are available to help with issues their child may be having online.

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# Parent Feelings about the Internet

# Tensions and Contradictions – From the Focus Groups

## Parents...

...trust their children

...see digital media a key avenue  
for tween/teen communication

...understand the amazing  
potential digital media provides  
for learning and growth

...fear the worst

...want reassurance that they are  
not alone

&

## Parents...

...want to keep their children safe

...see digital media as something  
that can negatively impact their  
child's mental health

...view digital media as a  
doorway to inappropriate content

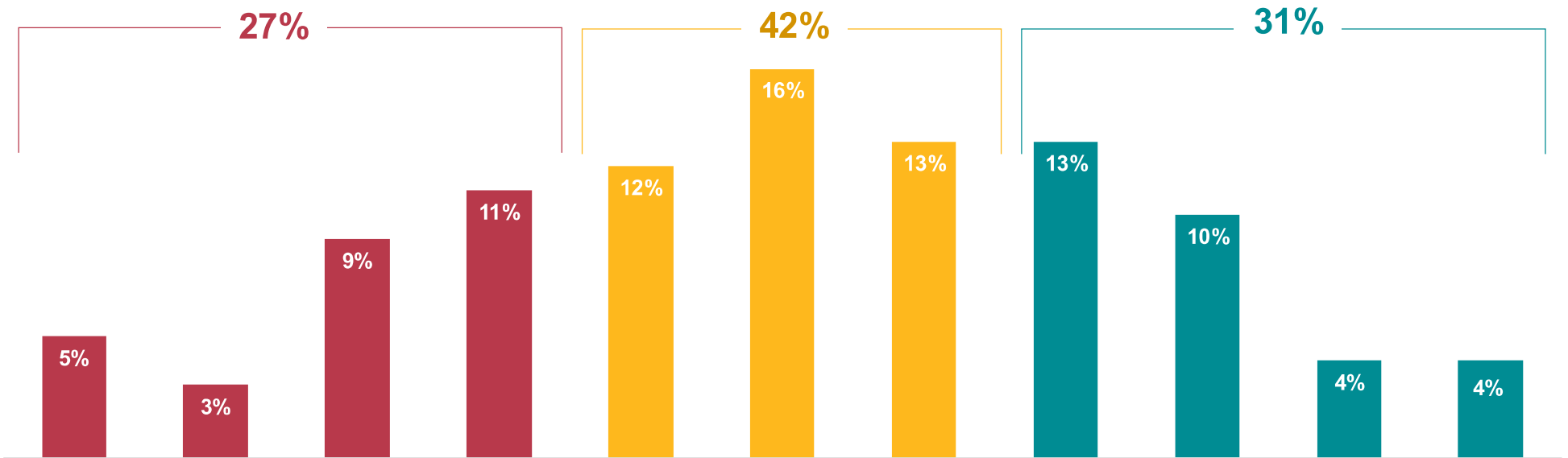
...contend that several dangers  
don't apply to their children, *yet*

...do not typically talk about the  
challenges they face in this arena  
with their peers

# Public School Parents are Torn on the Internet's Impact

They lean slightly towards seeing a positive impact on their children, but a plurality are on the fence.

Which of the following comes closer to your opinion?



Overall, the internet has a mostly **negative** impact on children.

**MEAN SCORE: 5.09**

ES – 4.74  
MS – 5.38  
HS – 5.38

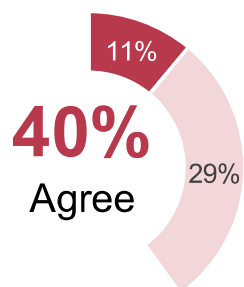
Black – 5.45  
Hispanic – 5.16  
White – 5.00

Overall, the internet has a mostly **positive** impact on children.

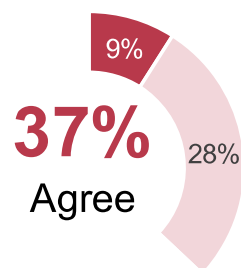
# Internet Pros and Cos

Most see the internet and digital communication as important for their child's development, and fewer see the harm to mental health.

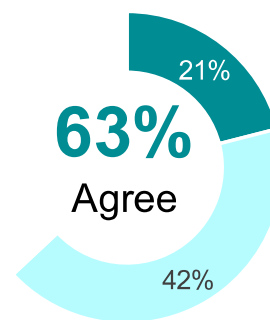
Social media has a negative impact on my child's sense of self or self-esteem.



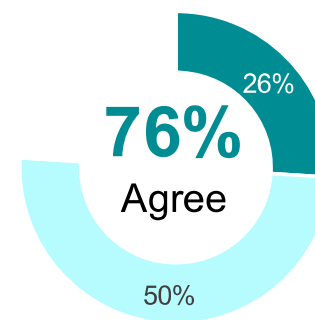
The internet negatively impacts my child's mental health.



Digital communication and social media are an important part of how tweens/teens socialize and make friends.



The internet is an important resource for children to learn, discover, and grow.



ES	MS	HS
58%	62%	72%

# A Closer Look at the Positive/Negative Camps

These overarching positions correspond with very different approaches to online safety.

## Negative Impact

27% of Public School Parents

*These parents are disproportionately...*

- Younger (18-34 years old)
- Elementary School Parents
- Have high school or less education
- More likely to...
  - select **older ages when a child should be allowed to participate** in online activities
  - **agree that it is too easy** for teens/tweens to get around parental controls
  - **monitor their child's online activities** extremely closely

## Positive Impact

31% of Public School Parents

*These parents are disproportionately...*

- Older (45+ years old)
- High School Parents
- Have a college degree or more
- More likely to...
  - indicate their child participates in several online and digital activities
  - Turn to National/local PTA for more information about keeping their children safe online

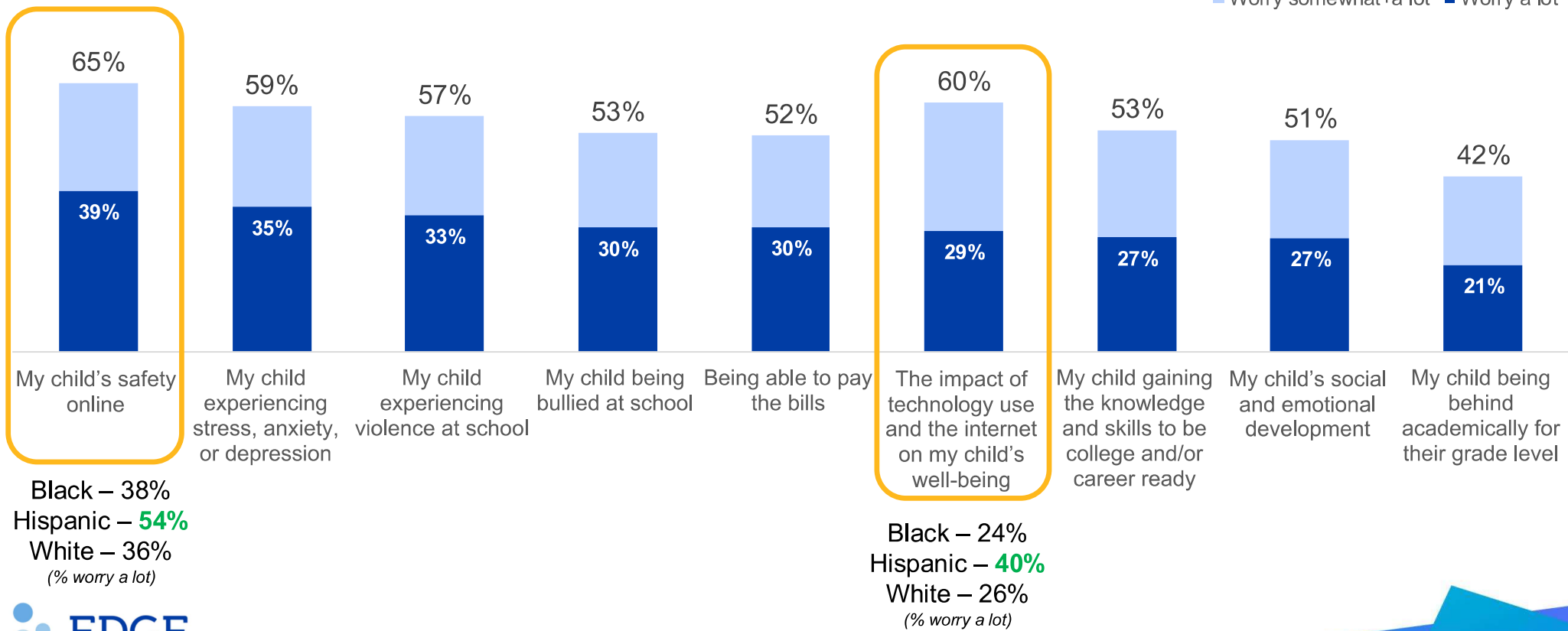


# Parent Worries

Their child's safety online resides in the top tier, along with parent concerns about stress/anxiety and school violence.

Parent Worries

■ Worry somewhat+a lot ■ Worry a lot



Ranked by % worry a lot



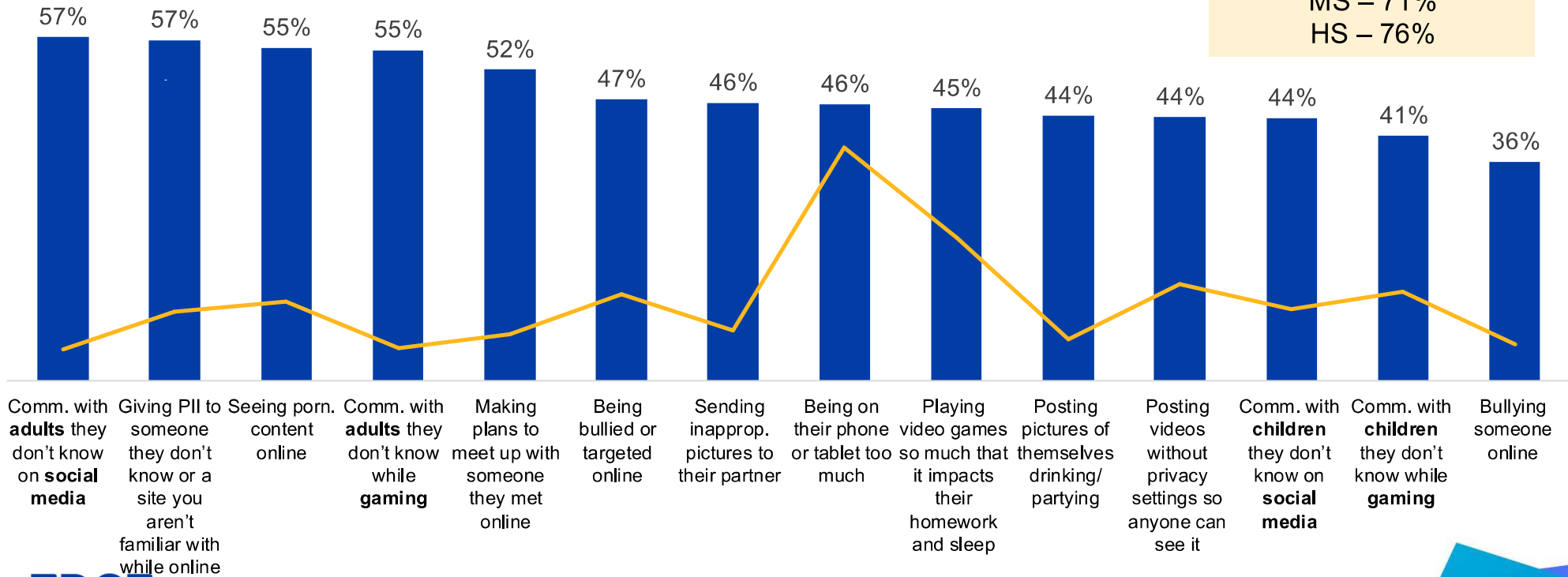
# Communicating with Unknown Adults Tops the Concerns List

Few parents indicate (know or admit) if these incidents have occurred

## Concerns and Experiences

■ Concerned    — Already Happened

**At least 1 has happened:**  
 ES – 64%  
 MS – 71%  
 HS – 76%



# Parent Mindsets

While specific fears and concerns vary by age and access, all respondents share that when it comes to social media, they lack control.

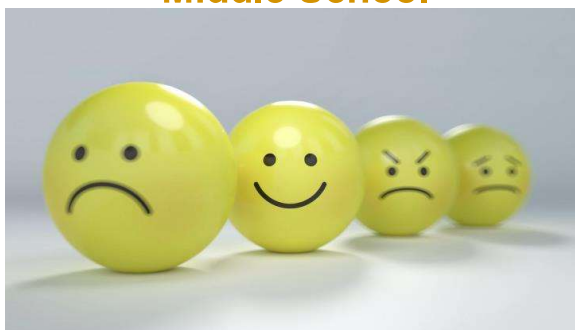
**Question:** When you think about your child being online **unsupervised**, how do you feel?

## Elementary School



*Cautiously optimistic. I trust my young child, but I do not trust the internet as much, and not sure what will possibly pop up! The internet seems like a vast, interesting and possibly dangerous space. While I trust my child, she is a child and might encounter something she ought not to. I try to stay connected but also trust while she is online.*  
– Elementary School Parent

## Middle School



*Anxious, suspicious, confident, and apprehensive. These emotions are because I know I have provided my child with the tools to safely use the internet, but I cannot protect her from predators who take advantage of minors. Also, even though the content is monitored, it's hard to truly prevent her from viewing/listening to stuff that may pop up beyond our control.* – Middle School Parent

## High School



*As a father, the thought of my child being online unsupervised can be a bit concerning. While I trust my child and want to foster independence, the internet can be a vast and sometimes unpredictable space. I feel a mix of emotions – a desire for them to explore and learn, but also a sense of responsibility to ensure their online experiences are safe and positive.* – High School Parent

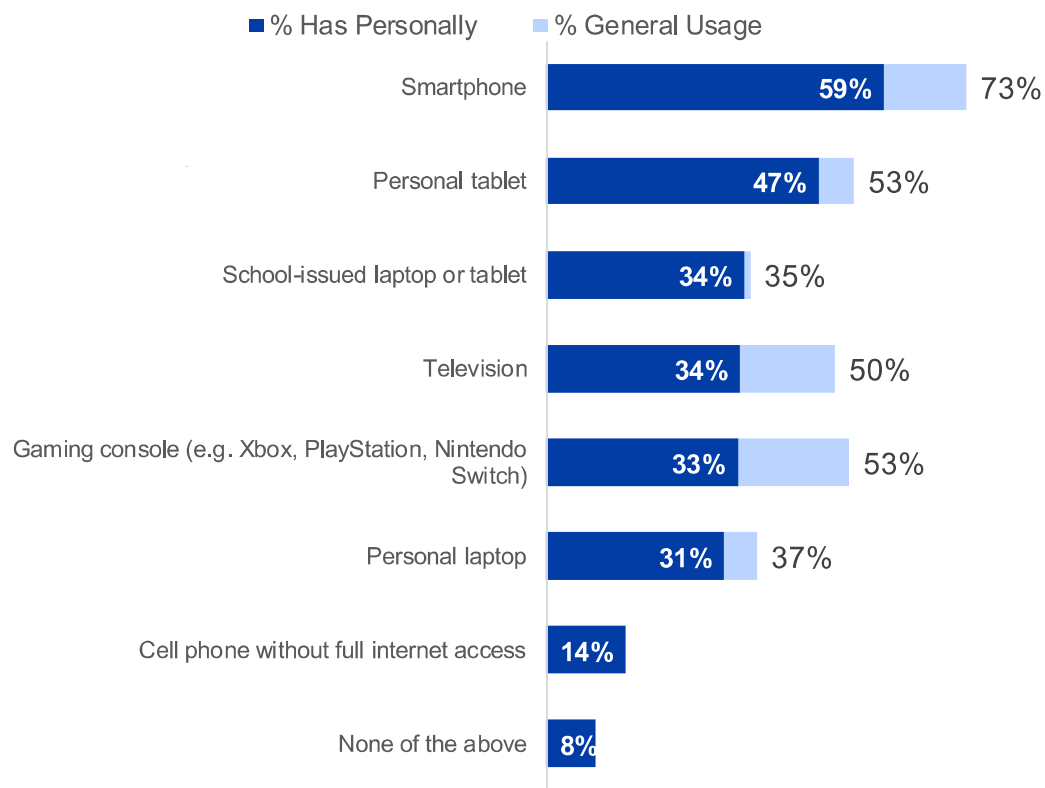
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# How Children and Teens Use the Internet—as Told by Their Parents

# Device Use

Mobile devices are most common, and even most Elementary School parents report their child has a smartphone

Digital Device Usage and Personal Possession



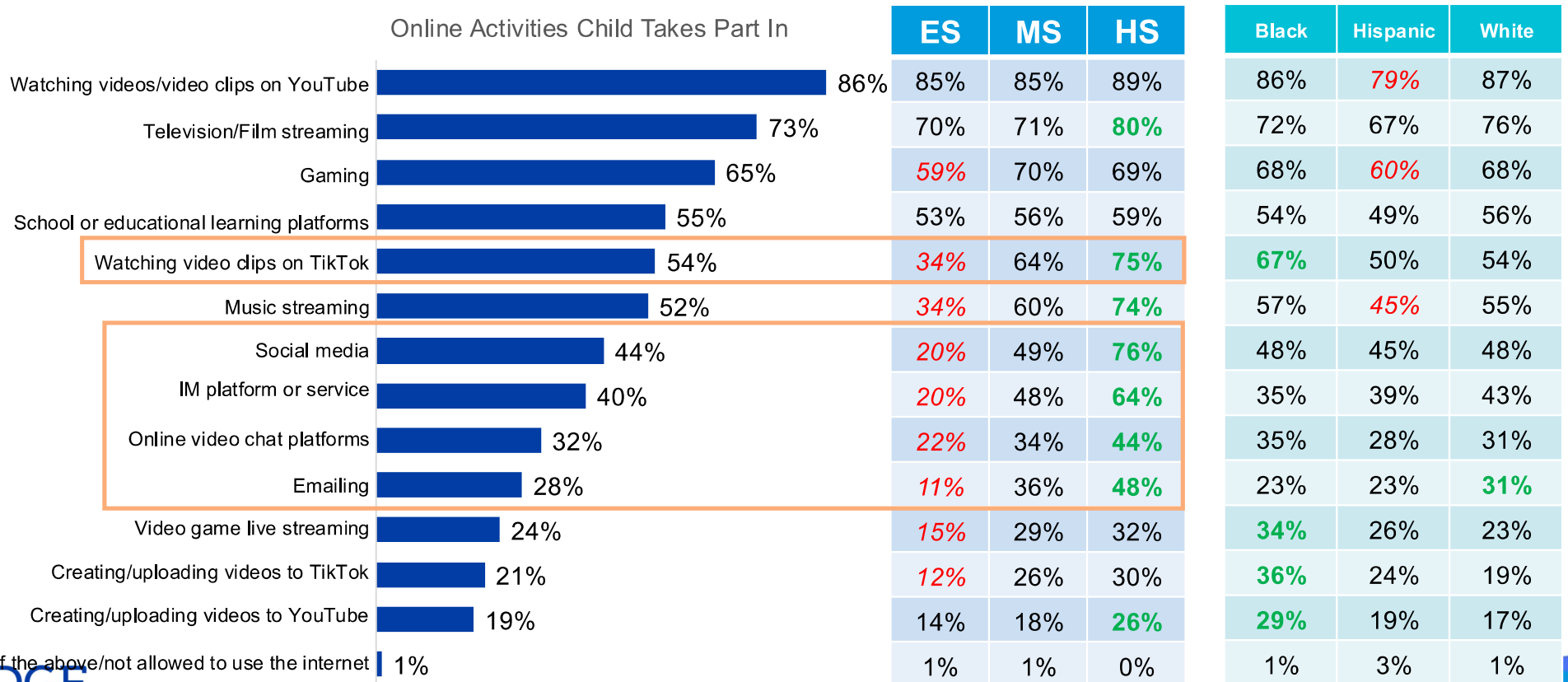
Ranked by % Has Personally

% General Usage

	ES	MS	HS	
	54%	84%	93%	Black parents: 80%
	65%	48%	40%	Black parents: 63%
	31%	39%	39%	Income under \$25k: 20%
	52%	50%	48%	
	46%	59%	57%	Hispanic parents: 50% Income under \$25k: 41%
	22%	43%	53%	Income under \$25k: 21%
	-	-	-	
	1%	1%	-	

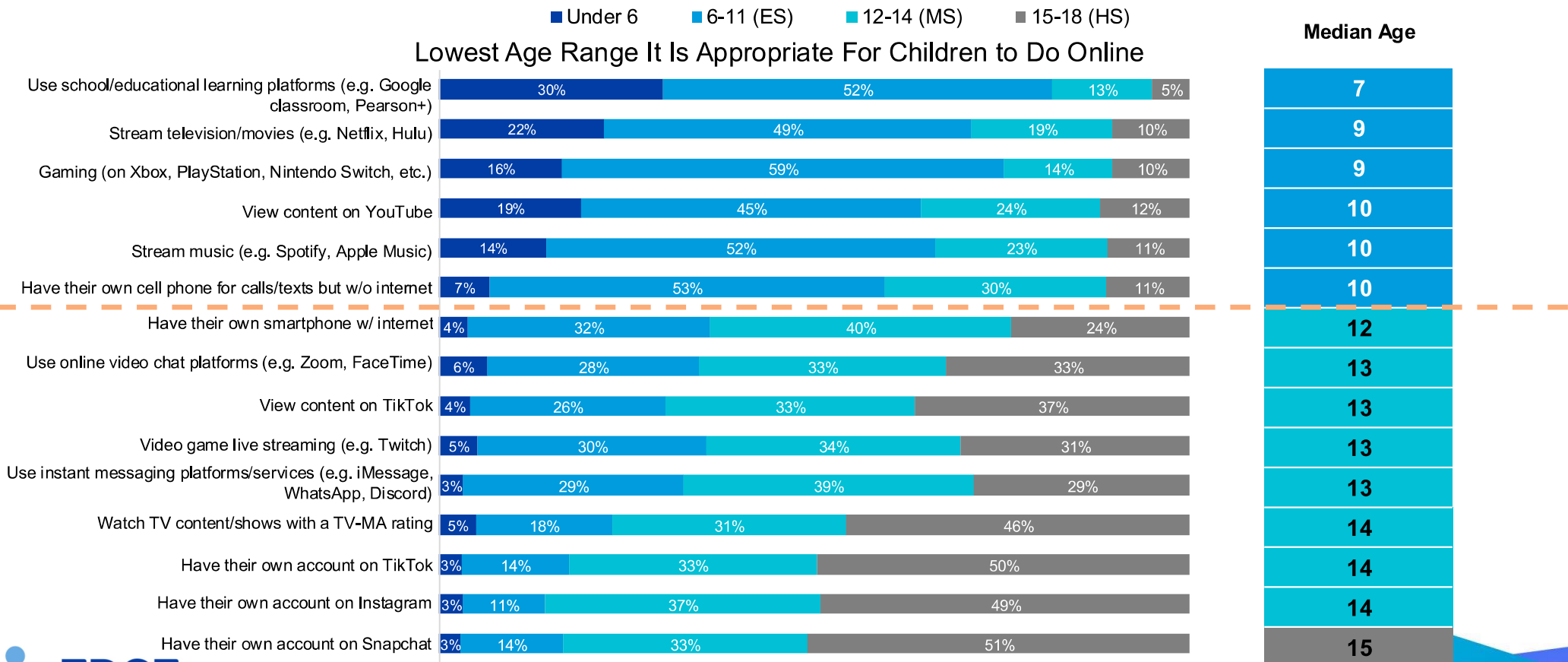
# Online Activities of Their Children

- Most parents report their children watching videos/TV and gaming.
- Several activities experience double-digit “jumps” at each phase of education.



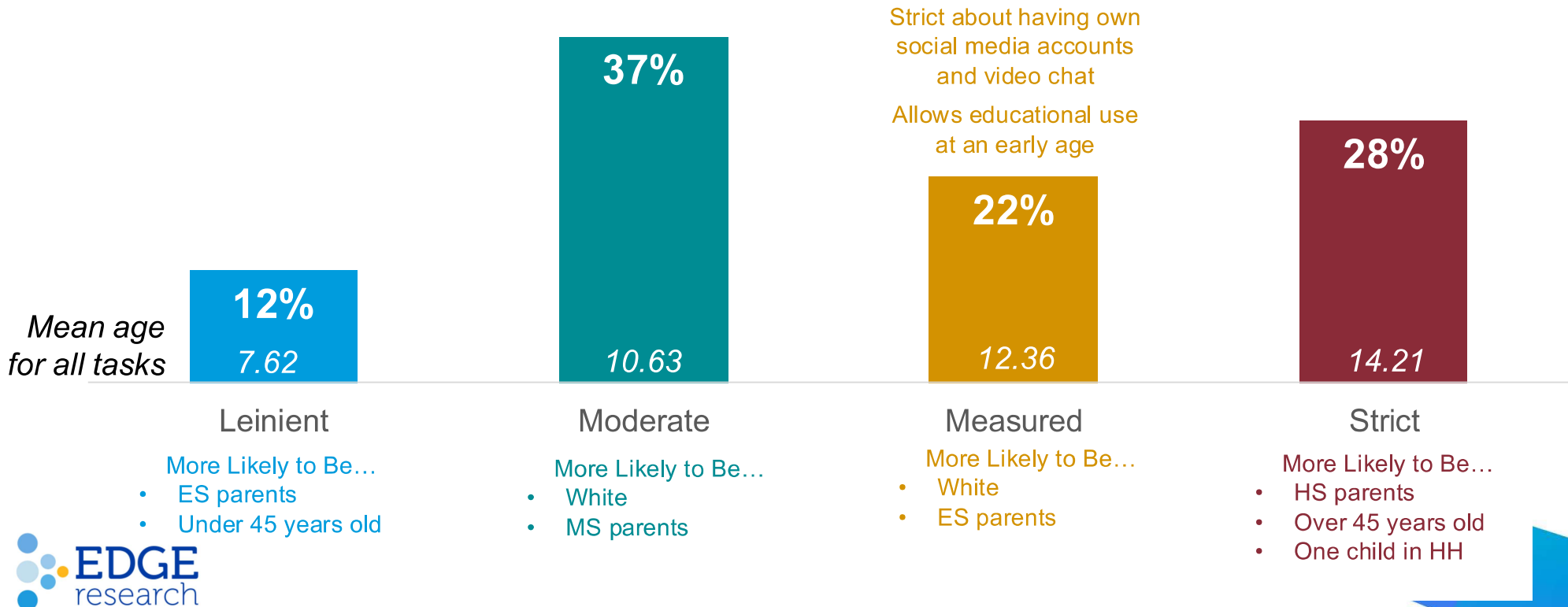
# Appropriate Age for Activities

Elementary School is the start of activities like school platforms, streaming, gaming, and basic devices. More interaction and internet-enabled devices start in Middle School.



# Parents Fall into One of Four Categories Based on When They Permit Online Activities

Parent Segments Determined by What Age Activities Should be Allowed





# Open-Ended Responses Help to Illustrate Parent Mindsets for these Categories

How do you know when your child is ready for their own internet-connected device like a smartphone or tablet?

**Lenient**  
(12%)

*As soon as they're able to download apps and to find what they want to do without help [from me].*

**Moderate**  
(37%)

*No time is perfect. You just have to use your best judgement and still keep an eye on what your child is doing.*

**Measured**  
(22%)

*When they show that they are capable of handling the home internet access responsibly with supervision. Most children are capable of handling connected devices at younger ages, but with restrictions of time and content accessibility. The problem with parents giving access to these accounts and accessibilities is that many do not take the time to teach the children how to properly use these privileges. That is where the misuse from children stems from the most.*

**Strict**  
(28%)

*When they move out. Social media is not acceptable these days for young children. I do not want my kids to be exposed to mature things at young ages.*

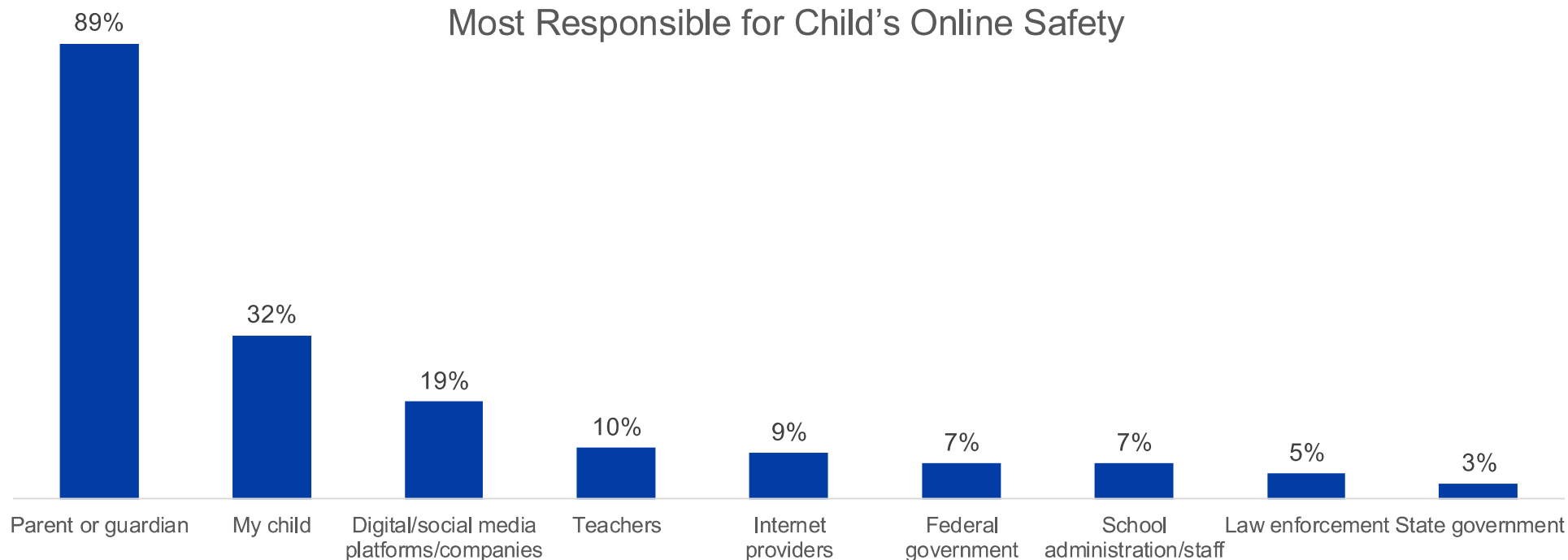
The background is a vibrant blue gradient with several overlapping geometric shapes. There are two large, dark blue circles that appear to be part of a larger design. A bright cyan triangle is positioned in the upper right quadrant. A large, semi-transparent blue shape, possibly a trapezoid or a large arrow, points towards the right side of the frame. The overall aesthetic is modern and clean.

# Trust and Monitoring

# Who's Responsible

Parents feel most responsible for their child's online safety, but companies have a roll to play, too.

Most Responsible for Child's Online Safety



# Who Has a Role to Play in Keeping Children Safe?

When asked who can/should help with this challenge, focus group participants think first of schools, and then of the companies themselves. PTA is not a top-of-mind partner (at this time).



## Schools

- Since schools require device/internet use, parents contend schools should have a role to play in making sure kids are safe on devices
- Curriculum on how to be safe online (so the message is not just coming from parents)

*Well, aside from being around their household, school is the majority of where they spend their time. **And I don't think school is putting much effort, I don't see it, into online awareness.** And I think they definitely have some responsibility to do some more education than what they're doing. – High School Parent*



## Social Media Companies

- Parents see themselves as unhappy customers, so companies should work to satisfy their needs
- Make controls easier to use

*I honestly think that it is the social media company's responsibility to the consumer. We are their consumer. **You want us to continue to use your platforms, then offer us the restrictions that we want** so that our kids are safe, and they're not being subjected to this type of media. – Elementary School Parent*

**Parents do not want to feel as though they are grappling with these issues on their own.**



*everychild.one voice.®*

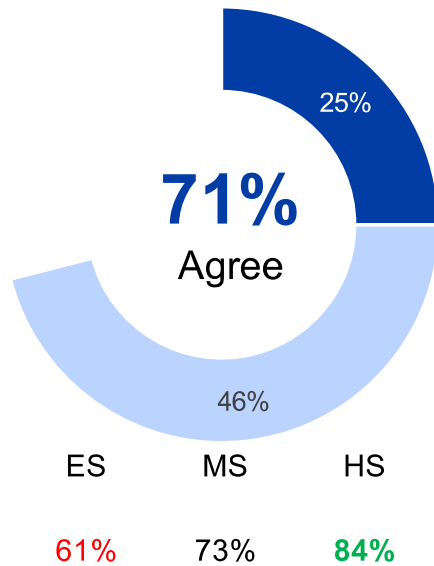
## PTA?

- Not top of mind and hard to envision (initially)
- First thoughts are information and resources for educating children as much as parents, especially after seeing proposed programs
- Could alleviate burden on schools to do some of this work

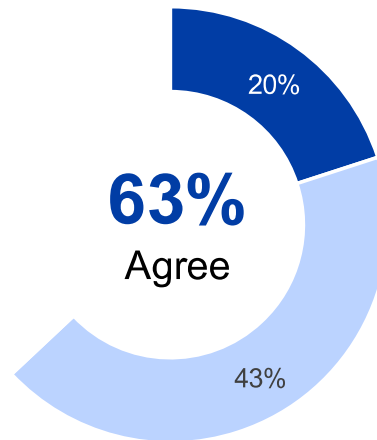
# Trusting Your Child and Others

While parents mostly trust their own child, they do not trust parental controls or other children that may interact with theirs online.

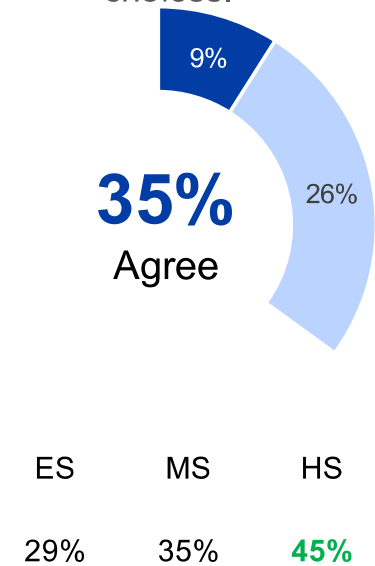
I trust my child to make good choices online.



It is too easy for teens/tweens to get around parental controls.



I trust other children who interact with my child online to make good choices.

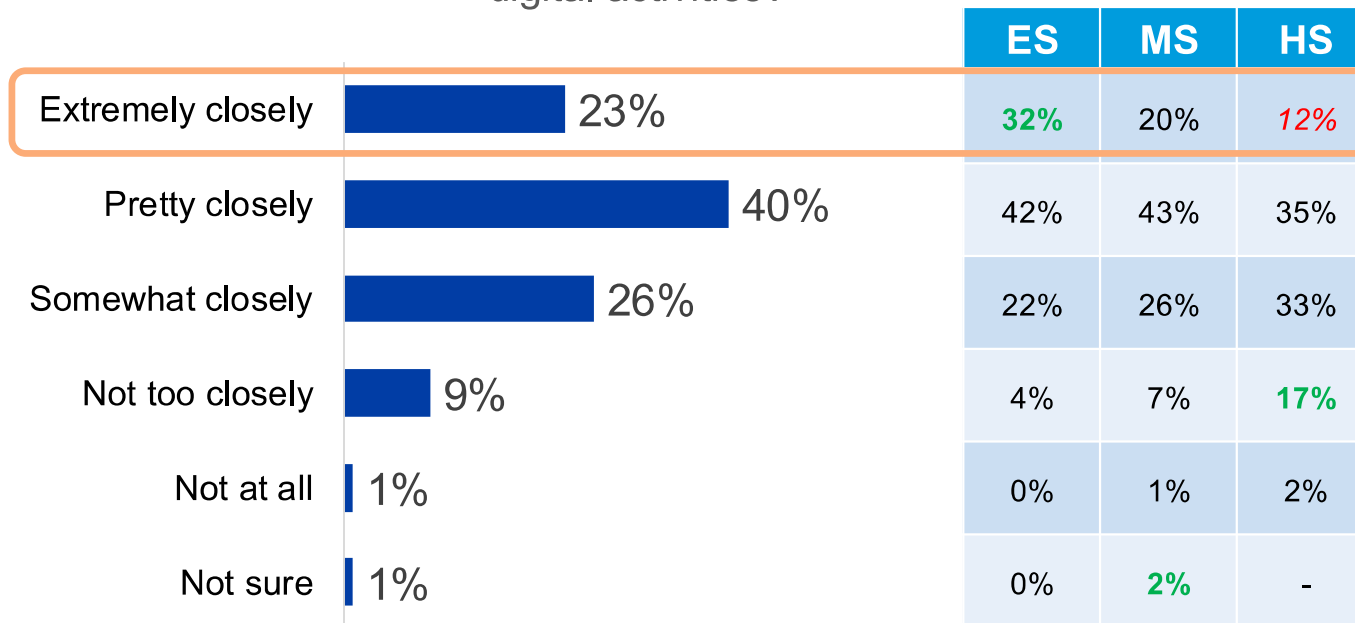


Darker shading = strongly agree  
Lighter shading = somewhat agree

# Monitoring Child's Online Activities

While most are monitoring, intensity declines as children age.

How closely do you monitor your child's online or digital activities?



Less than half (**47%**) of parents of HS students monitor their child's online activities extremely or pretty closely.

# Ways Parents Monitor/Manage Online Activities/Internet Use

- Most parent management involves rules and limiting access.
- Less than three-in-ten use monitoring software.

Ways to Monitor/Manage



Select all that apply



40% - Monitor in 3 or fewer ways  
 32% - Monitor in 4-6 ways  
 28% - Monitor in 7+ ways



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# Providing Resources to Parents



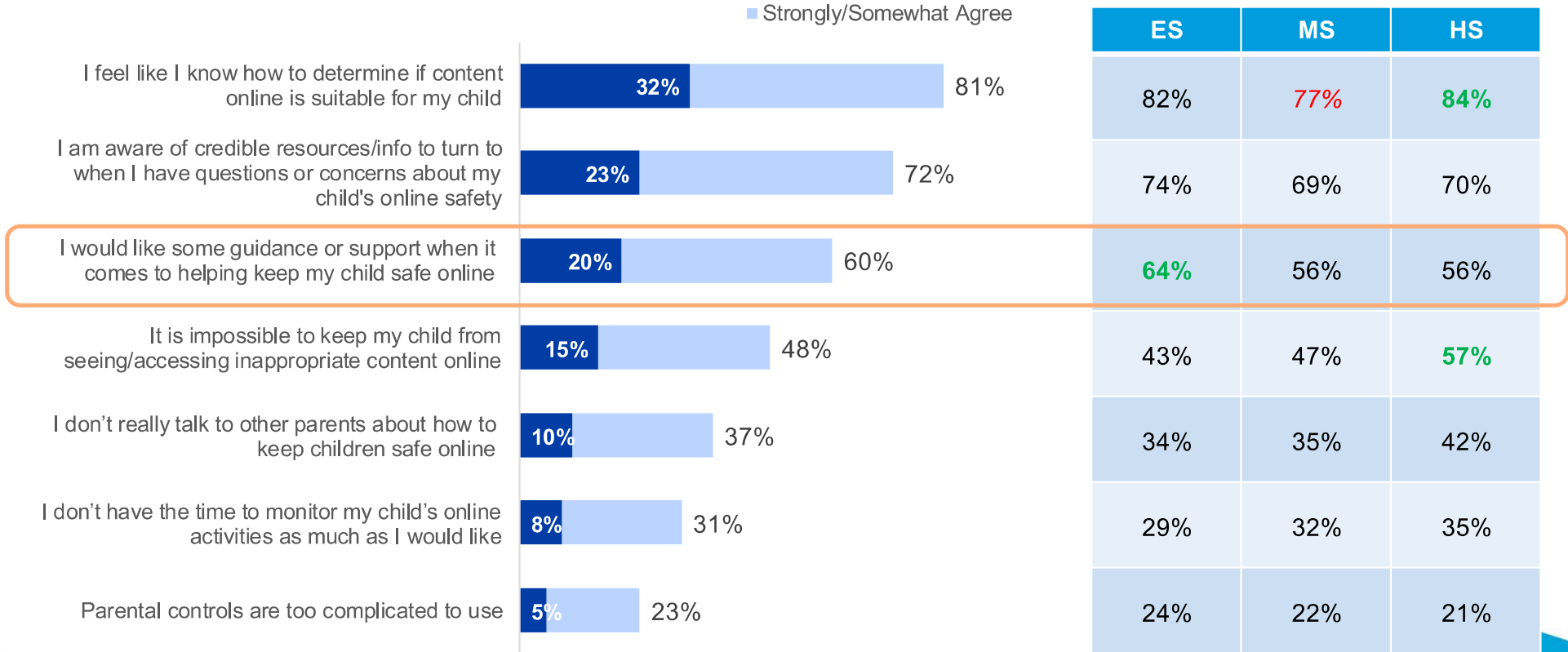
# What Parents Know and What They Need

Parents feel like they know what is suitable and where to turn for information, but most also say they would like guidance, especially Elementary School parents.

Opinions on Child's Online Safety

■ Strongly Agree  
■ Strongly/Somewhat Agree

% Strongly or Somewhat Agree

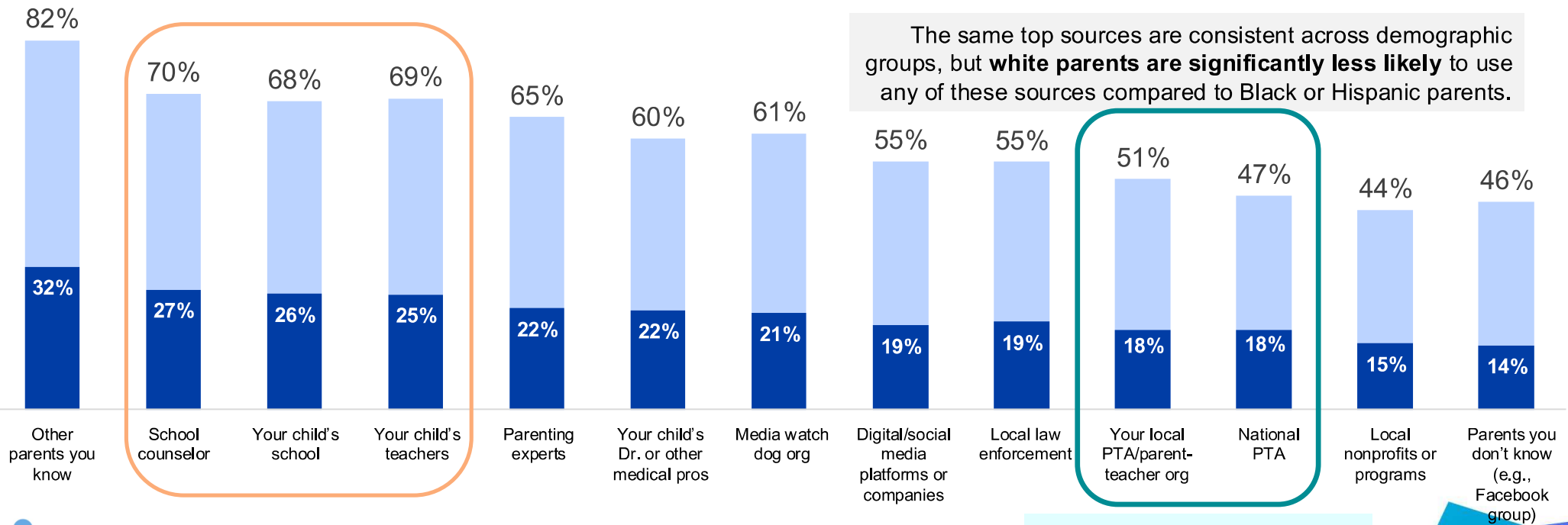


# Where Parents Would Go for Help

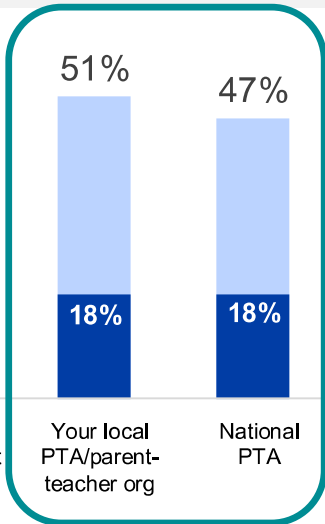
Many indicate they would be likely to go to their child's school, counselor, and/or teachers for guidance in this arena.

People/Resources to go to about Child's Online Safety

Very/Somewhat likely  
Very likely



The same top sources are consistent across demographic groups, but **white parents are significantly less likely** to use any of these sources compared to Black or Hispanic parents.

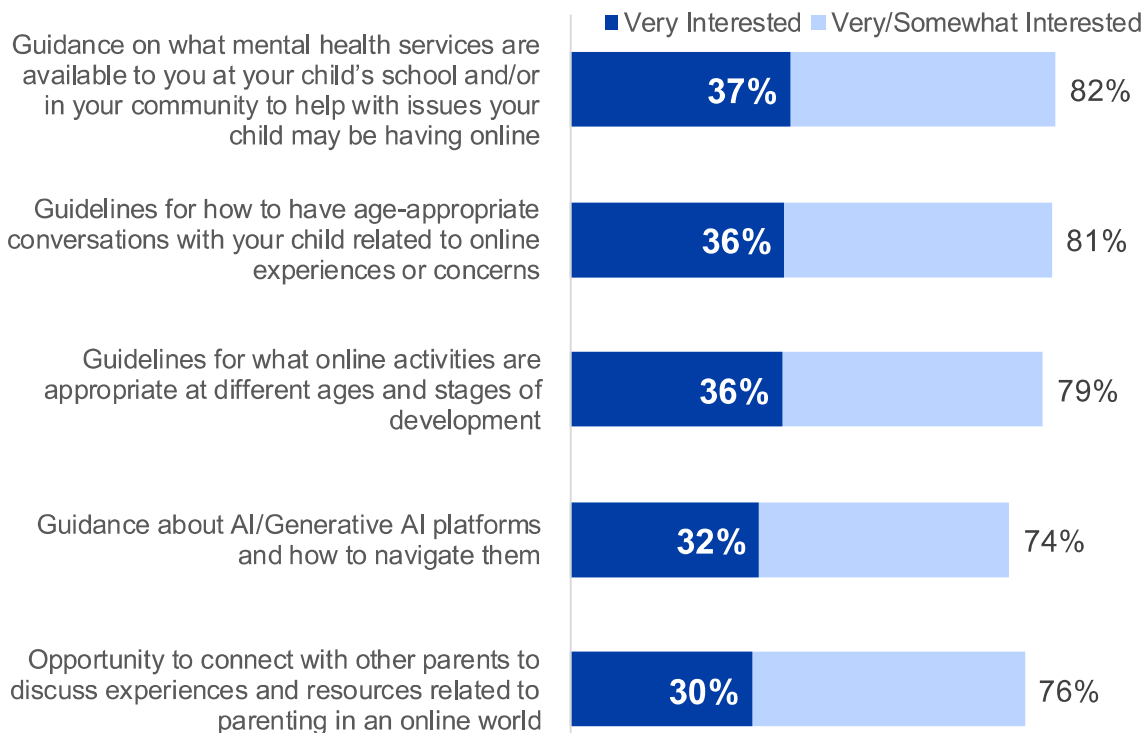


PTA-active parents are significantly more likely to turn to their local (69%) or National PTA (66%).

# Resources and Programs

Parents, especially those of Elementary School children, express interest in guidance on mental health services and guidelines to help them meet children “where they are” when discussing online activities.

Interest in Resources/Programs



% Very/Smwt Interested

	ES	MS	HS	Black	Hispanic	White
Guidance on what mental health services are available to you at your child's school and/or in your community to help with issues your child may be having online	86%	79%	77%	83%	84%	79%
Guidelines for how to have age-appropriate conversations with your child related to online experiences or concerns	85%	80%	76%	81%	88%	76%
Guidelines for what online activities are appropriate at different ages and stages of development	83%	80%	73%	82%	86%	76%
Guidance about AI/Generative AI platforms and how to navigate them	75%	71%	74%	78%	80%	72%
Opportunity to connect with other parents to discuss experiences and resources related to parenting in an online world	80%	74%	72%	81%	80%	72%



Ranked by % very interested

PTA-active parents are significantly more likely be interested in each program.

# What Drives Wanting Guidance and Which Parents are Most Interested in Possible PTA Programs

Regression analysis reveals those more likely to “strongly agree” they want guidance/support are...

- Elementary School parents
- Parents who live in urban areas
- Have household Incomes of \$100K+
- Parents who are worried “a lot” over their child’s online safety
- More likely to closely monitor their children’s online habits

Parents expressing most interest in PTA Programs

- Elementary School parents (followed by Middle School parents)
- Black or (less acculturated) Hispanic/Latino parents
- Have 2+ children in their household
- Active in their local PTA
- Have a college degree

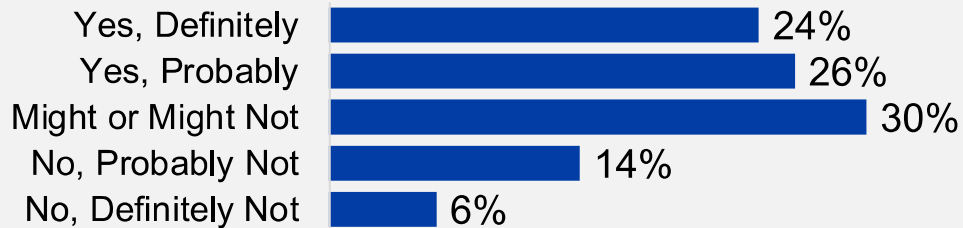
Psychographically, these parents are more likely to be worried about online safety and social media’s negative impact on their child’s sense of self/self-esteem.

# A Disconnect Between Parent Awareness and Child Actions

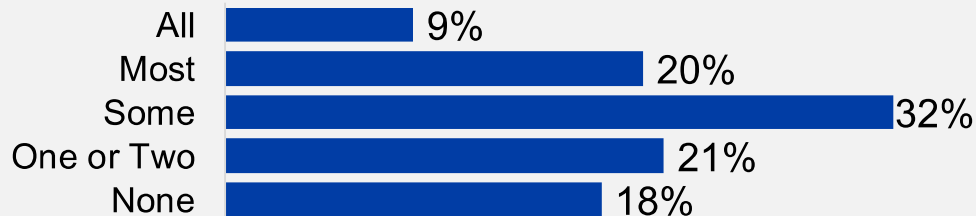
Comparing parent perspectives with teen/tween attitudes suggest that parents do not have a realistic picture of their child's online activities

From Boston Children's Digital Wellness Lab:  
*Adolescent Media Use: Attitudes, Effects, and Online Experiences (2022)*  
**13-17 year-olds**

Would you ever get together in-person with the friends you met online?



Of the people you talk to online but have never met in person, how many of these people do you think of as friends?



%s of Parents of Middle and High School Parents Who Say Their Children Have Done the Following

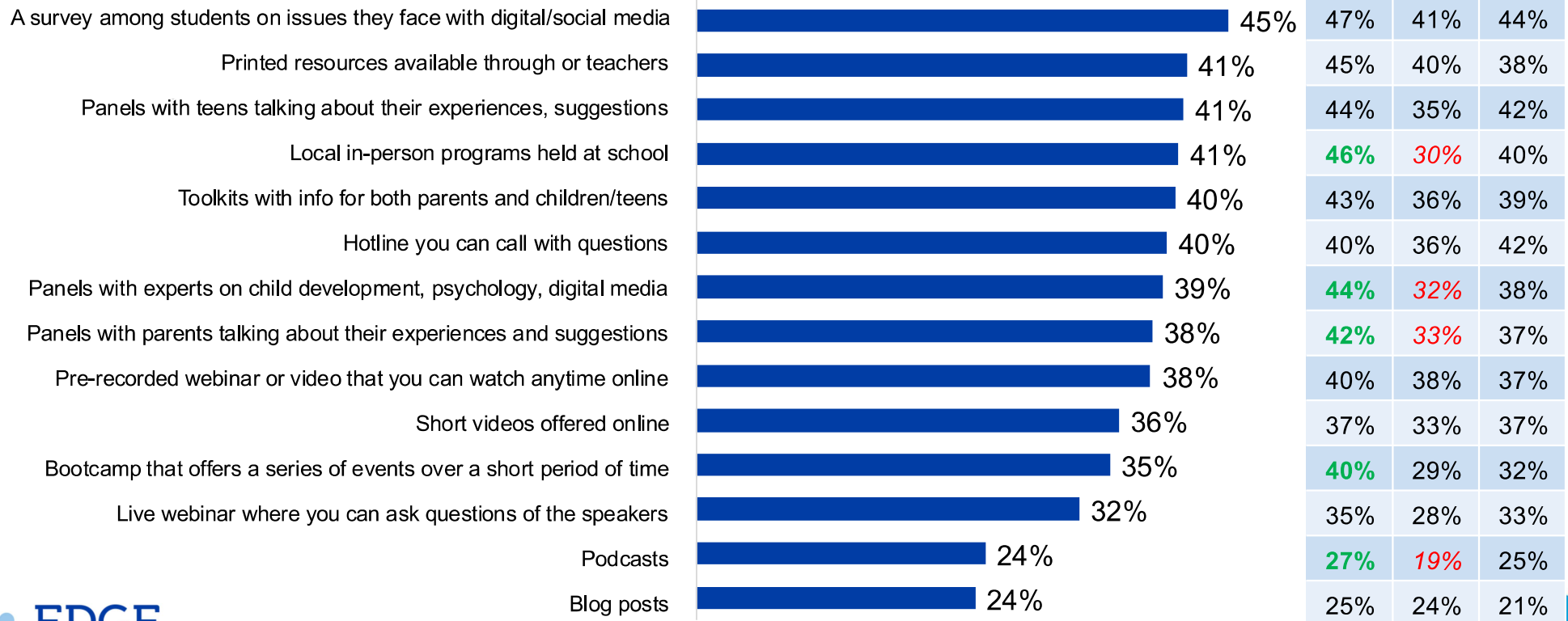
	MS	HS
Making plans to meet up with someone they met online	7%	8%
Communicating with children they don't know on social media	13%	13%
Communicating with adults they don't know on social media	6%	5%

# How to Offer Guidance

Parents most want to know what students really face or encounter online.

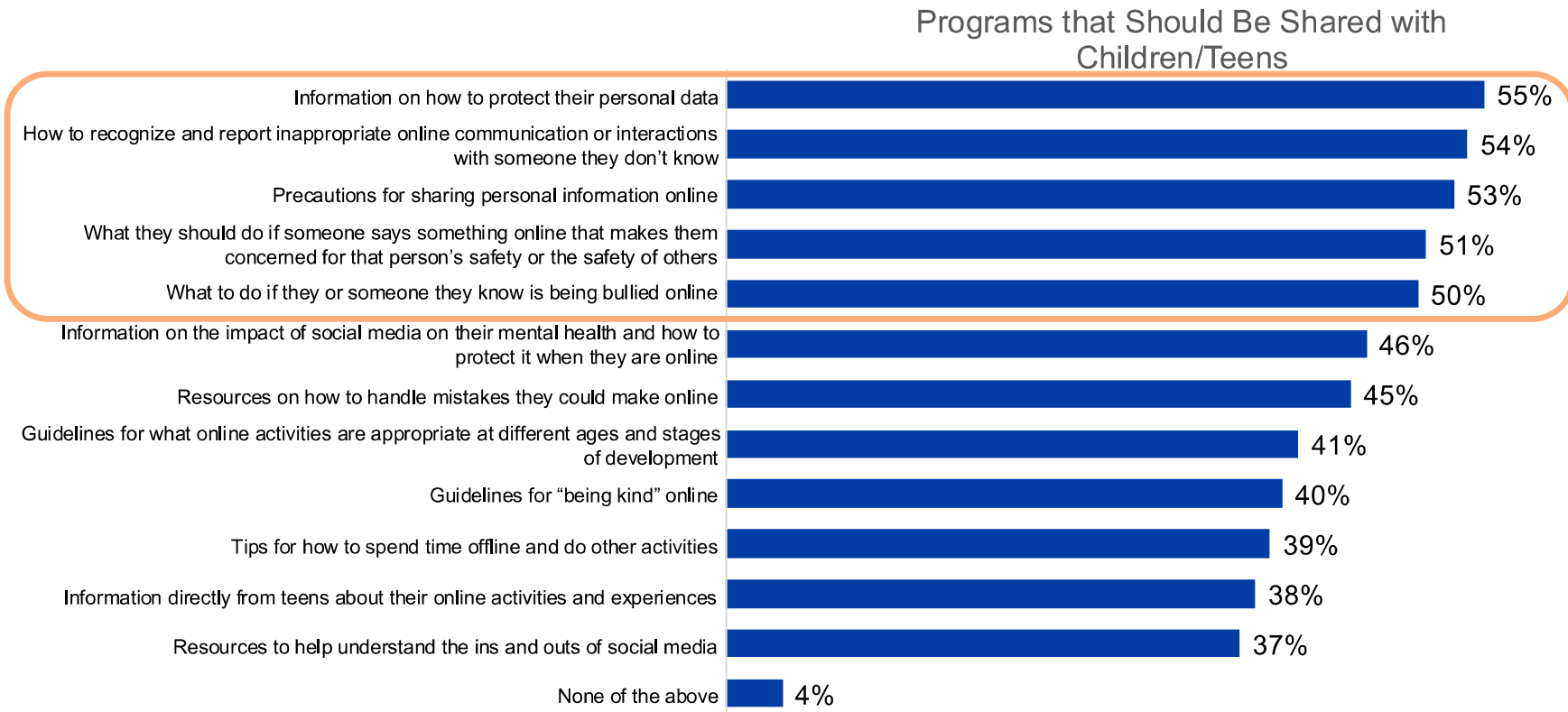
Importance of Format that Resource is Offered In

% Very Important



# Resources National PTA Should Share with Kids

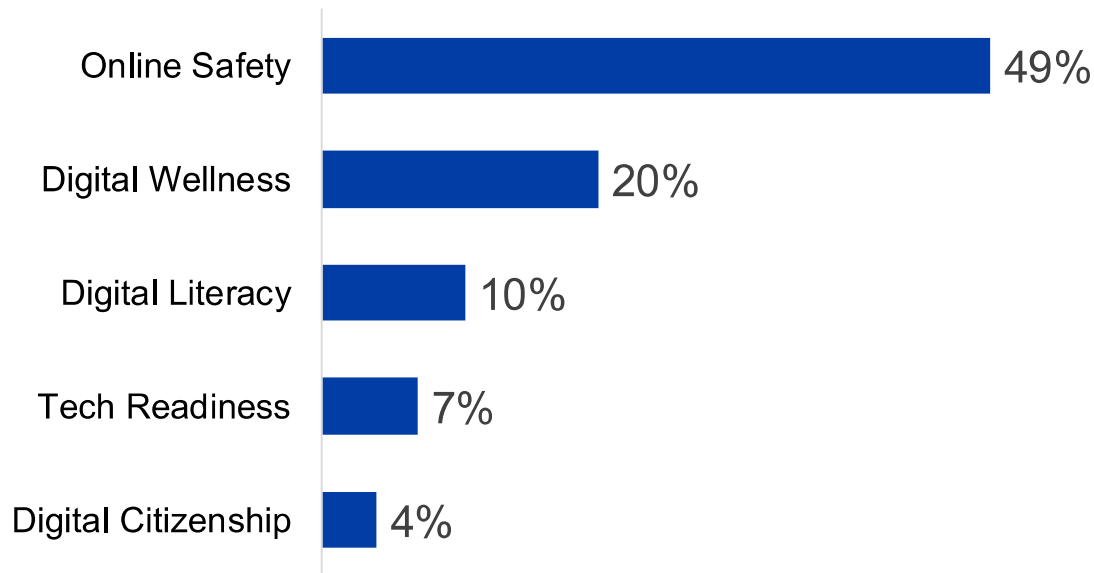
A majority of parents are interested in several programs PTA could share with children to help communicate key aspects of online safety.



# Language Choice

As we heard in the focus groups, simple, plain language is preferred over more “buzzy” terms.

Most Preferred Program/Resource Label



	ES	MS	HS
Online Safety	55%	44%	42%
Digital Wellness	17%	20%	25%
Digital Literacy	10%	9%	13%
Tech Readiness	7%	8%	6%
Digital Citizenship	4%	5%	3%



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# Implications

# Implications and Considerations

1

**PTA Can Fill a Void.** Parents are open to help/guidance, and they intend to look to schools and school officials for this assistance. Content from National PTA can enable local PTAs to share information with schools, parents, and students to assuage parent concerns about online safety.

2

**Fear and Opportunity Can Motivate and Educate.** Much of online safety content falls into the category of helping parents “know what they don’t know (or don’t want to know).” As such, it can skew towards addressing concerns about missteps and online dangers. Keep in mind that over 3-in-10 parents view the internet with an overall positive impact, and most see the internet’s importance to child social and intellectual development. These findings suggest that content that explores the educational opportunities of the internet could also garner interest.

3

**Lay the Foundation Now and Stay Ahead of the Curve.** Generative AI in the classroom, deepfakes, NCII, etc.—the landscape is becoming more complex and concerning. Establishing PTA as a go-to, trusted resource today could enable consistent interactions in the future, if PTA continues to develop helpful, timely content to help parents navigate this ever-changing digital environment. This implication is especially important for today’s Elementary School parents who are just beginning their online safety journeys.

**For additional information, please contact:**

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# Appendix

# Median Appropriate Age by Demographics

## Median Age

	ES	MS	HS	Black	Hispanic	White	Urban	Suburban	Small Town/ Rural
Use school/educational learning platforms	6	8	9	8	8	7	8	7	7
Stream television/movies	8	10	11	10	10	8	10	9	9
Gaming	8	9	10	9	10	8	9	8	9
View content on YouTube	8	10	12	10	10	10	10	10	10
Stream music	9	10	12	10	10	10	10	10	10
Have their own cell phone for calls/texts but w/o internet	10	10	11	10	10	10	10	10	10
Have their own smartphone w/ internet	12	12	13	12	13	12	12	13	12
Use online video chat platforms	13	12	13	13	13	13	13	13	13
View content on TikTok	13	13	13	13	13	13	13	13	13
Video game live streaming	13	12	13	12	13	13	13	13	13
Use instant messaging platforms/services	13	12	13	13	13	13	12	13	13
Watch TV content/shows with a TV-MA rating	14	14	14	14	14	14	13	15	14
Have their own account on TikTok	15	13	14	13	15	14	14	15	15
Have their own account on Instagram	15	14	14	14	15	14	14	14	15
Have their own account on Snapchat	15	14	14	14	15	15	14	14	15