

Amplifying the voices of children & young people



Australian Youth Digital Index 2025



Acknowledgement of Country

At Telstra Foundation, we recognise and acknowledge the existing, original and ancient connection Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have to the lands and waterways across the Australian continent. We pay our respects to their Elders past and present and all the First Nations people and communities we are privileged to work with on our Foundation projects. We are enriched by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' strength, leadership and contribution to our organisation, and we commit to working together to build a prosperous and inclusive Australia. We also acknowledge the inspiring contributions made by young Aboriginal & Torres Strait Island people as members of our Youth Advisory Council as well as program co-designers and collaborators.

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A message from Telstra Foundation CEO



We're proud to release the second edition of the *Australian Youth Digital Index*, a national snapshot of how young Australians are engaging with technology, and the opportunities and challenges they face in an increasingly digital world.

This year's Index builds on the foundations of our inaugural report, refining our research questions and introducing new areas of exploration that reflect how rapidly digital technologies are evolving. A key focus in 2025 is the growing role of artificial intelligence – how young people are learning from it, experimenting with it, and shaping its impact on their lives and communities.

These insights are more than just data points. They are evidence that can inform the work of policymakers, educators, community organisations and technology leaders. The Index helps us all better understand how to support young Australians to navigate the digital landscape safely, creatively and confidently.

At Telstra Foundation, we continue to invest in partnerships that put these insights into action. Since our first Index we have invested in significant and long-term new partnerships to address some of the challenges and opportunities young people shared with us. This work continues our commitment to collaborate closely with non-profit organisations that tackle universal access and drive meaningful connectivity to ensure every young person – regardless of background or postcode – can thrive in Australia's digital future.

We're especially grateful to our Youth Advisory Council, whose lived experience and leadership have helped shape this research. Their contributions have helped us better understand how young people are learning and sharing digital skills, not just with each other, but also in their families, classrooms and communities. Their perspectives remind us of the important role young people play as innovators, advocates and digital-makers.

This year's research shows that young people's offline and online lives are increasingly intertwined and that new technology like generative AI and online chatbots are being embraced as part of a rapidly evolving environment. There are signs that young people have strengthened their digital skills, particularly their understanding of ways to stay safe online, and are proactively seeking to manage negative impacts of being online while benefitting from digital opportunities.

The findings also highlight critical areas for action. Access to learning devices remains an issue for too many young people, and this year we have examined the relationship between not having a computer and a range of other aspects of life. It is clear that being without learning device can have far-reaching impacts, not only on immediate schoolwork but on developing the skills and knowledge that will be needed into adulthood.

Another area for attention is the role technology can play in our health system, and how safeguards must be put in place to ensure we benefit from efficiency and access opportunities while ensuring quality of care.

A clear theme throughout the report is that technology can rarely be classified as 'good' or 'bad'. Often the positives and negatives co-exist, and the challenge is to seize the benefits while safeguarding against potential harms.

Telstra Foundation's *Australian Youth Digital Index* aims to spark dialogue, inform evidence-based decisions, and inspire collaborative solutions that help all young people engage with and benefit from technology. We're committed to listening, learning and acting on what we discover – because the future belongs to young people, and they deserve our best collective efforts.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jackie Coates'. The signature is stylized and fluid, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Jackie Coates
CEO, Telstra Foundation

About the Australian Youth Digital Index

The Australian Youth Digital Index provides a comprehensive overview of how and when young people use technology, and how it affects their daily lives.

Drawing on both quantitative and qualitative data, the research examines young people's attitudes, behaviours, perceptions, and experiences. It seeks to:

- deeply engage with young people to learn about their experiences online, capture their insights to inform activity in this area and to amplify and advocate for young peoples' perspectives with respect to digital technology more broadly.

- provide an authoritative and reliable 'state of the nation' benchmark on the role of digital technology in young people's lives.
- be a definitive source of data points and insights for philanthropy, education policy and service delivery in the youth/digital sector.
- highlight emerging themes, trends, issues and thought leadership for key stakeholders in the youth/digital sector across Australia.

One of the central components of the research is to develop an 'index' measuring the experiences of young people across five key 'pillars': access, connectivity, skills, safety and wellbeing. Responses in the quantitative survey under each of the five pillars contribute to an index for each individual pillar. The total index score is an average of the index score for all five pillars.

The *Australia Youth Digital Index* is built on responses from a sample of 4,764 young people aged 8 to 25 (and their parents/carers), across more than 50 data points. The data can be split by gender as well as showing the progression of behaviour, attitudes and experience as young people mature and their relationship with technology changes.

This year we partnered with young early career researchers from The Young & Resilient Research Centre who reviewed the Index survey tool, the executive summary report and data and drew out their key insights, highlighting the many different ways we amplify the voices and perspectives of young people in our work. Their insights on the research are included on page 10–11.

The research also benefitted from the insights and lived experience of members of our Youth Advisory Council. This year our Youth Advisory Council explored digital skills in everyday life and shared their views and experiences. Read their report on digital skills on page 30–40.

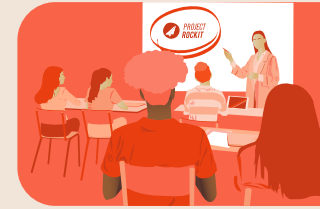


Translating insights into actions – our story

In 2025, we committed \$11m to address key insights highlighted by young people.

Since the launch of our first Index, we've acted on key insights shared by children and young people and committed an additional \$11 million to four new strategic partnerships. We also funded a range of research projects to amplify youth voices and improve digital wellbeing which are detailed in the *Further reading* section on page 62. Together, these initiatives provide additional critical insights to shape programs and policies that empower young Australians in a connected world.

This work is in addition to our existing partnerships to improve universal access and meaningful connectivity for children and young people, our commitments detailed in Telstra's Reconciliation Action Plan, and the Index-aligned work of our Youth Advisory Council (e.g. [the Sleep Challenge](#) and the Digital Skills report, see page 30–40).



NEW Strategic Partnership with PROJECT ROCKIT: face-to-face digital citizenship school workshops, resources and parent webinars across regional communities and online resources (\$2.5m over 5 years and additional funds via Telstra+ customer donations)



NEW Strategic Partnership with ReachOut Australia: We're supporting ReachOut to be the digital first step to feeling better for young people and their parents and carers during tough times. (\$2.5m over 5 years and additional funds via our shareholder dividend program)

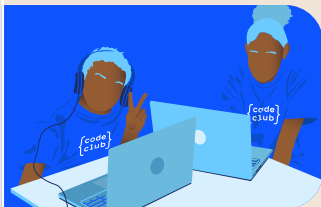


Meaningful Connectivity



Universal Access

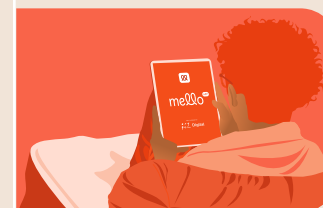
Our in-house program Code Club Australia and the annual Moonhack campaign, provides free coding education resources to get kids coding in schools across Australia (annual, ongoing funding)



NEW Strategic Partnership with The Smith Family: closing the device poverty gap for students transitioning to secondary school who don't have a computer at home (\$3.27m over 5 years)



NEW Strategic Partnership with Orygen Digital: Improve access to evidence-based digital mental health products that have been clinically tested to reduce young people's anxiety and depression (\$2.5m over 5 years and additional funds via our shareholder dividend program)





The best thing being online is the ability to instantly connect with people, access vast amount of information and explore endless possibilities from pretty much anywhere.

Female, age 11–12, NSW



Key findings: a snapshot

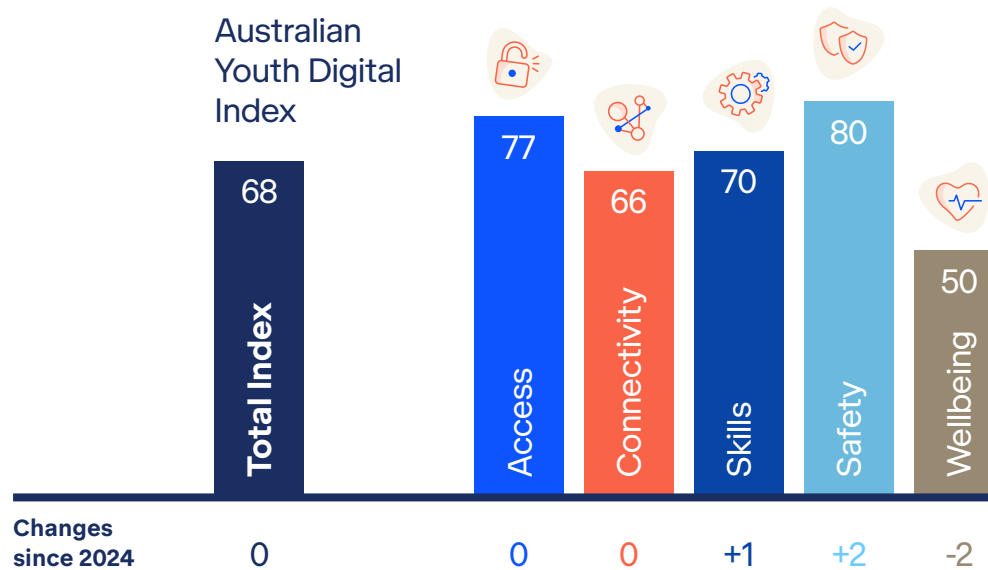
This year's *Australian Youth Digital Index* shows that the line between online and offline life for young people is increasingly blurred, as they seamlessly incorporate technology in their daily lives.

Whether they are tracking their running pace on a smart watch, using a 3D printer in an art project, promoting their fashion business through social media or asking an AI chatbot to help them study for a written exam, young people are harnessing digital tools to enhance every aspect of their lives.

The 2025 *Australian Youth Digital Index* builds on the data from the pilot year in 2024, deepening our understanding of the digital experience of young people across five pillars.

Key changes, areas of concern and signs of progress are highlighted throughout the report. The report also considers a range of factors that can influence digital inclusion, including location, gender, age, ethnicity and household income. More information and insights are available through the online dashboard.

The overall Index score for the 2025 *Australian Youth Digital Index* is 68, comprising scores for Access, Connectivity, Skills, Safety and Wellbeing.



Key findings: a snapshot Continued

Access Index score: 77

Stable since 2024

The Access score is based on the digital devices young people use and how much young people can use these digital devices when they need to.

Nearly all young people aged 14 and over (96%) have access to a smartphone, an essential tool as they progress through high school and into the workforce. Younger children aged 8 to 13 year olds were more likely to have access to a tablet (70%) than a smartphone (65%). Meanwhile, limited access to learning devices continues to hinder educational outcomes: the percentage of young people without access to either a laptop or desktop at home has grown from 19% in 2024 to 23%, or 1.42 million young people.

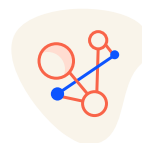


Connectivity Index score: 66

Stable since 2024

The Connectivity score measures how young people connect online (i.e. broadband or mobile data) and how much this is inhibited by limits, speed or quality of connection.

The quality of both Wi-Fi and mobile connections appears to have improved since 2024, with 84% satisfied with their home internet (up from 81%) and 83% satisfied with their mobile data connection (up from 80%). Home Wi-Fi remains the primary source of connection for most young people, but an increasing number are turning to mobile data, wearing the higher cost for the convenience of connection on the go.

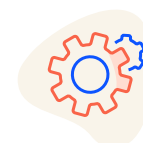


Skills Index score: 70

Up 1 since 2024

The Skills score measures how well young people can complete digital tasks for school or work, and how they learnt digital skills.

Young people are investing in building their digital skills, and it's showing in how confidently and effectively they use technology. They have embraced AI, with close to 80% using the technology and more than half finding it easy to use with everyday tasks. Four in five agree that digital skills are essential for their future career, an increase on 12 months ago.



Safety Index score: 80

Up 2 since 2024

The Safety score is based on young people's own rating of how safe they feel online, whether they are aware of various risks online, and how they learnt online safety.

Most young people felt confident in their ability to stay safe online and recognise the importance of having good online safety skills to avoid scams and other online dangers. The data presents a mixed picture around young people's ability to manage safety risks, improving on some measures since last year and declining in other areas. Nearly all young people (95%) are using some form of social media, with many under-16s expressing concern about the impact of age-based controls.



Wellbeing Index score: 50

Down 2 since 2024

The Wellbeing score covers how young people feel about different aspects of their life in general and the impact young people say being online has on their life.

Young people have increased the amount of time spent online over the last year. Almost half of young people report spending more than 5 hours online on weekend days. This is particularly so for older children – primary children, on the other hand, reported an increase in parental controls on online time.

While young people nominated many benefits of being online, and were more likely to say the impact was positive than negative on a range of aspects of daily life, there was nevertheless a drop in those who said the internet had a positive impact on their relationships with friends, family, schoolwork or work.



What stands out for us – insights from two Young & Resilient Research Centre youth co-researchers



Fiona's insights (Y&R youth co-researcher)

Young people are and have always been a diverse cohort – diverse in their digital engagement, strengths and roles in shaping the digital future. This report is a reminder that not everyone has the same opportunities to connect, learn, play and thrive in digital spaces.

As the findings show, access and connectivity have not changed from 2024. However, the digital world is changing, through the rise of AI and the upcoming social media ban. If this trend continues, some young people will be left behind, still stuck on the wrong side of the digital divide. This exclusion casts a long shadow over opportunities for education, careers, health, community belonging and participation in civic life.

Connectivity raises critical questions about equity. As services get delivered digitally, those young people without routine and reliable connectivity may be excluded from education, healthcare, and social support. On the flip side, we must consider how services for young people reach young people, especially from marginalised communities. There is concern the social media ban will further compound this challenge of outreach and engagement.

Young people are accessing support both online and in person, and we must continue to consider both modes of service delivery. Compared with 2024, there's been a shift towards seeking online support for individual issues and in person support for issues involving others, with some notable changes in health and fitness services. Digital experiences can complement, but perhaps never fully replace, the human connection that comes with some face-to-face interactions.

The rise of AI adds another layer of complexity around ethics, representation, authenticity, bias, and privacy, as demonstrated in Melisa's case study (see page 29). Many young people are aware that AI models are trained on data that may carry implicit biases, potentially reinforcing stereotypes or excluding diverse perspectives. Young people tell us they're questioning outputs, spotting bias, and making informed judgments, but want to see more education and support on critical thinking. This awareness also points to a new skill set necessary for responsible use – learning to set boundaries between AI and human interaction.

It is refreshing to see that young people's skills have improved and safety has risen even more, suggesting that many young Australians are continuing to explore how they can make the most out of being online while adapting with confidence. As young people, we know knowledge is power, and through digital tools we are gaining the knowledge we need to make informed decisions not only about our lives but others. Young people are often the ones with the responsibility of supporting adults and family members who may struggle to navigate the digital information environment. This role reversal, where children explain their digital realities to parents, highlights the generational gap in digital awareness and the need for education that includes families alongside young people.

It can be meaningful to reflect on when digital skills are learned and who models them. For many young people (74%), the majority of digital skills are acquired informally through self learning. Reflecting on my own experiences, learning these skills without structured support has been both empowering and frustrating, and for many young people these skills are also relational, connecting us to opportunities, communities, and identities. As entry level

jobs are increasingly being automated and reshaped by the introduction of AI, it is interesting to see that young people are prepared to adapt and 'safeguard their future careers'. Tasks such as data entry, customer service, and basic administrative roles, traditionally the first opportunities for young people to gain workplace experience, are being absorbed by AI systems, raising questions about how young people will access the labour market and build the foundational skills that open doors to long term goals.

Online experiences are a positive impact on young people's relationships, school performance, and work opportunities. However, with the upcoming social media ban, there are concerns that this ban will remove spaces for those under 16s, especially from marginalised communities who rely on online networks to find solidarity and belonging. However the social media age restrictions unfold, this ban will be disruptive to the ways young people form and maintain connections in a world that will continue to rely on digital platforms.

The drop in wellbeing, especially in physical and mental health, was especially discouraging, but highlights that progress across the other key pillars does not automatically translate into healthier or more fulfilling online experiences.

For most young people (57%), learning online safety is a process of self-learning and navigating risks firsthand. While this self-directed process of trial and error builds up resilience and confidence, it also highlights how much responsibility is placed on young people to learn to protect themselves in spaces designed by adults.

What stands out for us – insights from two Young & Resilient Research Centre youth co-researchers Continued

Tamima Rahman's insights (Y&R youth co-researcher)

I think it is quite interesting that the score for safety has gone up in the past two years, despite the wellbeing score decreasing. It would be nice to explore the relationship between these two pillars in more depth.

I wonder what the role of data breaches and cyber incidents, beyond your control, play, if any, in these young people's perceptions of online safety. I think the issue is quite topical, and I definitely know that it is something in the back of my mind now in my online interactions.

The wellbeing pillar is making me reflect on the benefits we claim to receive from being online, e.g. connecting with friends, and whether or not they outweigh the risk of potential greater harms that come with being constantly available.

As someone who is in the older range of the young people included in this report, I can see some of my own and my friends' experiences represented in this document.

I would've liked to see more of a breakdown in the learning of digital skills, and which skills exactly young people are developing on their own. With the increasing user friendliness of most digital devices and spaces, I think it is really easy to forego learning the skill required to engage with the device. Instead, it's simply tapping a screen or button.

A recent Ted Talk I watched by Elise Hu, 'How digital culture is reshaping our faces and bodies', has made me reflect more on the divide between our perception of our real life identity/appearance, and the version of ourselves we curate online.

Perhaps the report does not need it, but it would be interesting to look at gender identity in more detail and whether there are any marked differences in experiences based on it.

Overall, I think the index reflects the realities and stressors faced by young Aussies.

It feels like there is sometimes unfair and undue pressure on young people to constantly be doing more and to stay 'ahead of the game'. Choosing to reduce your online presence or not being on the ball with digital safety, can serve as a disadvantage when your peers are not doing the same.



Methodology/things we did differently

The *Australian Youth Digital Index* project used a combination of quantitative and qualitative methodologies, which was co-designed by Wallis Social Research and Telstra Foundation. Now in its second year, the study was originally based on the United Kingdom's Nominet Youth Digital Index survey.

In 2025, minor updates were made to the survey questionnaire as well as the construction of the index. The questionnaire included additional questions around artificial intelligence. We asked if young people had taught themselves or been taught by others to use generative AI, alongside asking the same questions about coding. We also asked how much they checked the accuracy of AI outputs.

Recognising the wellbeing concerns around young people and technology we expanded the questions around the impacts of being online, including around self-esteem and comparison to others.

Finally, we made minor changes to the wording of the questions to make them clearer and capture a broader range of responses. For example, in the access pillar we included additional options to explain why young people did not have access to a device ('We have it, I just don't use it' and 'I can't use it because I can't connect to the internet'). The full questionnaire and Wallis Social Research methodology is available [here](#).

Quantitative research



Completed by 4,764 Australians aged between 8 and 25*



Conducted August 3 to September 29, 2025



Distributed online by an accredited panel provider



Average completion time of 21.06 minutes

*Parental permission was required for young people age 14–17 and a parent of young people age 8–13 completed the survey on their behalf.

Quantitative research



20 In-depth interviews
14–25-year-olds
Parents of 8–13-year-olds
Stakeholders (e.g. youth sector professionals)



8 Focus groups
14–25-year-olds
Parents of 8–13-year-olds



10 Paired interviews
8–13-year-olds



Access



The internet and digital world has provided unprecedented access to skill development, communication and the knowledge of the world at the fingertips of young people. Access to all of this allows us to not just be passive consumers but active contributors in an ever evolving society.

Youth Advisory Council Member, Male, 16, SA



Access



Key findings

Smartphones are the digital lifeline for most young people. 96% of those aged 14 and over have access to a smartphone at home and 91% own their own.

The overall index score of 77 remains steady year on year. The access index score was slightly lower for young people living outside major cities, and slightly higher for those in city locations.

The score was also noticeably lower for those living in WA, Tasmania and ACT than for other states.

Access to learning devices remains a key and increasing barrier to successful education, with a growing number of young people having no access to a desktop or laptop computer at home.

People with no access to learning devices were also:

- Less likely to have home Wi-Fi
- Less likely to be able to use the internet to complete all tasks needed
- Less likely to have a quiet place to work
- Likely to have more difficulty with a range of online tasks
- Likely to have greater online safety concerns but a lower awareness of how to stay safe
- More likely to be impacted by cost of living issues
- More likely to live in regional/remote Australia than cities

The Access pillar examines the digital devices young people use and whether they can use these devices when they need to, as well as what they use their devices for when online. The Access score for young people in Australia is 77.

While the overall index score is unchanged from 2024, there are some notable differences in the responses that make up that pillar. Improvements in functionality (satisfaction with storage space and being able to do everything needed with devices) is counterbalanced by declining access to certain devices.

Access to Learning Devices remains a concern

Of particular concern, access to learning devices remains a significant issue for some young Australians, with the digital divide appearing to widen in the last 12 months. The percentage of young people who have access to **neither a laptop nor desktop at home** has grown from 19% in 2024 to 23%, or 1.42 million young people.

This includes 523,000 aged 14 and above, for whom access becomes essential for learning and daily tasks.

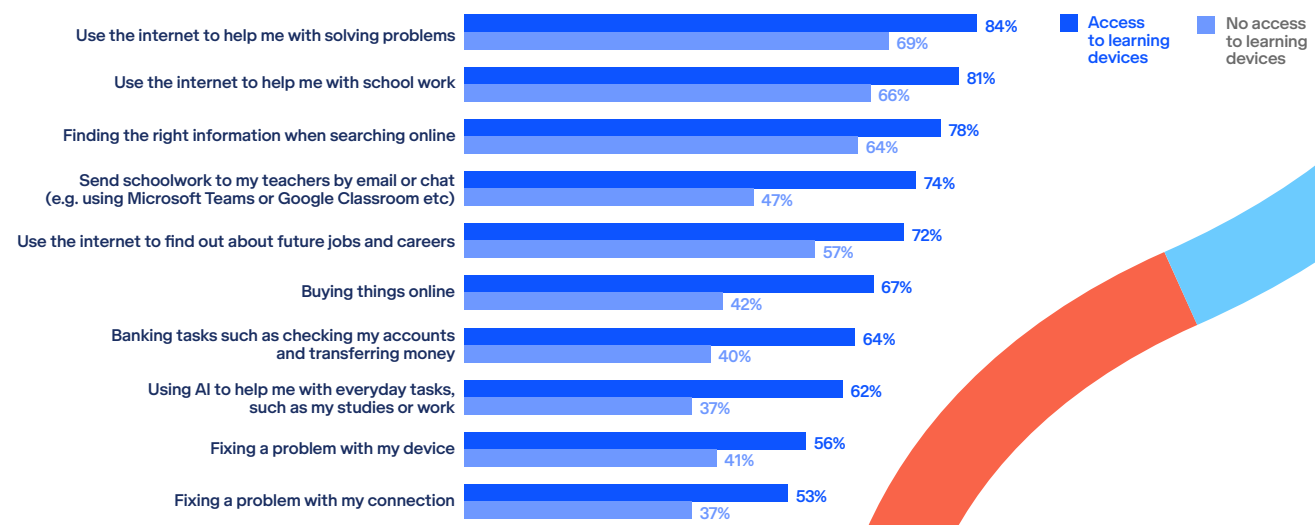
Even if we include access in other places such as school and libraries, 14% of all young people aged 8 to 25 (864,000) have no access to a learning device (up from 10% last year).

Access varies by state and home situation

Access index scores were lower for those in Western Australia (72), Tasmania (72) and ACT (73), reflecting more limited access to home devices in these states. For example, only 61% of West Australian young people had access to a laptop at home, compared with 70% across all states; and 17% of Tasmanian young people could access a desktop computer compared with 27% across all states.

The data also reveals challenges faced by young people who are in less common living situations such as those living with a guardian or carer. This group has an access score of 71.

Figure 1: The impact of digital exclusion on the management of online tasks – % who find task easy





Technology improvements and access by age and gender

On the positive side, the proportion of young people who felt they had sufficient storage space on their devices grew from 68% to 73%, possibly reflecting improved technology as manufacturers update the devices in market. The data shows some differences in device access by age and gender:

- Access to devices such as smartphones and laptops increases as age increases. 96% of young people aged 14 and over have access to a smartphone, while only 65% of 8 to 13 year olds did.
- Conversely, the youngest cohorts were more likely to access tablets (80% of 8–10 year olds), compared with those aged 18 (39%).
- Access to games consoles was markedly lower for those aged 18 and over.
- Boys were much more likely to have access to a gaming console or desktop computer; girls had greater access to tablets.

Figure 2: Access to devices by age and gender

	Total	8–13 year olds	14–17 year olds	18–25 year olds	Male	Female
Smartphone (e.g. iPhone, Samsung Galaxy)	85%	65%	97%	95%	85%	85%
Laptop/Chromebook	70%	55%	79%	76%	67%	72%
Tablet (e.g. iPad, Samsung Galaxy Tablet)	51%	70%	47%	39%	48%	55%
Games console (e.g. Xbox, PlayStation)	51%	57%	58%	44%	59%	43%
Desktop computer	27%	21%	26%	33%	32%	22%
Smart watch (e.g. Apple Watch, Samsung Galaxy Watch)	25%	16%	23%	32%	23%	26%



96%
14 and over
have access to
a smartphone
at home

91%
14 and over
own their
smartphone

65%
8 to 13
year olds
have access to
a smartphone

40%
8 to 13
year olds
own their
smartphone

Opportunity knocks: for business and government



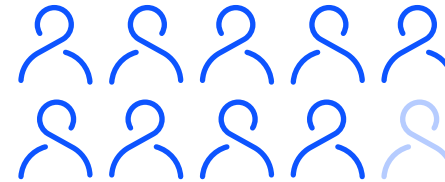
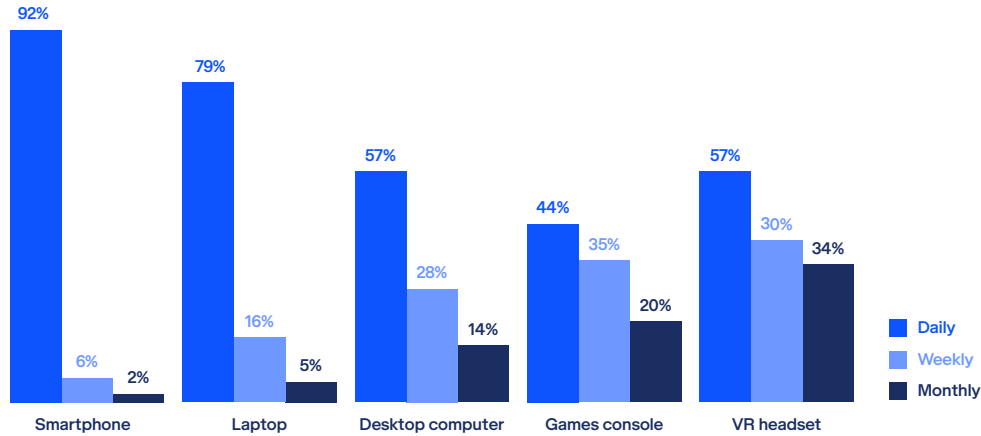
The National Device Bank works with community partners to give old tech a new purpose – putting refurbished business and government devices into the hands of Australians who need them most, including students. With 16 million devices refreshed by Australian organisations every five years, we’re asking Australian business and government to divert a portion of their ‘still valuable’ devices to the National Device Bank. Let’s close the digital divide and reduce e-waste together.

Caroline McDaid, CEO WorkVentures

[Learn more](#) 



Figure 3: Most frequently used devices



Nine in ten are satisfied with their smartphone and laptop.

Smartphones were the most frequently used devices, with nearly all (92%) young people who had one using it at least daily/almost daily to get online. Most of those with laptop access also used it daily/almost daily (79%).

Device Satisfaction

Most young people are satisfied with their devices, with around nine in ten being satisfied with their smartphone (88%) and laptop (89%), and around four in five with their desktop computer (83%) and tablet (84%).

Similarly to 2024, satisfaction rates were lowest for 'a TV that isn't a smart TV' (55%) and 'a mobile that isn't a smartphone' (62%), indicating that not having the latest version of technologies can be a source of angst for some young people. This was particularly so for girls: while 66% of boys indicated satisfaction with a non-smart phone, only 54% of girls were satisfied. This may reflect the difference

in how young people use devices. Girls are more likely than boys to browse posts, videos and images from other people, and therefore want access to a smartphone with the latest technology.

Whether or not a young person is impacted by financial pressures is a strong predictor of their satisfaction with many types of digital devices, with those feeling financial strain less likely than others to be satisfied with their smartphones, laptops and desktop computers. It may be that financial constraints are leading to compromises on devices for some of these young people.



I just have a 30-minute time limit on my children because I've got one daughter who's neurodiverse, so she'd sit on there for hours.

Focus Group 5, Parents of children age 8–13, Australia-wide

Spotlight



Parenting in the digital age: a new kind of balancing act

Parenting has never been simple, but raising children surrounded by digital technology presents new complexities. Technology is both a social lifeline and an essential tool for navigating daily life.

Used well, technology can open doors. But the digital landscape also carries risks. From exposure to inappropriate content to pressures around constant connectivity, the challenges are real. Guiding children through this environment is a responsibility that weighs heavily on many parents.

Our research provides insights into this delicate balancing act. For younger children in particular, parents tend to take a highly managed approach to device use, gradually loosening access restrictions as their children grow and gain independence. Four in five young people aged 8–13 (79%) have parental restrictions on their online access, easing to one in five 17–18 year olds (20%).

But the latest data on why some children don't have access to a smartphone also suggests parents are adopting a more nuanced approach as they manage their children's screen time. In 2024, 70% of young people without a smartphone said it was simply because their parent or guardian wouldn't allow it. This year, that figure had fallen to 57%, while the proportion who said their parent was worried it wasn't safe rose from 28% to 33%. This suggests parents are moving beyond blanket refusals towards more subtle

conversations about risk, responsibility and readiness. Research by the [eSafety Commission](#) suggests many parents are primarily concerned with their child being exposed to age-inappropriate content (38%) and unwanted contact with strangers online (38%), illustrating that privacy and safety remain top priorities for digital parenting.

Young people themselves recognise the need to balance their online and offline lives, and how digital habits affect their wellbeing. They also understand other risks like misinformation, scams and hacking, although many (especially younger children) acknowledge the need for support to manage these risks.

Given the stakes, families shouldn't be navigating these challenges alone. Schools, institutions and communities all have a role in helping children build digital resilience. In response, Telstra Foundation has supported [Digital Futures](#), a partnership with PROJECT ROCKIT, that works directly with young people on digital citizenship skills but also takes a 'whole of community' approach, upskilling parents, carers and teachers to navigate concerns regarding those in their care. The program helps young people thrive in digital spaces by building their digital citizenship skills, fostering self-awareness, critical thinking, boundary setting, and balanced online engagement.

Understanding the everyday online risks and knowing how to navigate them, for parents and young people alike, can empower families to embrace technology's benefits while staying alert to its challenges.





Case study



When access shapes opportunity

Chantel and Vince have three boys in high school, each with their own devices to help manage their schoolwork. While they make the most of having a reliable internet connection and workable devices at home, life hasn't always been easy when it comes digital access.

"We lived close by to the local library for a couple of years ... rain, hail or shine we'd walk down to the library and wait in line, like a lot of other families, just to access the computers," says Chantel.

"It's hard when there are limited devices for a lot of families in the same position. The boys got used to using their waiting time to read and things like that, and we were pretty accepting that there were a lot of other people there for the same reason."

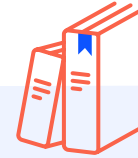
"Ultimately, we were lucky that we lived somewhere close by. If things had been different, we would have been completely isolated."

But having reliable internet at home now is still only part of the challenge.

For a lot of families, the cost of purchasing up-to-date devices ready to take on the needs of the classroom has never been more out of reach. While her eldest boys received devices through the Smith Family's Digital Learning Essentials program (formerly Digital Access), demands are changing, and devices that were perfectly good two to three years ago, are now considered out of date.

"I guess the technology changes so quickly that the devices need to be able to accommodate what the schools are doing so the kids can keep up with their work."

"We've have been really lucky with our school. There are a lot of families who've been in the same situation that they have supported with access to devices. But I know this is not the same at every school."



Similarly, parents have to not only be skilled enough to support their kids with online learning, but they need to have access to devices just to keep on top of their children's schooling. While Chantel says her digital ability is fair, access has been a challenge previously, with mobile phones not always being suitable to engage with the school's online portal.

"You have to rely on your children being the messengers, and I tell you what, when kids are aware of the sort of lengths they need to go to just to get an excursion form signed, it has a pretty significant effect on their education," Chantel says. "They limit themselves, and I think that's a real problem for young people experiencing barriers with digital access."





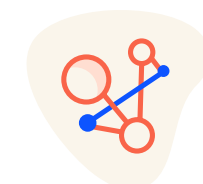
Connectivity



I would prefer to use data on my phone, mainly because of privacy and security reasons. I had a friend who [uses] public Wi-Fi and then I think he was transferring money and his bank details got stolen. So I'm kind of more vigilant with that. I only use public free Wi-Fi if, for example, I can't use data on my phone.

Young person interview 17, Female, age 24,
Regional NSW, CALD

Connectivity



Key findings



The Connectivity index score was unchanged at 66.

Home Wi-Fi remains the primary source of connection for most young people. Most young people (89%) have access to the internet at home, and 72% said it was their primary means of connection.

Around four in five young people (84%) reported their home internet connection was good quality.

But young people are increasingly turning to mobile data to get online. While this offers convenience and flexibility, it is a more expensive way to connect. Nearly 1.5 million young people (24%) use mobile data as their main way to connect to the Internet.

There is generally lower satisfaction with the quality of connection when using mobile data, although there are signs of improvement since last year.

26% said there were some things they couldn't do online due to limits in mobile data allowance, and 34% reported this was the case because of slow or no internet.

Secondary students had a higher index score than the youngest and oldest groups surveyed, suggesting there may be some connection benefits of school.

Regional and low income young people, as well as those with health conditions, scored lower on connectivity.

The Connectivity pillar covers the type of internet connection young people have access to and explores the activities that young people engage in when online.

Type of connection

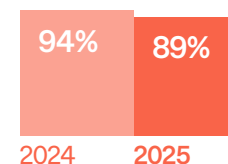
The data this year shows a marked increase in the use of mobile data, with 73% connecting this way compared with 68% last year. Conversely, use of home Wi-Fi decreased, both at home (89%, down from 94% in 2024) and at school/college/university (47% down from 51% in 2024).

The fact that 11% do not connect through home Wi-Fi at all is surprising, and cannot be explained as simply the youngest cohort being restricted through parental controls. In fact, it is the older groups who have seen the larger decline in home Wi-Fi use, with 13% of 18-to-25 year olds saying they don't have home Wi-Fi (compared with 7% in 2024). This is concerning, as using mobile data involves higher costs and could become a financial burden.

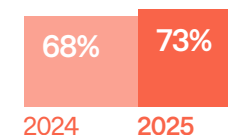
Nevertheless home Wi-Fi remained the most common connection type, used most frequently among 72% of young people.

Access to the internet in other environments – such as schools (47%), workplaces (31%) and public spaces (29%) – was less common, and almost never the main way of connecting. Developmental age is influential here, with younger children less likely to say they have access at school, a public place or in a workplace.

Access to the internet

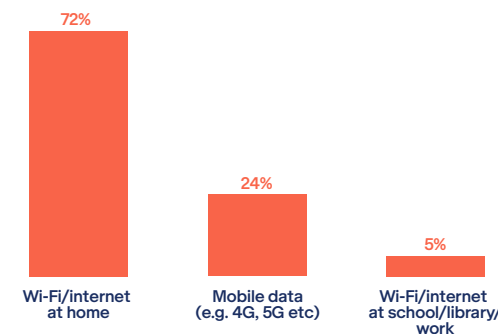


Have access to Wi-Fi/internet at home



Have access to mobile data

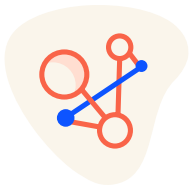
Figure 4: Type of connection used most frequently



I usually avoid it [public Wi-Fi]. I trust my university, even though there's obviously still risks there. But outside of that, I mostly just use data. I don't wanna risk public Wi-Fi [because of] unauthorized access, my data being recorded, stuff being key logged. That sort of stuff.

Young person interview 16, Female, age 20, Regional VIC, Disability, LGBTQIA+

Connectivity Continued



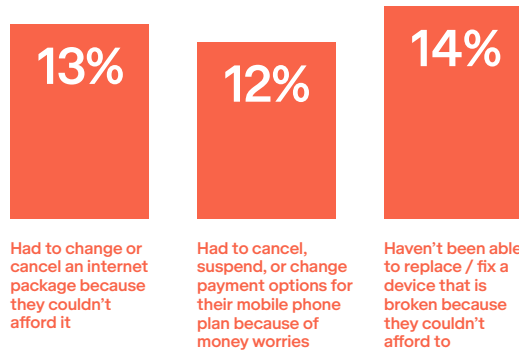
Connection Quality

In positive news, the quality of both Wi-Fi and mobile connection appears to have improved since 2024, with 84% satisfied with home internet quality (up from 81%) and 83% saying mobile data connection was satisfactory (80% in 2024).

Cost of living impact

Cost of living has clear consequences on how young people experience technology.

Figure 5: Digital inclusion – financial constraints



Everything has some sort of two-factor authentication or some online component. So I think that's a really large barrier [for] people experiencing homelessness and financial disadvantage if you don't have money to buy credit for your phone.

Professional interview 29, Metro QLD

Opportunity knocks: for business and government

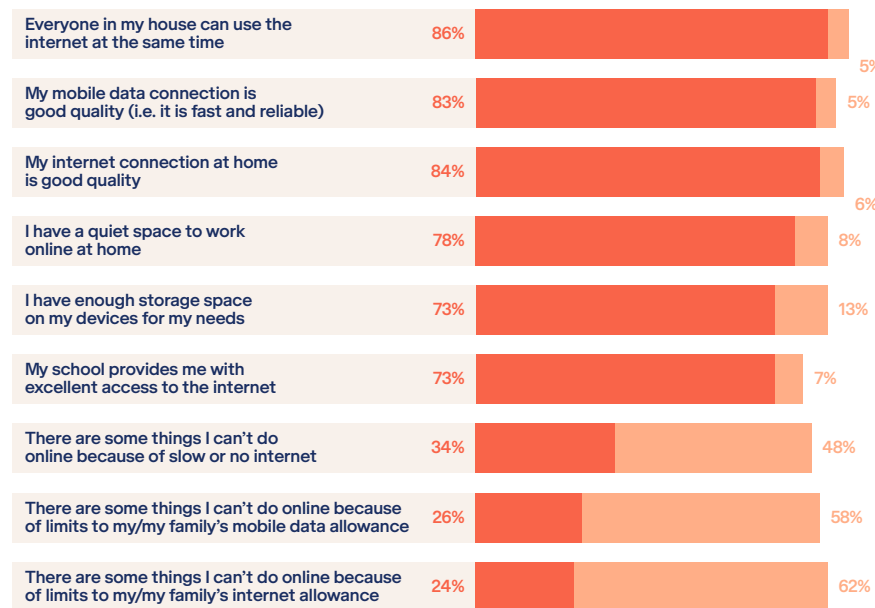


Learn more

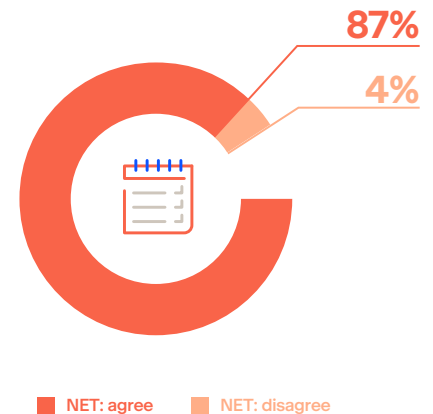
I've met parents who have no choice but to take their children to shopping centres and libraries just to connect to the internet to do their homework as home internet is simply out of reach. Initiatives like the Australian Government's School Student Broadband Initiative, which provides free NBN broadband to eligible families, has been extended until June 2028 and it would be great to scale this further.

Doug Taylor, CEO The Smith Family

Figure 6: Young people's experiences getting online



I am able to use the internet to complete all the tasks I want to do.



Spotlight



Collaborative connectivity: finding connection in a disconnected world

A small but important number of young people face significant barriers to participating in the digital world. This can be due to poor quality connection (an issue for around one in 20 young people), financial challenges (more than one in ten) or even the lack of quiet space at home (an issue for 8% of young people).

But with being online almost synonymous with participation almost synonymous with participation, including to access essential supports, young people are being creative about how and where they go online.

Libraries, for example, have become modern-day hubs of digital democracy. Once seen primarily as quiet reading spaces, libraries now pulse with the energy of students, job seekers, and creators who gather not just for free Wi-Fi, but the social connection.

Campaspe Library Services Manager Jenny Mustey, who has worked in libraries and schools for nearly four decades, said the increasing role of libraries in young people's lives was a striking and exciting development.

"I've definitely seen an increase in young people coming through," she says. "A lot of them bring in their laptops and other devices to access the Wi-Fi."

"It seems to be more of a collaborative study sort of approach. You see lots of groups of young people working together."

Communities, too, are adapting creatively. Friends and family support each other by enabling hotspot tethering. And local councils and grassroots organisations are experimenting with community Wi-Fi initiatives, ensuring that no one's access depends solely on individual means. Such efforts highlight that connectivity is no longer a luxury, and it's a shared responsibility to find ways to ensure no one is digitally excluded.

Telstra has also responded to this need, making all standard national and mobile calls free from its payphone network five years ago. Since that time, more than 100 million free calls have been made – many of them during times of need or crisis. Telstra's 14,000+ free payphones also play an important role for young people facing tough moments who may not readily have access to a working mobile phone or internet connection. Accessing a safe phone line, free of cost, is often a vital step to seek help, reach out to services, family or friends.

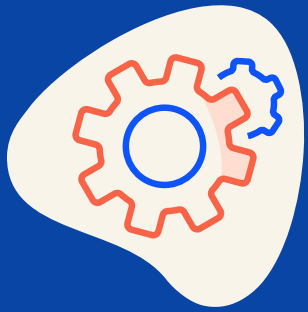
Since becoming free, usage data shows an increase in calls made from Telstra payphones to support lines such as Kids Helpline, Lifeline and Headspace, as well as to emergency and state support numbers. They give young people a safe, private and reliable way to reach out, with nearly 8,000 free calls to Kids Helpline made from payphones in the past year alone. Today more than 4,000 of Telstra's payphones also include free Wi-Fi, helping young Australians stay connected even without mobile data – and ensuring that anyone without a smartphone, charger, or mobile credit still has access to a lifeline, a real person at the end of the line. Find a payphone anywhere in Australia [here](#).



I work with a woman at the moment who is experiencing homelessness and she hasn't been able to register her baby's birth because she doesn't have access to the internet.

Professional interview 29, Metro QLD





Skills



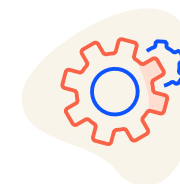
I think [digital skills are] important. I'm trying to get a job at the moment and I go into stores with my paper resume, but they're like, oh, just go online. So then you have to put your [resume] on online. [Everything is] more digital, not many places take cash anymore you have to do it with your phone and stuff like that.

Young person interview 13, Female, age 14, Metro QLD



I think a big contender [for most important skill] would have to be AI and understanding if something is AI generated, or if this comment is part of a bot farm. There's so much hesitancy towards consuming or just taking anything at face value because you really just can't tell nowadays.

Young person interview 16, Female, age 20, Regional VIC, Disability, LGBTQIA+



Key findings



The Skills index score was 70, one point higher than 2024

Nearly four in five young people say digital skills are essential for their future career.

Young people are finding it easier to use the internet to find out about future jobs and careers (70%, 62% in 2024), while nearly 9 in 10 said they did not need help when using a computer for school, university or work.

High schoolers had significantly higher skills than both their older and younger peers, while young people from high income households had much higher skills than young people from less wealthy backgrounds.

In 2025 more young people said they receive good training from work to use technology (67%, 65% in 2024). They were also more likely to say they had learned digital skills from teachers and parents than last Index.

But independent learning remained the key source for learning digital skills: most young people credited themselves (74%) and ‘from the internet’ (53%) as the main method.

Young people have embraced artificial intelligence (AI) over the last year – more than half (56%) say they find it easy to integrate AI tools into their everyday tasks. However one in five young people said they ‘never’ or ‘rarely’ check the accuracy of information provided by AI.

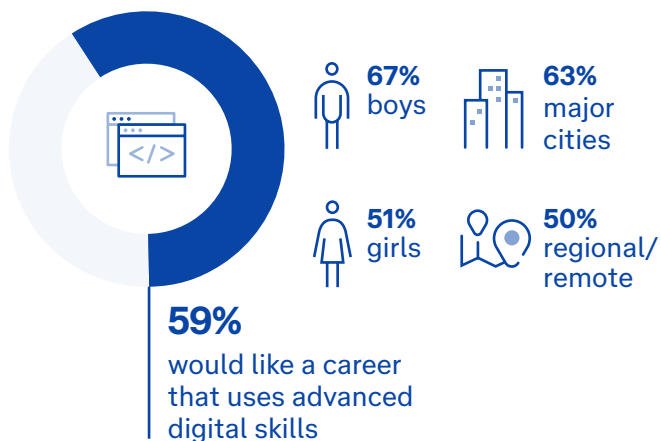
Participants in the qualitative research understood digital skills to be much broader than just ‘using the internet’. Key skills included information search, AI, coding, digital literacy skills and online safety skills. Telstra Foundation Youth Advisory Council have also explored what constitutes a digital skill in daily life and shared their findings. See page 40.

The Skills pillar considers young people’s ability and confidence in undertaking a range of tasks online, as well as how they are acquiring skills. It also considers their views on using digital skills in their careers. This year, the index survey included some new questions regarding artificial intelligence.

Importance of digital skills

Digital skills are essential for young people to harness the benefits of technology, and no one knows this more than young people themselves. While a few expressed concerns about being ‘left behind’, most recognised that investing time and energy maintaining their digital literacy capabilities was a feature of modern life. Nearly four in five (79%) agreed that digital skills are essential for their future career, up from 75% in 2024.

Around two-thirds (67%) of boys had an interest in a future career using advanced digital skills whereas only 51% of girls did, although this figure has risen from 47% in 2024. Given the figure for boys has remained steady, this represents a slight narrowing of the gender gap. A higher proportion of young people in major cities (63%) compared with those in regional and remote areas (50%) said they were interested in a career using advanced digital skills.

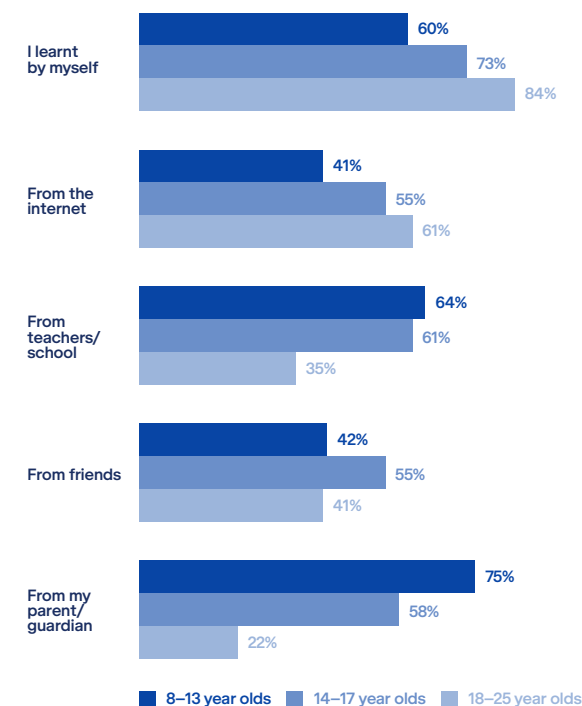


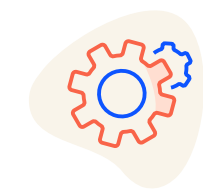
Growing capability of young people

There are clear signs that investment in digital skills by young people and those around them has increased in the past 12 months – and is flowing through to how effectively young people embrace technology. The proportion who do not need help when using a computer for school, university or work – a key measure in understanding capability – has risen from 82% to 87%.

Once again, young people have demonstrated their independence in acquiring skills. While primary-aged children (8–13) are most likely to learn from a parent or guardian (75%) or at school (64%), those over 14 are most likely to say they learned by themselves.

Figure 7: Way of acquiring digital skills





Digital abilities by type of task

Our survey considered a range of skills across work, school and personal contexts. Young people have shown the strongest progress on personal skills, improving their ability to search for information online, use the internet to find out about jobs and use apps to edit photos and videos. However, they felt slightly less confident in their school-related digital skills while confidence in the work-related skills was largely unchanged.

Young people were least confident with two skills that are relevant across all contexts: fixing a connection problem and fixing a problem with the device itself. Just under half of all young people felt confident about these.

AI and coding skills

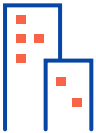


Overall, young people accepted that they needed to stay abreast of digital developments and trends. Young people appear to have embraced AI, with 59% having taught themselves AI skills and 48% having been taught AI skills by others. And more young people found it easy to use AI to help with everyday tasks, such as studies or work, than a year earlier (56% up from 45%).

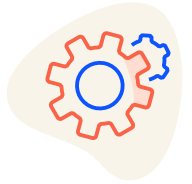
In contrast, coding remains more of a niche skill: half of young people say they have not been taught to code and only 35% say they have taught themselves.

Figure 8: Level of difficulty with digital tasks (NET easy)



Fixing a problem with my online connection was **the lowest scoring skill** with less than half (48%) of young people finding this skill easy

		2024	2025
		50%	48%
Office 	Use the internet to help me with solving problems	79%	80%
	Communicate with people at work by email or chat if I need help	77%	78%
	Send files to people inside or outside my organisation by email	74%	75%
	Read or view documents that people inside or outside my organisation send me	76%	76%
School 	Use the internet to help me with school work	78%	78%
	Communicate with my teachers by email or chat if I need help	70%	67%
	Send schoolwork to my teachers by email or chat	70%	68%
Personal 	Finding the right information when searching online	67%	75%
	Use the internet to find out about future jobs and careers	62%	70%
	Using apps to change or edit digital photos or video content	52%	62%
	Share online content such as videos, blogs, music, art I have created myself	64%	64%
	Banking tasks such as checking my accounts and transferring money	58%	58%



Four in five young people aged 8 to 25 are using AI – usage increases with age, but even amongst the youngest group (8–10 year olds) fewer than half (45%) said they did not use AI. At the other end of the age spectrum more than nine in ten young adults aged 23 to 25 appear to be using artificial intelligence.

Use of AI is higher amongst people in the cities compared with regional and remote peers.

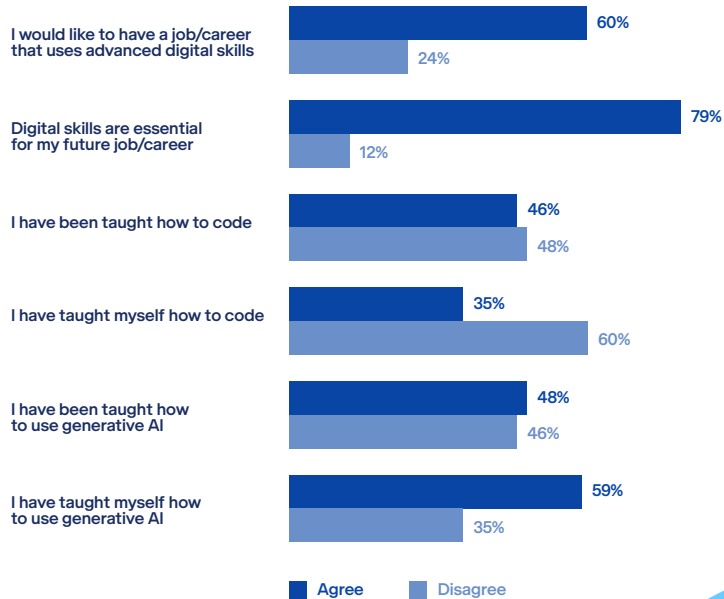


The way that I'm trying to beat it, I guess, is to stay on top of skills, constantly upskilling, even learning about AI.

Young person interview 17, Female, age 24, Regional NSW, CALD

Worryingly, there is a stark difference in the use of AI between those young people with and without access to a learning device (laptop or desktop computer). A third of young people without a learning device said they did **not** use AI, more than twice the rate of those with access to a learning device (14%). Those with a learning device also demonstrate better fact-checking habits around the use of AI, suggesting lack of a learning device also holds back the development of important online skills.

Figure 9: Statements about digital skills



Opportunity knocks:
let's grow the next gen of digital makers



Just as with past tech innovations, the rise of AI brings both promise and risk – it can widen gaps and create new challenges if we're not careful. It's important that every young person gains a solid grasp of AI. This isn't just about tech; it's about empowering children to understand, shape, and critically engage with the future. We need to deliver fun and engaging programs to help young people learn how AI works, so they're better prepared to make informed choices, create their own solutions, and use their creativity to solve real-world problems that matter to them.

Kaye North, Community Engagement Manager, Code Club Australia

Spotlight



Artificial Intelligence

Artificial intelligence is rapidly becoming the unofficial sidekick of young people building their digital skills. In a world where learning no longer depends on classrooms or scheduled lessons, 74% of young people now say they learn digital skills by themselves, and AI is slotting neatly into that DIY learning culture. In fact, 59% have already taught themselves how to use AI, and more than half (56%) say they find it easy to integrate AI tools into their everyday tasks. For a technology once seen as futuristic, AI has quickly become a familiar, intuitive companion.

For many, the draw of AI is simple: it's fast, it's clever, and it saves time. Participants consistently described AI as a turbo-charged shortcut that trims away hours of reading, researching, or revising. In particular, AI serves as a patient, always-available 'second teacher' that can turn

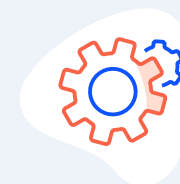
confusion into clarity in seconds. While school-aged young people told us teachers were still cautious about allowing AI use, university-aged participants suggested the technology had been embraced.

Young people say AI gives them more time to focus on what matters. And when it comes to searching for information, many rate AI as superior to traditional search engines: instead of sifting through pages of results, they get tailored answers phrased in a way that feels natural and easy to absorb.

AI also shines as a creative partner. Participants spoke enthusiastically about using it to brainstorm ideas, generate content, and tackle problems from fresh angles. Beyond the classroom, AI is already shaping their first steps into the workforce. From producing polished CVs and cover letters to practising interview responses, AI offers a confidence boost, and potentially a competitive edge.

But it's not all smooth sailing.

With all its strengths, AI brings a set of challenges. There were concerns about the 'dumbing down' effect through weakening research habits. And young people, educators, and parents reflected that AI's mistakes aren't always easy to spot. That raises concerns about over-reliance, especially if students use AI as a crutch rather than a tool. Our research highlights this risk.



My uni professor actually encouraged us to use AI – not to do our research or to write our essays, but to edit things or get basic structures... They encourage us to use it for our planning and just to get ideas. So I would probably use it a bit for uni just in the initial planning phase when I'm trying to work out how I'm gonna tackle the big ideas.

Focus group 3, Young females, 18–25, Australia-wide



If I'm in class and Google won't give me enough information, I'll go into AI and it will give me heaps I can ask it to expand on what I've asked from it. I can ask to add stuff. I also use it to check stuff. I use QuillBot and it paraphrases.

Focus Group 1, Young females, 14–17, Australia-wide





Spotlight



Continued

One in five young people said they ‘never’ or ‘rarely’ check the accuracy of information provided by AI. In the case of high-schoolers, just under a quarter rarely or never checked, while around a third said they checked ‘always’ or ‘most of the time’.

The ethical landscape is complicated too. Young people are aware of issues like the exploitation of authors’ work to train AI systems, the rise of deepfakes, and risks to personal privacy. Environmental impacts, such as energy and water consumption, also surfaced as growing areas of concern.

And despite AI’s remarkable capabilities, participants highlighted the key missing ingredient: the human touch. AI can explain, summarise, and guide, but it can’t replicate the connection, nuance, and empathy of real human communication.

The consensus from participants was clear: AI is a gamechanger when used deliberately, thoughtfully, and with an awareness of its limits, but works best when paired with curiosity and human judgement.



There are things that we’re not really comfortable [using AI for]. I don’t think [anyone] really wants to use things that will replace artists and stuff.

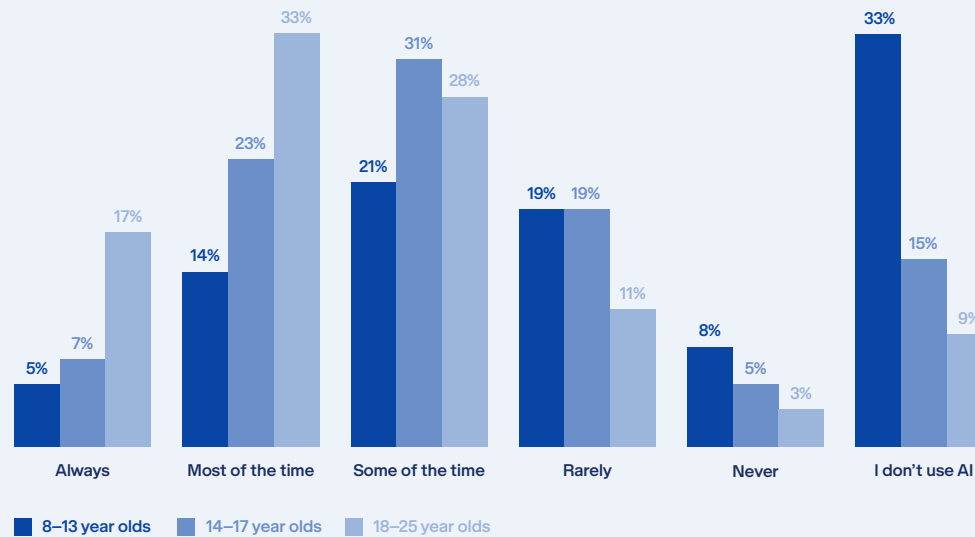
Focus group 3, Young females, 18–25, Australia-wide

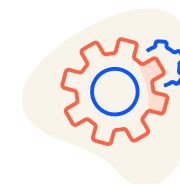


I don’t think it’s going away. I think you need to teach them, and give them the ability to use it. To ensure that they’re confident in what they’re doing... Where can we use AI and where is that beneficial.

Professional interview, 28, Metro VIC

Figure 10: How often young people check accuracy of AI





Case study



The digital soul: one student's critique of generative AI and creativity

Melisa is a young woman in her 20's studying digital media at university. In a job market where AI can write essays or design graphics, she fears that the skills she has spent time mastering (e.g. writing, design, coding) may become redundant or less respected.

Melisa sees generative AI as a double-edged sword that offers undeniable convenience but also threatens the very essence of human learning and creativity. She feels that the instant, effortless outputs produced by tools such as ChatGPT 'rot the brain' by replacing the process of problem-solving with a readymade answer.

In her view, this erosion of effort translates into a loss of 'human soul' in creative work: *If you're all about instant gratification, you're erasing the value of effort.*

She sees this 'human soul' as the human intent behind creation, the emotion and intentionality embedded in the work. AI, she feels, delivers a sterile, algorithmic result that feels devoid of that human touch.

Melisa acknowledges that generative AI is a powerful tool rather than a replacement for human creativity. She sees its main advantages in three areas:

- **Speed and efficiency** – AI can produce ideas, drafts, and solutions in seconds, cutting the time she would otherwise spend searching or drafting, so she can focus on the why and how of a task.
- **Instant access to knowledge** – She uses ChatGPT and similar models to answer questions, factcheck, and summarise academic material, keeping her coursework and research up to date.
- **Creative brainstorming and problem-solving** – Even when she prefers to create manually, AI can surface unexpected ideas, give step-by-step tech instructions, and help her in 3D modelling and data transfer tasks. AI can serve as a tutor, breaking down complex concepts into digestible explanations.

Overall, she sees the benefits of AI as a *timesaving, knowledge mobilising, and idea generating assistant* that enhances her academic and practical workflow when coupled with proper regulation.

Despite its perceived benefits, Melisa is conscious that robust digital skill training that prioritises critical thinking and the ability to distinguish AI generated content from human created work is vital, stressing that:

"The big new skill is being able to recognise whether something is AI generated. If you don't know that, you're going to get tricked."

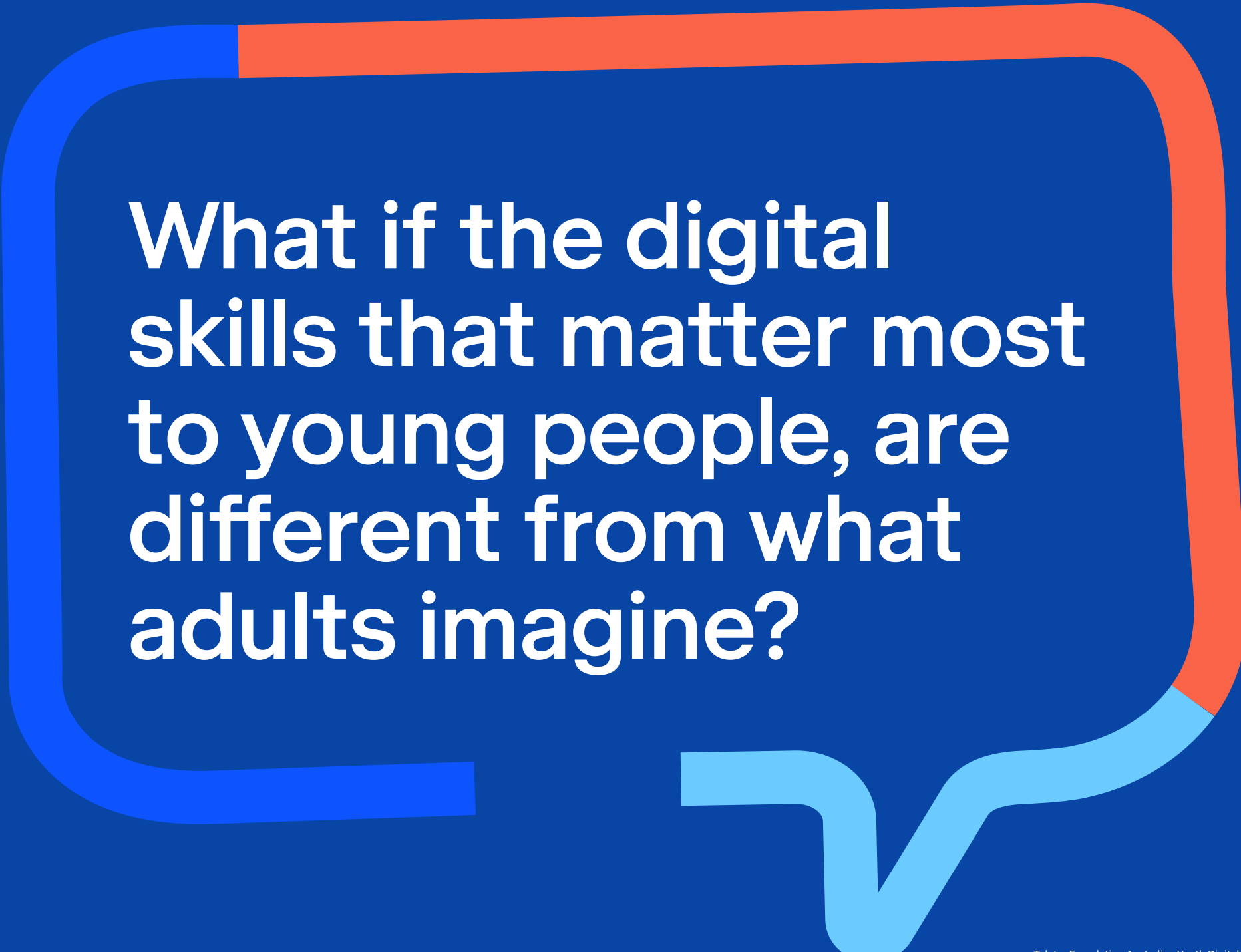
Melisa believes the rise of AI should be met with clear regulatory measures. She would like to see mandatory 'AI generated content' tags on platforms like Instagram and TikTok, arguing that users should be able to immediately identify synthetic media. Beyond labelling, she stresses the urgent need for legislation around deepfakes, especially those involving nonconsensual sexual content, noting that:

"I've seen the horror of deepfake sexual content. That's why legislation around deepfakes is absolutely essential."

If AI can convincingly fake a person's image or voice, the line between real and fabricated art is blurred, threatening personal identity and the authenticity of creative expression.

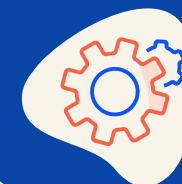
In summary, her perspective frames AI not merely as a technological innovation but as a societal challenge that requires proactive education, transparency, and legal safeguards to preserve the authenticity and agency of young people's digital experiences.

"I think we need to teach people how to make the most of AI, but also how to keep their own voice alive. If AI can do everything, what's left for us?"



What if the digital skills that matter most to young people, are different from what adults imagine?

Youth Advisory Council Skills Report



Introduction

Digital skills are at the heart of how young Australians connect, create, and thrive in an increasingly online world. The 2025 *Australian Youth Digital Index (AYDI)* reveals that young people are not just adapting to technology, they are shaping it, often in ways adults might not expect.

The Skills score for young Australians in 2025 is **70**, up by 1 point from 2024, the Index shows most young people are confident with everyday digital tasks – over 80% find it easy to use the internet for problem-solving, and nearly 75% are comfortable searching for information online.

For this generation, digital skills go far beyond technical know-how; they encompass creativity, critical thinking, self-expression, and the ability to navigate complex social and information landscapes.

Young people today are: gamers, creators, entrepreneurs, learners, artists, advocates, educators, collaborators, and activists, sometimes all at once.



Many are building their digital skills independently, learning from peers, online communities, and hands-on experience, rather than relying solely on formal education or adult guidance. In fact, the AYDI shows that most young people are figuring out digital skills for themselves, with less than half learning the essentials at school or from family, and 74% saying they taught themselves digital skills, often through trial and error.

Importantly, young Australians recognise that digital skills are essential for their future careers, with 79% agreeing that these abilities will be vital regardless of industry. The rise of AI and other emerging technologies is seen as both an opportunity and a challenge, prompting young people to invest in upskilling and to approach new tools with a critical, creative mindset. While confidence is high, the AYDI also identifies areas for growth, including advanced technical skills, troubleshooting, and critical evaluation of information.

This section of the report explores what ‘digital skills’ truly mean for young people in 2025. Through the voices and stories of our [Youth Advisory Council \(YAC\)](#), and grounded in the latest AYDI data, we’ve looked beyond devices and platforms to understand the depth and richness of digital lives today. The aim is not just to measure skills, but to appreciate the diversity, agency, and aspirations of a generation growing up digital.



Why explore digital skills?

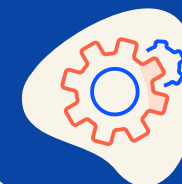
Young Australians are leading the way in how they use technology, proactively managing their digital health, finances, identities, and confidently shaping their online presence.

The 2024 AYDI revealed just how diverse digital experiences are for young people and showed that traditional ideas about ‘digital skills’ barely scratch the surface. We were curious about how this plays out when coupled with the 2025 AYDI showing that 74% of young people are able to learn digital skills easily on their own easily. How does this show up for young people?

In response, the 2025 YAC Digital Skills research project – using AYDI data and youth-led action research – explores the breadth of digital skills young people develop across all aspects of their digital lives.

Who was involved

The project was devised by the Telstra Foundation team and developed in partnership with PROJECT ROCKIT, engaging 18 YAC members (age 12–18) as co-researchers.



The process

Step one: youth-led digital interest activities

Using the YAC co-researchers' conversations and interests, we identified four domains for a two-week digital activity period: Digital Art, Digital Music, Gaming, and AI. They worked solo or in groups to spend time on projects and activities over the two weeks.

Step two: identify skills used and learned

Over two weeks, each YAC co-researcher completed three surveys to track their skills. Afterwards, they met to discuss and identify the skills they used and learned.

Step three: case studies

Several YAC co-researchers apply digital skills in professional and semi-professional contexts, such as operating an AI chatbot service, participating in robotics competitions, or producing and distributing music. The research team documented some of these activities.

Step four: digital skills timeline

YAC co-researchers also co-designed and completed a timeline of key digital skill milestones to provide a reflection on at what age children and young people are developing specific skills or having specific digital experiences to provide further insight into digital skill acquisition.



Case study



AI Voting App, Raghu, 17

“My digital activity was to create an interactive, accessible, and engaging visualisation of how Australia’s preferential voting system works.

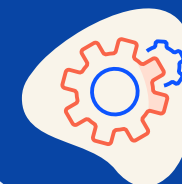
Earlier in the year, I led voting education sessions for 14-year-olds and noticed that explanations of how votes are distributed through preferences were often too complicated, too simplistic, or missing altogether. This frustrated me at the time, as I wished there were an easier method to demonstrate the concept. This is exactly what sparked the idea for my project.

With the support of AI, I built a program using Python, HTML, and JavaScript that simulates the allocation of votes to candidates and moves through successive “rounds,” showing how preferences shape the final outcome. Throughout the process, I used AI tools to strengthen my digital skills in problem-solving and programming. I also experimented with several IDEs (Integrated Development Environment, essentially like a coding workspace) to understand their features and find what worked best for me. In the end,

I chose Visual Studio Code, paired with Tabnine and Qodo, as they were intuitive, well-integrated, and genuinely helped to bring my project to life.

Learning how to use AI as a copilot in programming was a newly developed digital skill in itself and is certainly transferable to other projects I may undertake in the future. While I have a foundation in programming, I was excited at the opportunity to develop my skills in a non-stressful environment where I could focus on something I was genuinely passionate about. As I was able to work at my own pace, I was more inclined to spend time on this project and thoroughly enjoyed it. Overall, I believe that my interactive simulator of preferential votes easily and engagingly demonstrates the core of the Australian democratic system.





Activities & skills identified

Spending at least 4–5 hours over two weeks, YAC co-researchers engaged in activities like AI art, music creation, Minecraft community building, VR game development, website and bot development, and more. They recorded the skills they applied in activities. These activities facilitated not only learning technical skills (coding, AI prompting, web design) but also information navigation, social, creative, and mobile skills.

This lines up with the 2025 AYDI which shows that skill acquisition is highly informal: 53% learn from the internet itself (e.g. YouTube tutorials), 50% from teachers or school programs, and 48% from parents/guardians. Only about 4% took external training or bootcamps.

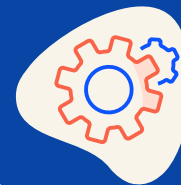
Skills identified

YAC co-researchers found that they acquired a broad range of skills through their activities. For example, constructing an underwater base in Minecraft – an activity that some may regard as primarily recreational – was found to involve significant skill development. And that regardless of the activity the skills they developed had many commonalities.

Activities included:

- AI prompting with different platforms to recreate famous works of art
- Music creation using GarageBand and DJ apps
- Playing Minecraft and building an online community
- Undertaking VR game development
- Exploring fashion design with AI
- Developing websites and online businesses
- Discord bot development and verification
- Exploring the possible intersection between AI and art as collaborative instead of competitive.
- Using AI to create a web app
- Using digital art in VR headsets to create a formula one car
- Building relationships through gaming
- Setting up an AI Transformation Agency





Interestingly many basic digital skills, which are necessary for more complex tasks, were not specifically noted by YAC co-researchers. It was generally assumed that all participants could use web browsers, organise digital files, manage and store data in the cloud, and properly use a VR headset etc.

The skills identified likely represent only a portion of the abilities developed by young people through regular digital interaction. This highlights the critical importance of access; like how access to books and reading support enhances literacy, access to digital technology and guidance contributes to the development of digital skills. People with greater access tend to develop a broader and deeper set of digital skills.



Case study



The YAC Minecraft Server:
Micah, Adi, Lilly, Patrick

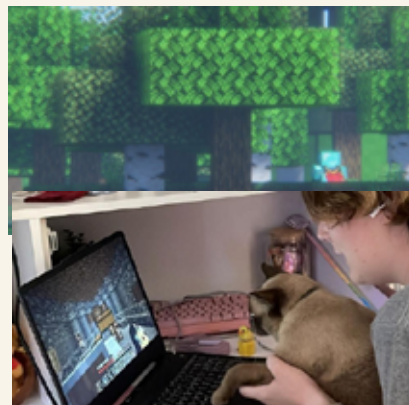
Some members of the YAC set up a standalone Minecraft Server to play and explore in an open-ended fashion. The core members were involved in building and shaping a small online community where they strengthened their relationships. They collaborated on construction and creative projects within the game, coordinated activities and group adventures, and supported one another in resource gathering and achieving in-game objectives.

What became obvious was how online gaming fosters strong pro-social behaviours. Very quickly the group were praising and positively commenting on each other's builds, sharing tools and resources, working out how they could work together and even creating spaces where any excess could be shared across the group.



The breadth and depth of technical skills was represented in the planning and building of structures, managing the backend of the server itself and creating machines using redstone (Minecraft's 'coding' material).

At the end of the two weeks, one member even demonstrated a commitment to the group by securing a special resource called Netherite and reproducing it to share with everyone on the server as a thank you. And even though the activity has ended, the group are planning on setting a time to all be together on the server to go and defeat the Ender Dragon.



Skill categories (per International Internet Skills Scale)

We used the International Internet Skills Scale (ISS), an empirically validated instrument that assesses internet skills from basic to advanced, to categorise the digital skills.

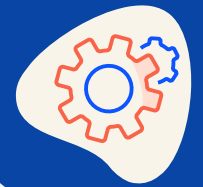
Case study



Project:Ranked: Micah, 14

Find out how Project:Ranked came to life in Micah's blog about building his competitive ranking system from scratch – complete with PHP, PostgreSQL, and a vibrant community.

Learn more [→](#)



Some skills span multiple categories, so they've been placed where they most strongly align:

1. Operational skills

Using devices, software, and basic digital tools

- Coding (Python, JavaScript, HTML)
- Bug testing/debugging/iteration
- Website development & management
- Web design/UI design/SEO
- AI prompting/prompt engineering
- AI system knowledge (automation, AI agents, solutions mapping)
- 3D art and VR design
- Music production (GarageBand, DJing)
- Digital art tools (Illustrator, drawing apps)
- Data handling

2. Information navigation skills

Finding, evaluating, and managing online information

- Research skills
- Information and media literacy
- Critical thinking
- Reasoning
- Analytical skills
- Decision-making
- Learning how to learn
- Curiosity and exploration

3. Social skills

Communicating and interacting online

- Communication skills (digital + verbal)
- Teamwork and cooperation
- Digital communication

- Outreach and marketing communication
- User feedback and engagement
- Client communication
- Empathy (understanding user perspectives)

Case study



Digital Music Creation: Dakota, 18

"In 2022 to 2023 I began a music project called Supernova. It is an experimental project which attempts to seamlessly blend digital music with more traditional forms. Using GarageBand as my Digital Audio Workspace (DAW), I began to compose some tracks. I believe the songs produced demonstrate that anyone can create music, regardless of circumstance, which ultimately aids in connection and maintaining creativity. Most of the tracks began with a loop of my guitar being recorded by my phone angled towards my amp and adding digital synthesizers found on GarageBand. I recorded some ambient sound from my Korg Monotron Space Delay synth and took some field recordings of birds with my phone. After shifting layers, cutting sections, looping recordings, I had a completed track titled DREAM/TRANQUILITY. I used a similar process to record my second track, ASCENSION, although that included drums which were entirely digital. The last track I produced, which is the first in the trilogy,

SPACECRAFT, was created using only GarageBand and a sample, using digital synthesizers and drums.

In 2025, I continued to add more layers to the existing songs and created some mock album covers. The album covers started from pictures I took which were digitally edited to look more like an album cover. The music production itself, as well as the creation of the album covers, were only possible due to access to a digital means of creating music and editing photos."

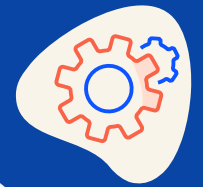
Listen to Dakota's music here – tip from Dakota you should listen to them in this sequence!

 **Spacecraft**

 **Dream**

 **Ascension**





4. Creative skills

Creating and sharing digital content

- Creativity/design thinking
- Colour theory
- Digital art and illustration
- 3D design and VR modelling
- Music and rhythm (drumming, DJing)
- Logo and brand design
- Business planning/entrepreneurship
- Marketing strategy and outreach
- Workflow design and systemisation
- AI solutions implementation
- Planning and organisation

5. Mobile skills

Using mobile devices and apps effectively

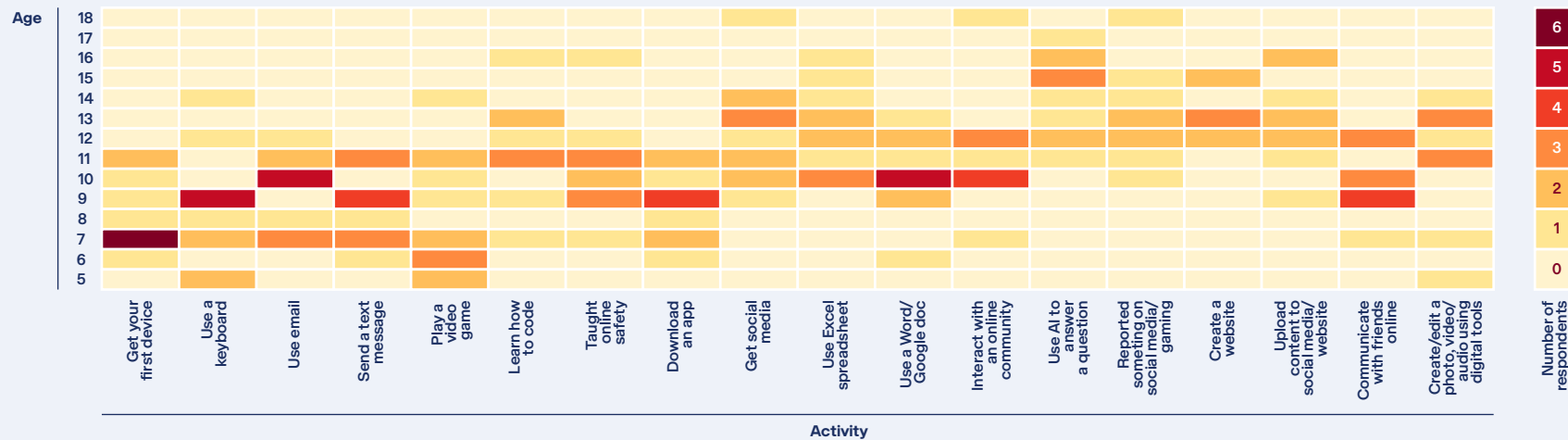
- Many of the above skills (e.g. digital communication, content creation, app-based design tools) can be adapted to mobile contexts, especially:
 - AI prompting/prompt engineering (via mobile apps)
 - Digital art tools
 - Music production
 - Social media outreach
 - Mobile-first web design

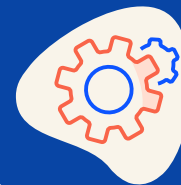
Digital skills development timeline

YAC co-researchers used a digital timeline survey to record the ages at which they first had digital experiences. Out of the 12 respondents of the survey, the following patterns emerged:

- **Ages 7–10** show the highest concentration of first experiences: across activities like texting, gaming, and keyboard use.
- More **advanced skills** like creating websites, coding, and using AI show higher starting ages, typically **11–13**.

Figure 11: Heatmap of age distribution by digital activity





- Many YAC members first helped an adult with technology at around 11–13 years old. Common situations:
 - Helping parents or teachers fix a **TV setting, Wi-Fi, or computer issue**
 - Supporting relatives with **basic navigation** (email, browser, etc.).
- Some activities (e.g. coding, reporting content) have sparser distributions, indicating less universal early exposure.
- Common first online safety lessons remembered:
 - ‘Don’t share personal information’
 - Stranger danger online
 - Password protection and privacy

Young people’s early digital experiences – often involving entertainment, learning, connection, and exploration – reflect the realities of growing up in a digital world. While foundational online safety was taught, skills like critical thinking and problem solving were mostly self-learned through independent exploration.

Digital skill acquisition is not something that can be ignored – the later young people learn digital skills, the more they fall behind.

Case study



Digital skills development: Adi, 16

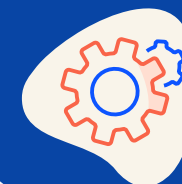
“I first started building my digital skills when I got my first iPad at around five years old. I remember setting up games, apps, and even customising the layout of my home screen without really knowing what I was doing. I kind of just explored and tweaked around until things worked. Over time, YouTube and the internet in general became my biggest ‘go-to’s’ for learning digital skills. I’m most proud of learning how to build a custom advanced eCommerce AI chatbot on Voiceflow (a low-to-no-code chatbot builder). I created the chatbot by searching online for all the different parts that would make up the chatbot that I wanted, but I just couldn’t find every single piece of code and tutorial that I wanted. I ended up using ChatGPT and even asking my mum for help with coding some parts, like using APIs for Shopify and recommending products through AI with custom database algorithm.”

Sharing Digital Skills

I try to help other people with technology all the time, especially when it’s related to my interests or skills. My friends usually come to me when they need help with anything tech or AI related, and I usually turn to AI for my own digital problems. I feel really fulfilled and happy when I can help others figure something out, for example setting up a tool, explaining how to use AI effectively, or just showing them a new way to do something faster or better.

Impact of Digital Skills

My digital skills have made a huge impact on my life. They’ve helped me study more effectively at school, earn money through my business and help around in our Telstra Foundation Youth Advisory Council, and even solve random problems like figuring out who made the ‘ships’ account for our school. My life basically revolves around technology and AI now, and I really can’t imagine what it would be like without it.”



Observations & recommendations

What we see in both the outcomes of the YAC Digital Skills research project and the 2025 AYDI are consistent.

Observations:

- Digital skills include higher-order cognitive skills (critical/creative thinking, reasoning) used across digital experiences. About 10% find fact-checking information 'hard', and only 58% find it easy to verify information online, indicating a need for stronger media literacy.

- Young people learn broad digital skills organically through work, creativity, and recreation, often outside formal education. Four out of five young people are confident with everyday digital tasks, and over a third have any coding experience.

Case study



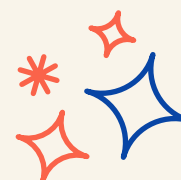
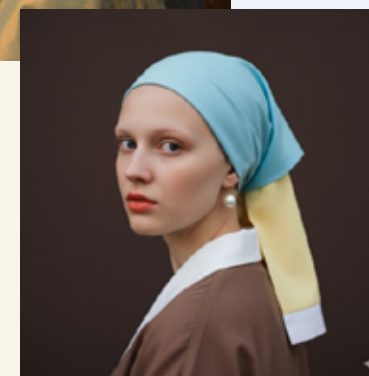
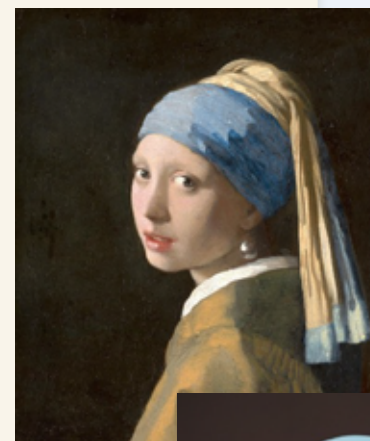
AI Art: Rispah, 17

"I've always admired the details that go into artworks, so when the YAC Digital Skills Project gave us the chance to experiment with AI, I thought, 'Why not try to recreate some of the world's most famous paintings using just words?'. Initially, I thought using two different AI platforms would help, but after some trial and error, I decided to stick with Google Gemini. As I kept experimenting, I realised this wasn't just about typing prompts – it was about thinking critically, anticipating mistakes, and learning how to communicate clearly with a machine.

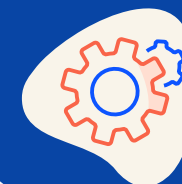
One of my biggest challenges was getting Gemini to understand ambiguity. For example, when I tried to generate Euan Macleod's Barrow Man, I told it to make the figure completely featureless, but instead, it gave me a man in a suit with vague facial details. That taught me patience because even when I wrote long, detailed paragraphs, AI didn't always follow instructions perfectly. Sometimes my elaborations confused the platform, so I had to rephrase and explain things differently.

I also learned that clear communication matters. This was apparent when working on the Portrait of Madeleine, and I noticed Gemini generated her with one gold hoop earring. To get that right, I had to specify the size and whether the other side of her face should show another earring. These small details shaped the accuracy of the output and showed me how much precision matters in AI prompting.

Looking back, this experience wasn't just about generating images; it was about developing skills. I've improved my critical thinking by breaking down what makes a painting iconic, practiced patience when AI didn't get it right, and strengthened my ability to communicate clearly through written instructions. The images weren't perfect replicas, but they were fascinating interpretations, shaped by my words and the AI's algorithms. It made me consider big questions too – like originality and ownership in the age of AI. But mostly, it made me excited. Creativity with AI can be unpredictable, but I can't wait to keep learning and growing with it.



Generate a photo of a girl looking over her left shoulder to the viewer standing in front of a dark brown background. Make her skin complexion fair, her lips a coral orange colour, and her eyes a deep blue. Make her eyebrows very light blonde and almost transparent. Put her in a robe that's a lighter shade of brown to her background with a white collar. Give her medium sized pearl earrings. Give her a headwrap that is shaped around her head like a ponytail. Make the base of the headwrap light blue and slightly covering her forehead and make the part that hangs down like hair light yellow and the bottom of it has a white banner. Finally make the photo by from her chest upward, medium shot, with a blank expression on her face.



- Skill acquisition is ongoing and peer-supported, with trial and error, online resources, and peer guidance playing major roles. 44% learned from friends, and 22% from siblings.
- Support is needed for continued skill development and to close the digital divide. Socioeconomic factors and location affect access to advanced tools and training, but basic and intermediate digital literacy is high regardless of location.

Recommendations:

- Recognise the full spectrum of digital skills youth develop, including adaptability and self-learning.
- Invest in access, tools, and environments for self-directed and peer-led learning.
- Partner with youth as co-designers of digital futures.
- Ensure equitable access and recognition of digital skill-building opportunities and micro-credentials, especially in coding, AI, and media literacy.



Listen, Learn, and Lead with Young People

The digital world moves faster than even the most tech-savvy adults can keep up with – but young people aren't just passive consumers; they're leading the charge. It's time we redefine what digital skills mean, not by adult assumptions, but by listening to the lived experiences of young people themselves. They are creators, coders, collaborators, entrepreneurs and critical thinkers – they are learning outside formal systems, through curiosity, community, and creativity.

So, as educators, policymakers, industry leaders, and families how should we respond to this?

We can start by:

- Recognising the full spectrum of digital skills young people are developing. They're going beyond the basics, into creativity, problem-solving, and innovation.
- Acknowledge digital play as fundamental to building transferable skills like; creativity, critical thinking, collaboration and teamwork, and decision making.
- Investing in access, tools, and environments that support self-directed and peer-led digital learning.
- Partnering with young people as co-designers of their digital futures, not just recipients of adult-led programs.
- Closing the digital divide by ensuring all young people, regardless of background, can explore and build the digital skills they need to thrive.

A final word



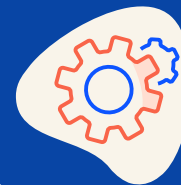
From a young age I grew up around technology like artificial intelligence, VR headsets and holograms. I'm so extremely lucky to have had the opportunity to learn early on how important young people are in today's society.



I have seen in real time how fast technology is growing and how the younger generation are at the centre of the future and are so important to listen and learn from them.

What I have taken away from the digital skills activity is that young people are so talented and we need to listen to them in order to adapt to the future of technology.

Jasmine, 16



Case study



Codemates & Patch: building digital skills from curiosity to confidence

Codemates is reimagining how young Australians discover coding. At the centre is Patch – a lively animatronic puppet that children can program remotely using a simple, web-based interface. By making Patch dance, joke, and interact in real time, kids as young as eight experience the thrill of seeing their code come to life, turning digital learning into hands-on play.

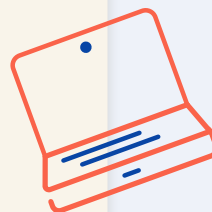


This playful approach is core to Telstra Foundation's strategy: building foundational digital skills early, for all. Codemates and Patch lower barriers to entry by making coding accessible, social, and fun, especially for children who might not see themselves as 'techy'. The program fosters experimentation, creativity, and peer learning, helping young people move from digital consumers to confident creators."

As Patch says:

"Coding is more fun when we do things together! Let's get creative and see what you can make me do!"

By meeting kids where they are – curious, playful, and eager to explore – Codemates and Patch are helping to close the digital divide and inspire the next generation of digital makers across Australia



Bottom line: Young Australians are increasingly self-reliant and proactive in developing digital skills, with growing confidence and recognition of the importance of these skills for future careers. While formal education and parental guidance play important roles, self-learning and internet resources are the primary avenues. The rise of AI is both embraced and approached with caution, highlighting the need for balanced education on its use and implications.



Safety



I feel the good old days where you go to Facebook and it [would] just be, I don't know, your Aunty showing pictures of her new puppy and that's it. And you weren't bombarded by ads, and even algorithms itself is kind of toxic.

Young person interview 17, Female, age 24, Regional NSW, CALD



Safety



Key findings

The Safety index score was 80, two points higher than 2024.

The Safety index score was 80, two points higher than 2024

Most young people have an understanding of what online safety means (95%) and feel safe online (93%).

However, safety risks are a part of online life for young people – 72% reported being exposed to at least one kind of potentially unsafe situation, with exposure to unsafe content increasing with age.

The data presents a mixed picture around young people’s ability to manage safety risks, improving on some measures since last year and declining in other areas.

As with digital skills, independent learning was the biggest source of information about online safety. However there was more of a spread of learning sources: 57% learned by themselves, 55% learned from parents and 51% from teachers. This suggests young people may not be as confident in their ability to learn about safety compared with more general digital skills.

Nearly all young people (95%) are using some form of social media, with YouTube and Instagram the most popular platforms.

93%
feel safe online

91%
are using social media

72%
have been exposed to unsafe content

The Safety score is based on young people’s own rating of how safe they feel online whether they are aware of various risks online, and how they learnt online safety. The safety index score increased by 2 points to 80, with young people showing greater knowledge and confidence in how to stay safe online.





Young people generally feel safe online and appear to be quite resilient even when they encounter unsafe content. Nearly three quarters (72%) said they had been exposed to some form of unsafe content

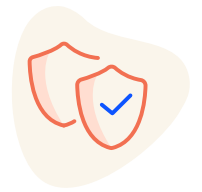
Online safety awareness

Primary-aged children had a more superficial understanding of how to keep themselves safe online than older peers, but nevertheless showed strong understanding of the basics: 86% knew about the risks of sharing personal information, and 93% knew passwords should be kept safe.

Across all young people surveyed, there was growing awareness of some safety measures aimed at keeping users safe online.

Figure 12: Awareness of online safety measures

	2024	2025
 Personal information about me and things I do or share online can be accessed and used by others	81%	90%
 Popular social media platforms have minimum age limits	85%	89%
 I cannot take and use other people’s content (images and documents) without their consent	83%	86%
 I should use security software to block viruses from damaging my computer	89%	83%



Confidence in staying safe

Most young people felt confident in their ability to stay safe online and recognised the importance of having good online safety skills to avoid scams and other online dangers. Most (82%) also said they would know where to find support if they needed it and said they would trust a friend (99%) or parent (98%) when dealing with unsafe online content.

However, when it came to certain elements of online safety, young people’s confidence in staying safe online has declined. Fewer young people felt it was easy to ‘recognise suspicious links, attachments and pop ups’ (58%, down from 62%) and ‘identify secure websites’ (55% down from 67%), possibly reflecting young people’s awareness of the increased sophistication of cyber threats.



My wife went to use [our son’s] iPad and found that he had been engaging with one of those [deep fake] programs. We had to sit him down and have a talk to him about it...just warning him about if he’s going to access those things that that’s not what real life is like and he’d be better off avoiding it.

Focus group 5, Parents of children age 8–13, Australia-wide

Fake news and misinformation

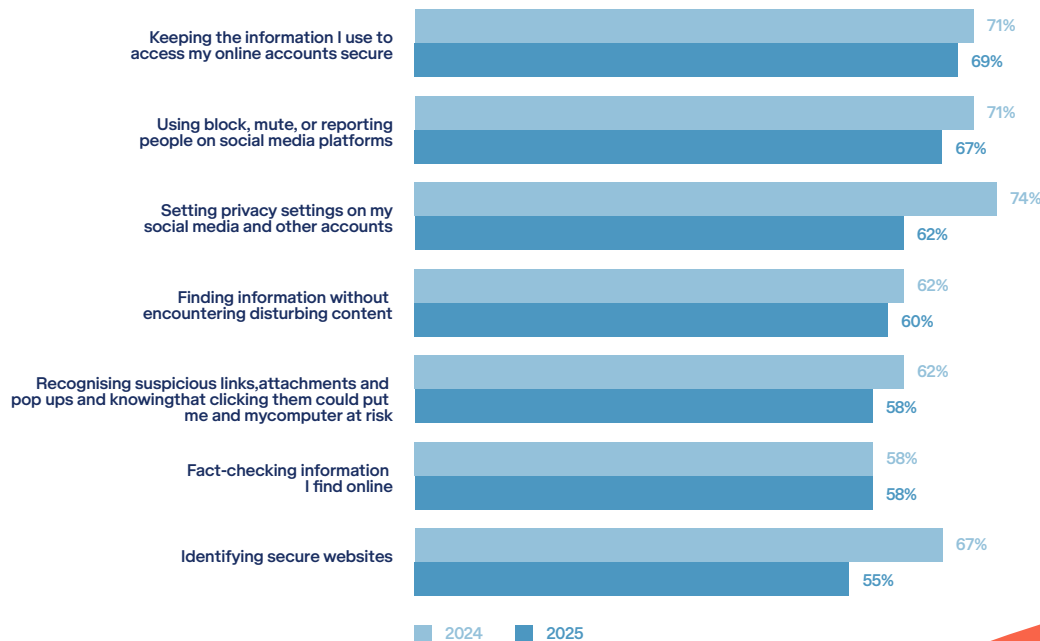
Fake news and misinformation is one of the biggest and growing safety concerns of young people (a concern for 45% of respondents, up from 42% last year). This is especially true for those in high school or older.

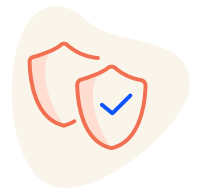
The role and impact of online news and information remains a key concern identified by young participants in the 2024 and 2025 Index surveys. Following that insight, we worked with Young & Resilient Research Centre to conduct

workshops with children and young people designed to explore their perspectives about accessing trustworthy information and news online. These workshops aimed to:

- Identify key perceptions about accessing trustworthy information and news online, with a focus on challenges, opportunities and aspirations.
- Surface insights about the ways they access trustworthy information and news online and how online information and news impacts them.

Figure 13: Confidence in ability to stay safe online





In summary, children and young people told us they hoped for a future in which information and news online is accessible, safe and trustworthy for all. In the present, they have an advanced toolkit of strategies that they employ to keep themselves safe online. But, they call for practical familial and institutional support to achieve their vision of a future where trustworthy information is ubiquitous online. At the same time, they want better protection now from exposure to untrustworthy information and news online,

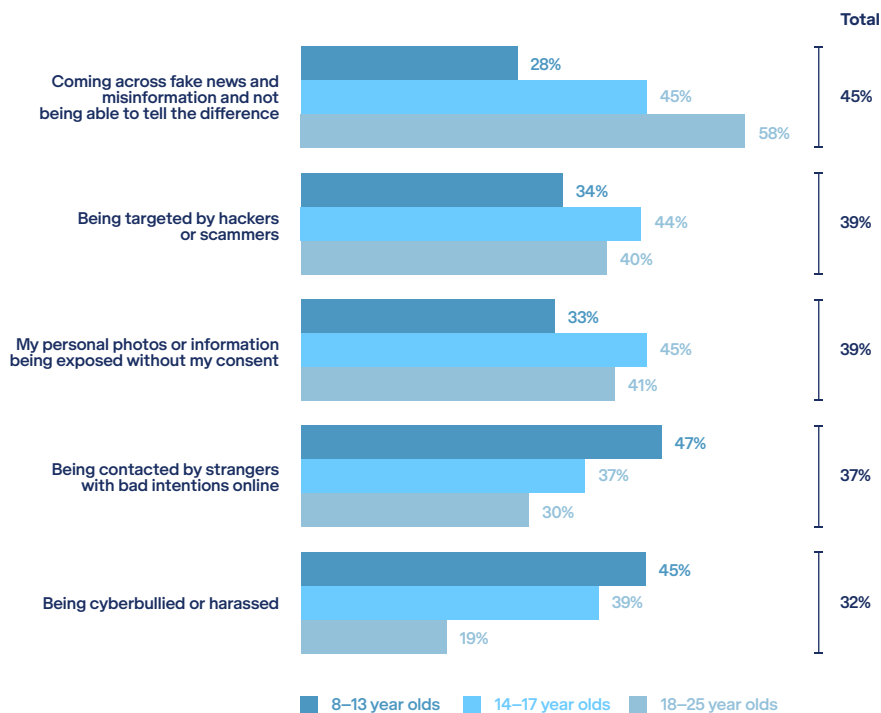
and to learn more about how to protect themselves. They want key actors and decision-makers to monitor, prompt, and regulate online environments in ways that make them safer and more trustworthy, to support them in their endeavours to thrive online. And finally, they want their voices to be heard so they can help shape an internet with safe online spaces for all. The full report can be accessed [here](#).

Other safety concerns

Primary-aged children are most concerned about being contacted by strangers with bad intentions online, or being cyberbullied.

Being targeted by hackers/scammers remains a concern for young people of all ages but has eased slightly (39%, down from 44%).

Figure 14: Major top 5 concerns about online safety (by age groups)



We're hearing that it's happening more and more [in schools]...The eSafety Commissioner's website... is a really powerful tool and it's got really explicit steps that they can follow. There's another website called 'Take it Down', which we educate young people about as well. However, it may be taken down from the platform, but that doesn't mean it hasn't been shared or screenshot-ed as well..

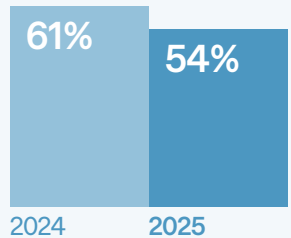
Professional interview 26, Metro VIC



Spotlight
Social Media

In the last 12 months there have been major policy shifts that will reshape how young Australians interact with social media, as debates continue about the balance between protection, privacy and young people’s need to connect.

Social media – positive impact overall (%)



In 2025 fewer young people feel that using social media is a positive experience overall

8–13 year olds

44%

14–17 year olds

64%

19–25 year olds

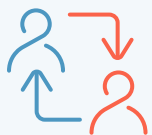
57%

Social media helps them



keep in touch with friends

60%



connect with others like them

59%

Young people in Australia are among the heaviest social media users in the world, and this is reinforced by our data. Only one in twenty young people (5%) reported having no access to social media in this year’s *Australian Youth Digital Index*.

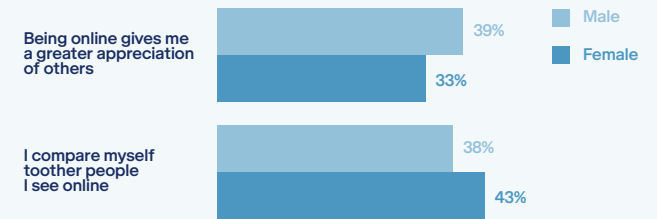
Social media is deeply embedded in young people’s daily lives and leisure time. Around 60% said these apps helped them stay in touch with friends or connect with others like them. More young people say social media has a positive impact on their lives than a negative one.

Young people also told us about the positive impacts of internet and devices on a range of relationships, including with family and schoolwork. While these questions were not specific to social media, it’s likely social media use was an important factor in responses.

Yet in 2025, the number of young people who felt social media was a positive experience overall fell (to 54% from 61% in 2024). And fewer young people said they knew when they needed to disconnect from being online (50%, down from 55% in 2024).

Many young people are making comparisons between themselves and what they see online, sometimes unhealthy ones, and this is especially a risk for girls. Around 43% of females said they compared themselves to other people they see online, while 38% of males said this.

Figure 15: How young people relate to others online



Young people are already just exposed to it, most of us would have already had it for years. There’s not much point to getting rid of it now. It might benefit younger people who are like six or something.

Focus group 1, Young females, age 14–17, Australia-wide



The horse has bolted [for] the older ones... For the younger ones, I hope that really can kick in and make a difference.

Focus group 8, Parents of children age 14–17, Australia-wide

Spotlight

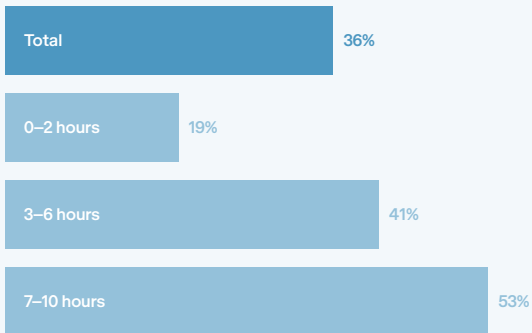


Social Media Continued

At the same time, young people are spending more time online each day, with high use linked to sleep disruption. Young people who spend more than 3 hours online each day are twice as likely to complain of an impact on sleep as those who spend less than 2 hours.

Even the youngest group are heavily using apps such as YouTube, Messenger Kids and TikTok. The nature of these apps suggests usage at this age is mostly about watching videos, following creators and chatting with friends.

Figure 16: Negative impact on sleep by time spent online (weekend day)



By the time they become young adults (18–25), there is near-universal adoption of social media. YouTube remains central for video content, but Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp and Snapchat also become key to day-to-day communication. This age group is more likely to use social media for work, study networking, professional branding (e.g. LinkedIn) and shopping alongside social uses.

Of most interest, this year, is the data for early and mid-teens, for whom usage intensifies from the primary years. Adolescents use these platforms not only to socialise but also for news, identity exploration, activism and school or hobby communities. The top platforms used by 13–16 year olds were YouTube (82%), TikTok (55%), Instagram (53%) and Snapchat (53%), with Facebook and WhatsApp not far behind. Only 4% of young people aged 13 to 16 said they did not currently use any social media.

A delay on the use of social media for under-16s, now expanded to include TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat, X and YouTube has now taken effect.



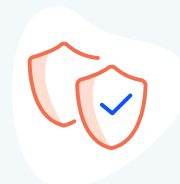
Having access to queer spaces online... especially as a kid... There was an interview with Albanese where he got asked, 'What are queer kids who get bullied at school gonna do when they don't have that safe outlet to explore their identity?' and his response was 'Kids just need to go outside and talk to each other more', which in my opinion, is not how it works at all, which is very unfortunate to see. So I'm very, very against the ban.

Young person interview 11, Male, age 15, Metro SA, disability



It's [social media ban] not going to benefit kids that are socially excluded in the real world.

Professional interview 26, Metro VIC



Spotlight



Social Media Continued

Young people expressed concerns about being socially excluded if their friendship group included a mix of over- and under-16s, while there was general concern about the impact of the controls on vulnerable groups. They also highlighted the creative and career relevance of access to social media, which allows them to market themselves and their fledgling businesses.

Parents tended to be more positive about age limits, while professionals called out the importance of the platforms themselves implementing safeguards to ensure young people could stay safe online.

Opportunity knocks: work meaningfully with young people



Right now, adults call the shots. We build the products, we set the rules, and young people hardly ever get a say! But with this massive social media transition coming, Australia has a real chance to flip that. We can finally bring young people into the process in a meaningful way.

If we don't, we risk pushing them into sketchier, less regulated corners of the internet. So let's ask them: What support do you actually need? Where do you want to spend time? Do you need new offline plans, or other safe ways to connect online? The only way we navigate this well is by putting young people at the centre.

Lucy Thomas OAM, Co-Founder and CEO PROJECT ROCKIT



I wouldn't be able to talk to any of my friends anymore because we all normally use WhatsApp for all our projects and everything.

Focus group 1, Young females, age 14–17, Australia-wide



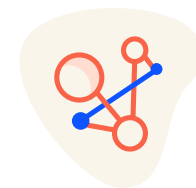
Our stance is always that the reality is kids are online. So let's do what we can. Let's get the platforms on board to make sure that when they're online, they're safe.

Professional interview 26, Metro VIC



Apps like Messenger Kids and YouTube Kids.. [that] have the word 'kids' in the title. They have to meet really strict requirements to have that word in there... they're a lot safer and there is the ability for parents to put controls and measures in place to keep their young people safe online and the chance of them being exposed to inappropriate content or people they shouldn't be interacting with is a lot less.

Professional interview 26, Metro VIC



Case study



It's complicated – understanding online risks

Angus (*not his real name) is 15 and lives with a disability. He lives in Adelaide and, given his age, is very conscious of the new social media bans and how they will affect him and his friends. He can see both sides, but ultimately thinks young people are likely to outwit the adults who are designing the controls.

"In a sense, the social media bans are good, but in a sense, they're bad. They can help people that don't know how to help themselves... who haven't been educated on the goods, the bads, the do's and the do not's about social media," he says. "But for the people who do understand how to conduct themselves online... it feels like it's impacting them negatively for no good reason."

"All I know is, is that... we're a smart generation and every time there's a restriction put on technology... just as quick as it goes on, is as quick as we find a way around it. The idea is great – the idea has always been great. But inevitably we will either outsmart it or we will find a way around it in some way."

Angus is also concerned about how the bans might limit young people's growth in other ways. He says social media is not just used for socialising – for example, entrepreneurial young people use it as a marketing tool.

"I actually know a few people at the moment who are starting to become hairdressers or barbers and things like that. If they didn't have social media, they would lose 80% to 90% of their clientele. That is how they spread the good word of what they do. That's how they advertise. That's how they do all those fun things."

Angus understands the complexities of social media, and is also conscious of safety risks in other areas. AI has become commonplace in the schoolyard and beyond, and is not always used positively, he notes.

"There was a there thing at our school a while ago. [Someone] was doing deep fake images on to people using AI and was sending it around in group chats."

What can seem light-hearted fun can quickly become something much more serious, even criminal.

"And I think that's why, again, AI is a very dangerous tool. It's getting to a point now where it's getting so advanced, we're not going to be able to tell [what's real] anymore soon."



Wellbeing



Sometimes it's boring if you play the same game too much, but it's fun if you play it with friends. It's just you get to play together and it's just fun communicating with them and just doing it together.

Young person interview 17, Female, age 24,
Regional NSW, CALD



There are apps that tell you you've been clean this many days, good on you, you know, quotes in a day, things like that... that's great. It helps people. It gives them something to look forward to. It gives them something to be like, good on me, you know, good on me for that. I'm doing a good job...

Young person interview 11, Male, age 15, Metro SA,
Disability



Wellbeing



Key Findings

The Wellbeing index score was 50, down 2 points.

Most young people feel in control of what they see online (62% agree, 10% disagree), know what it means to be a good person online (79%), and feel they can build respectful relationships online (71%).

Around 69% of young people said they were happy with the amount of time spent online.

However, compared with 2024, fewer agreed that digital devices and the internet had a positive impact on their relationships with friends, family, schoolwork or work.

And the percentage that said being online helped them stay in touch with friends they would otherwise not speak to fell from 67% to 60% this year.

Almost half (46%) of young people report spending five or more hours online on weekend days.

Parental restrictions have increased for the youngest children. This year 88% of 8–10 year olds reported having parental restrictions placed on their online time, up from 82% in 2024.

Overall, 79% of children aged 8 to 13 have such restrictions.

Young people whose time online is restricted by parental controls are significantly more likely to want to spend more time online (62% compared to 12% of those with no parental restrictions).

*As young people spend **more** time on devices as they get older, they express **lower rates of satisfaction** with the time spent online.*

62%
feel in control
of what they see
online

69%
are happy with
the time they
spend online

79%
of children under
13 have parental
restrictions

This pillar of the research relates to the impact that being online has on relationships and mental and physical wellbeing, the amount of time young people spend online and where they go to seek advice on personal topics.

The Wellbeing score reflects the extent to which technology is having a positive influence on various aspects of a young person's life. Given the complex relationship young people have with digital devices, with many recognising both positive and negative aspects, it is perhaps no surprise that for many questions contributing to the index 'no impact' was the highest overall response. The percentage of people who reported a positive impact on relationships with family, work, schoolwork and friends ranged from 42% to 55%. This explains the relatively lower index score for the Wellbeing pillar.

We also measured the net impacts on these relationships, and found being online was generally viewed as a net positive. Consistent with this, when asked the best thing about being online, 39% of young people said connecting with friends or family (the most mentioned best thing).

How being online affects young people

For many teenagers and young adults, the internet is a place of connection and creativity. It's where they learn new things, explore ideas and form opinions. Three in five (59%) agreed that being online "means I can connect with others like me" and 50% said it connected them with people with different life experiences. Around half (47%) said it gave them opportunities for creative self-expression.



When I spend time online it makes me feel good because you get to talk to your friends while you're playing...That [makes me] happy.

Child-parent interview 1, Male, age 10, Regional NSW, CALD



Being online also had a net positive impact on schoolwork and employment. More than a quarter (28% up from 24% in 2024) said access to information and new perspectives was the best thing about being online, a factor that would likely be helpful in both the school and employment contexts.

The impact of being online was less clear-cut for mental and physical health. While the net impact for both was still positive, it was lower than the relationship scores. And when asked about the worst things about being online, 22% mentioned mental health issues or cyberbullying/harassment.

The proportion of young people who said they were happy with life slipped from 73% to 71%, but there was a slight decrease in the proportion who feel isolated from others (from 26% to 24%).

Time Online

Young people are spending significant amounts of time online, especially as they enter young adulthood, with use typically higher on weekend days than weekdays. On weekends, almost half (46%) of young people report spending five or more hours online.

Figure 17: Impacts of being online

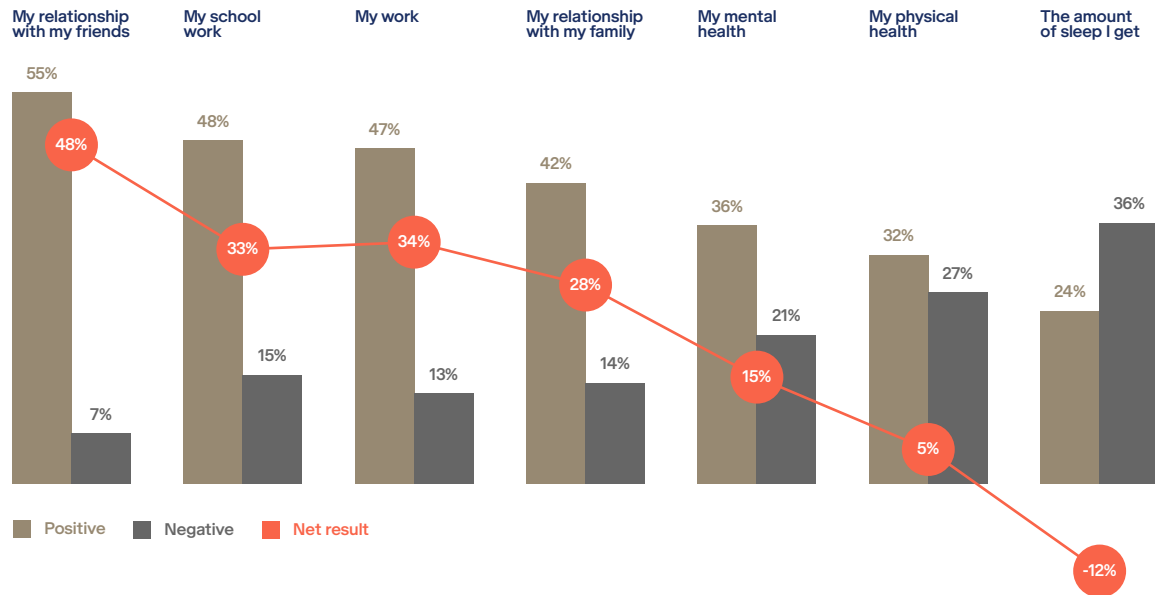
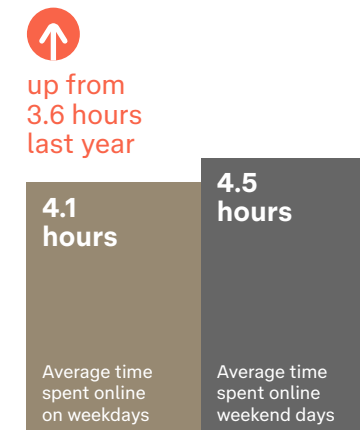


Figure 18: Average time online (weekdays and weekends)



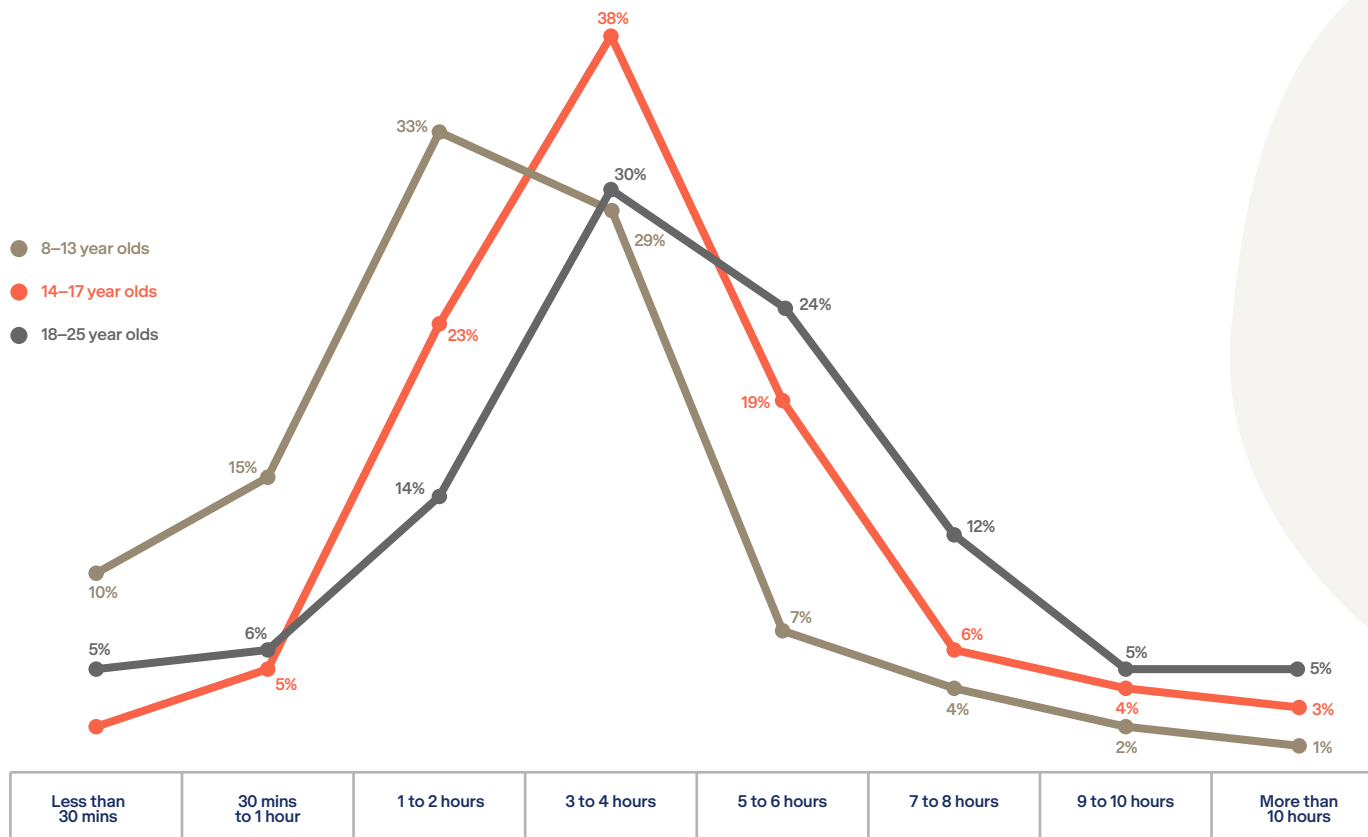


The figure below shows self-reported time spent online during a typical weekday across different age groups. The majority report spending fewer than five hours a day online. In 2025, young people who spend 0–2 hours online on an average weekday decreased (37%, down from 41% in 2024), while those who spend 3–6 hours online increased (47%, up from 42% in 2024).

Satisfaction with time online

In the qualitative discussions, young adults spoke about their approach to balancing online and offline time. They understood the negative impacts that can come from being online, such as the addictiveness of scrolling on TikTok or making comparisons to others online, and said they sought out offline hobbies and activities to achieve a healthy balance. They also used technology as a tool to control their time online, employing apps to place limits on screen time or hiding certain social media apps from view.

Figure 19: Hours spent online on a typical weekday (by age groups)



If I go to Opal and, for example, I want to view a Instagram post or something like that, I have to go to the app and then disable it. It loads for 10 seconds and you're like, oh, I actually have to wait for this and then maybe you don't want to do it anymore. Also, I've just been happier in general when I'm off social media, cause I've realised that subconsciously I'm not comparing myself as much. I'm not reaching for my phone when I'm with friends.

Young person interview 17, Female, age 24, Regional NSW, CALD



Around two-thirds of young people are happy with the amount of time they spend online (69%), similar to 2024 (70%). Those in the oldest cohort were least likely to be happy with their time online. As young people spend more time on devices as they get older, and as the influence of parents limiting device time diminishes, young people express lower rates of satisfaction with the time spent online. This suggests that while parents of younger children may receive strong pushback on restrictions, lifting controls to enable greater screen time will not necessarily result in greater happiness.

Seeking support online versus in person

Many young people use the internet as a source of information and support. We asked young people about which topics they were likely to seek in-person support for, and which they would seek out support for online.

Satisfaction with time spent online – by developmental age



74%

8–13 year olds

83%

14–17 year olds

61%

18–25 year olds

Figure 22 reflects their responses across a range of topics. The biggest shifts since 2024 were:

- **fitness and exercise support** – the proportion seeking online advice and support jumped from 16% to 48% while in-person support dropped from 77% to 44%
- **health support** (dealing with illnesses and health conditions) – young people were still more likely to seek support online but this dropped from 75% to 51% while those seeking in-person support doubled from 16% to 34%
- **relationships** (e.g. friendships, peer pressure) – the percentage seeking online support nearly doubled from 14% to 27%.

Figure 20: Preference for time spent online

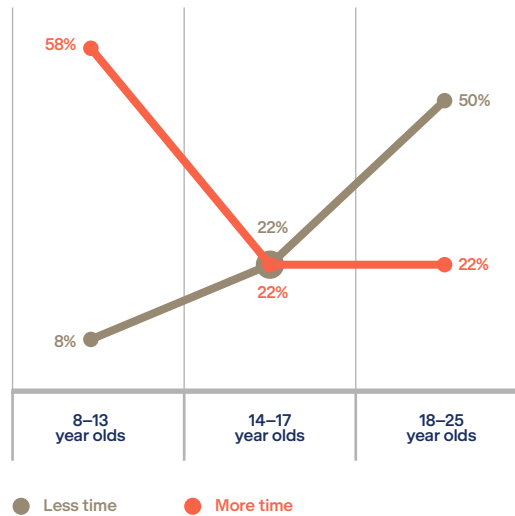


Figure 21: The most significant changes since 2024

		2024	2025
Fitness and exercise support (online)	↑	16%	48%
Fitness and exercise support (in person)	↓	77%	44%
Health support (online)	↓	75%	51%
Health support (in person)	↑	16%	34%
Relationships (online)	↑	14%	27%



Young people were much more likely to seek in-person support regarding their feelings (e.g. anger, sadness), rather than going online. However, when young people were asked whether they were familiar with mental health apps, almost every participant could name at least one. The breadth of recall of these apps demonstrates that these resources are now part of the everyday digital landscape for young people. This year we asked for the first time about use of AI chatbots for mental health information – 7% said these chatbots would be their first source of help for mental health information (compared with just 1% nominating a mental health professional).

Most participants also shared the belief that in principle, these apps could provide useful support to people who needed it, particularly when mental health services are over-burdened or geographically difficult to access;

however they should not be used as a substitute for professional care when mental health concerns are severe. Even then, young people pointed to the benefits of technology through telehealth opportunities.



At the end of the day, [these apps are] mental health help, which is extremely accessible to anyone with a device. I can't say that's a bad thing. I think it's good.

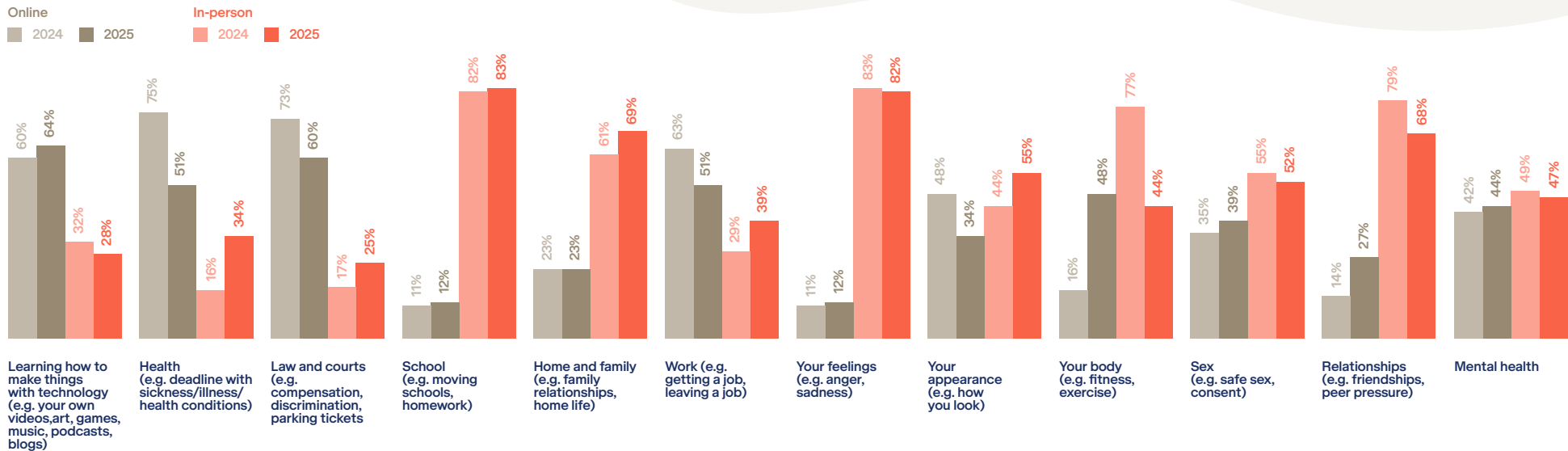
Young person interview 19, Male, age 22, Regional QLD, CALD



I used to have a psychologist I would talk to and call online and since she lives 3 hours away, it would be hard to receive that help without being online. It definitely saved a lot of time and money without having to travel.

Young person interview 14, Female, age 15, Regional NSW

Figure 22: Accessing support





Spotlight 

Screen Dreams – how devices are stealing sleep and what to do about it

Evidence in adolescents and young adults links pre-bed screen use with shorter sleep and poorer sleep quality. The *Australian Youth Digital Index* shows over a third (36%) of young people report a negative impact of technology on sleep, with the negative impact correlated to the number of hours spent online each day.



Figure 23: Online behaviours affecting sleep

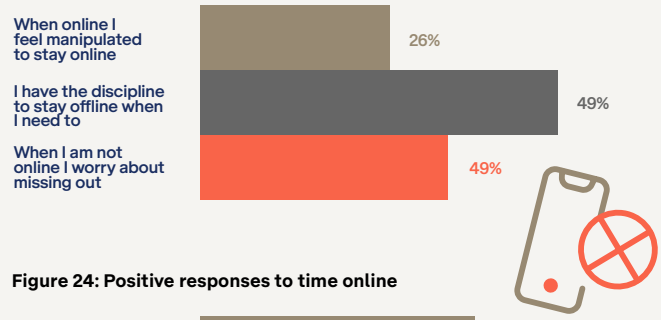


Figure 24: Positive responses to time online



Digital devices influence sleep through several pathways, including circadian disruption from evening light, cognitive arousal, and displacement of sleep time.

Short-wavelength (‘blue’) light suppresses melatonin and increases alertness, making it harder to fall asleep when screens are used late at night. Emotionally engaging content such as social feeds and gaming also prevent the relaxation needed to doze off. Finally, being online can lead to later bedtimes, reducing total sleep.

A quarter of young people told us they feel manipulated to stay online, and less than half (49%) said they had the discipline to stay offline when they needed to. Over a third (34%) said they worried about missing out when not online.

Many young people described a sense of being ‘pulled in’ by apps designed to capture attention. Notifications, streaks and endless scrolling make it difficult to log off, even when they recognise the impact on their sleep.

Together, these are powerful drivers to keep young people online into the night.

Finding the right balance is challenging when schoolwork, social connection, music and relaxation can all occur on the same device.

Experts recommend simple changes such as using night-shift settings, setting app downtime before bed, charging phones outside the bedroom, and replacing late-night scrolling with calming pre-sleep routines such as reading or stretching. Even reducing screen exposure in the hour before bed can noticeably improve sleep onset and quality. Conversely, close-up screen use can nudge the body clock later.

As awareness grows, young people are showing early signs of adjusting their habits. And that’s where we can celebrate some positive data: over half (51%) of young people say they know when they need to disconnect, 62% agree they know the steps to get offline when they need to., and over half say they have a good balance of offline and online time.

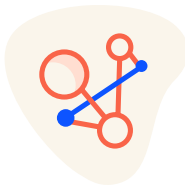
And let’s not forget the 24% of young people who say devices and the internet are having a positive impact on their sleep – after all, technology opens doors to a range of meditation, mental health and relaxation supports.

While the impact on sleep is still a significant concern, the net impact on sleep (netting off positive and negative impacts) has improved from 16% negative to 12% negative in the last 12 months. If this trajectory continues, perhaps sleeping easy is achievable.



I stay up later [playing games], then when I get up for school I'll be really tired and grumpy.

Child-parent interview 7, Female, age 13, Regional NSW, Disability



Case study

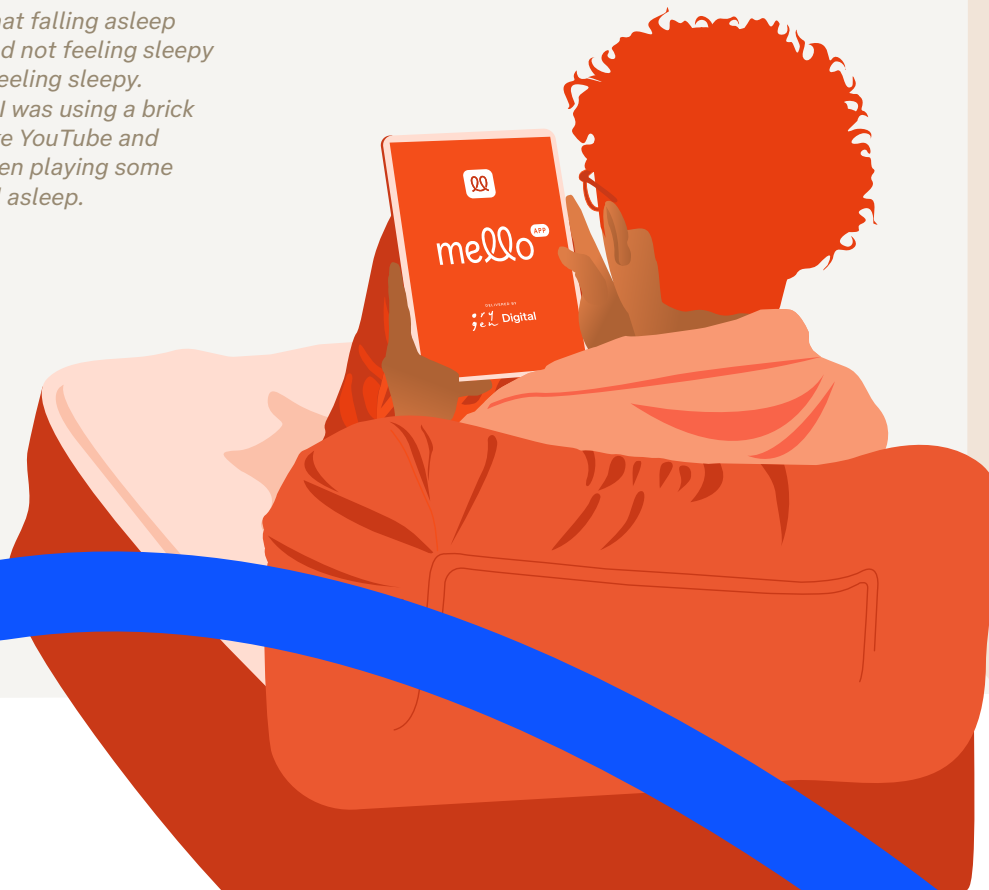
Flipping late night scrolling on its head

Lilly (14) is a Telstra Foundation Youth Advisory Council member and participated in the Foundation's Sleep Challenge. She shares her experience:

"During the sleep challenge, I noticed how much my phone and late-night screen time was affecting my sleep. At first, it was harder to switch from my phone and doom scrolling to reading.

However, after a few days I noticed that falling asleep was easier and instead of scrolling and not feeling sleepy after reading for an hour or two was feeling sleepy. To switch from my phone to my book I was using a brick device and shutting down my apps like YouTube and Instagram to help switch to a book then playing some quiet music on Spotify to help me fall asleep.

One thing that I found the most interesting was despite only running this challenge for a week was how much better I was feeling once I woke up in the morning. Before when I woke up for school, I wasn't feeling great and throughout the day I was still feeling tired but after the challenge I noticed I was feeling fine when I woke up and was no longer as tired during a day. I am going to continue to use these sleep tactics to better my sleep."



Opportunity knocks:
keep investing in youth mental health services



At this time of crisis in the youth mental health system, the biggest opportunity is for ongoing investment in this area – it is critical. One million young people across Australia are not seeking support when it comes to their mental health. In too many cases we know that's because it's too difficult and too costly for them to do so. That's where free, 24/7, trusted digital mental health and wellbeing services can play a key role to connect young people with the support and resources they need. Whether young people are taking their first step toward feeling better via ReachOut.com or accessing clinically-tested digital therapies like Orygen Digital's MELLO and MOST – collectively these important services require sustainable funding as they continue to evolve to the needs of young people.

Gary Groves, CEO ReachOut and Prof. Mario Alvarez Jiminez, Chief Orygen Digital

Acknowledgements



Telstra Foundation Youth Advisory Council

Our Youth Advisory Council elevates youth voices in everything we do at the Foundation. Our council members help us gain a deeper understanding of how young people experience digital technology and its impact on their lives. We thank our Council who played a key role in shaping our Youth Digital Index project and will continue to do so as it evolves. Meet our YAC

Survey participants

We thank all the children and young people who participated in the quantitative and qualitative study, our in-depth interviews and focus groups and for trusting us with their data. It is your voices we are amplifying. We also thank the parents of younger children involved in this project and youth community workers who also participated.

Wallis Social Research, Bastion Reputation, Dassier, Nominet UK and the Young & Resilient Research Centre

We are grateful to our research partner Wallis Social Research, who undertook the quantitative and qualitative research that underpins this report and produced a comprehensive analysis report to guide our final report (Bastion) and online data visualisation tool (Dassier).

We are also grateful to Young & Resilient Research Centre team who conducted additional qualitative research in response to our 2024 insights; enhanced our survey tool and provided additional insight commentary via youth co-researchers. We thank the team at Nominet UK who launched their Digital Youth Index in the United Kingdom in 2021 and shared their survey tool and advice that shaped our Australian Index to amplify the voices of young people.

Our Telstra Foundation partners

Telstra Foundation team thanks our partners featured in this report for their time, guidance and insights and looks forward to working with them as we translate insights into action. As expert thought leaders, our partners' knowledge continuously guides us.



Appendix 1 – Index Composition

The factors comprising the individual pillar scores are listed in the table below.

Table Pillar 1: Access – summary scores

Access	77
% who have access to a laptop or desktop	86
I am able to use the internet to complete all the tasks I want to do (% Agree)	86
% who have access to a smartphone	86
% who do not share a smartphone	75
% able to use a smartphone whenever they need to	77
% able to use a laptop/computer whenever they need to	74
Overall, I am able to do everything I need to with my digital devices (% Agree)	73
I have enough storage space on my devices for my needs (% Agree)	71
% who do not share a laptop or desktop	61

Table Pillar 2: Connectivity – summary scores

Connectivity	66
% with home broadband	89
My internet connection at home/Wi-Fi at home is good quality (% Agree)	74
% with mobile data	73
There are some things I can't do online because of limits to my broadband allowance (% Disagree)	60
There are some things I can't do online because of limits to my mobile data allowance (% Disagree)	57
My mobile data connection is good quality (i.e. it is fast and reliable) (% Agree)	60
There are some things I can't do online because of slow or no internet (% Disagree)	47

Appendix 1 – Index Composition Continued

Table Pillar 3: Skills – summary scores

Skills	70
% who do not need help when you need to do something for school, university or work using a computer	87
% who find it easy to use the internet to help me with solving problems	80
% who find it easy to use the internet to help me with school work	77
% who find it easy to communicate with people at work by email or chat if I need help	78
% who find it easy to read or view documents that people inside or outside my organisation send me	76
% who find it easy to send files to people inside or outside my organisation by email or chat	74
% who find it easy to read or view documents or videos that my teachers send me	72
% who receive good training from school to help me use technology in my everyday life (% Agree)	76
% who find it easy to send schoolwork to my teachers by email or chat	68
% who find it easy to communicate with my teachers by email or chat if I need help	67
% who find it easy to use the internet to find out about future jobs and career	70
% whose teachers/school taught them digital skills	50
% whose parents/family members taught them digital skills	48

Appendix 1 – Index Composition Continued

Table Pillar 4: Safety – summary scores

Safety	80
% feel safe online	93
% aware that my passwords and personal information need to be kept safely as they have value to others	94
% understand what 'online safety' means	95
% aware that I must not share other people's data online without their consent	90
% aware that viruses can damage my computer and that security software should be used to block them	83
% aware that the risks and threats involved in carrying out activities online and the importance of working securely	91
% aware that it is important to keep my computer systems and security software up to date and I allow them to be updated when prompted	84
% who can keeping the information I use to access my online accounts secure (e.g. using different and secure passwords for websites and accounts)	86
% aware that I cannot take and use content (images and documents from the web) that belongs to others without their permission	86
% aware that others can capture and use my data and that I can protect and secure my personal data against such threats through privacy settings	84
% aware that my online activity can produce a permanent record which could be accessed by others and used both now and in the future	90
% who can identify secure websites by looking for the padlock and 'https' in the address bar	76
% who can set privacy settings on my social media and other accounts	77
% who can recognise suspicious links in emails, websites, social media messages and pop ups and know that clicking on these links or downloading unfamiliar attachments could put me and my computer at risk	78
% whose parents/family members taught them about internet safety	55
% whose teachers/school taught them about internet safety	51
% who have never experienced anything upsetting online	44

Appendix 1 – Index Composition Continued

Table Pillar 5: Wellbeing – summary scores

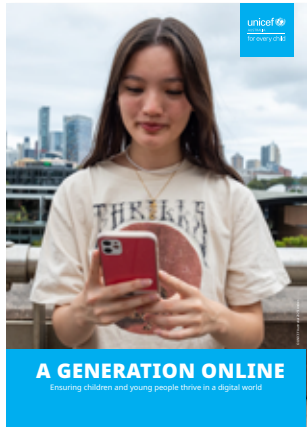
Wellbeing	50
% who are generally happy with life	71
% who say being online helps me keep in touch with friends that I would otherwise not speak to	60
% happy with the amount of time that you spend on your digital devices	67
% who feel in control of what I see and do online	63
% who say overall, using social media is a positive experience for them	54
% whose use of the internet and digital devices has a positive impact on my relationship with my friends	55
% whose use of the internet and digital devices has a positive impact on my relationship with my school work	48
% who do not feel isolated from others	50
% whose use of the internet and digital devices has a positive impact on my relationship with my work	47
% whose use of the internet and digital devices has a positive impact on my relationship with my family	42
% who do not worry about missing out when they are not online	38
% whose use of the internet and digital devices has a positive impact on my relationship with my mental health	36
% who do not say social media has a negative impact on people like me	35
% whose use of the internet and digital devices has a positive impact on my relationship with my physical health	31

Appendix 2 – Index Methodology

Wallis Social Research conducted this study in two stages: first, a quantitative survey, then a qualitative phase. The qualitative phase involved a series of focus groups and in-depth interviews with young people and those working with young people. In 2025 the fieldwork took place from 3 August to 29 September 2025. Full details on the Index methodology are available [here](#).

Further reading

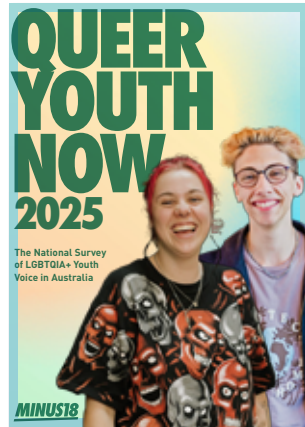
Read research, reports and blogs funded by the Telstra Foundation:



UNICEF Australia: A generation online

UNICEF Australia's *A Generation Online* examines the digital lives of over 2,000 young Australians, uncovering concerns around misinformation, privacy, and online safety.

[Read More](#) →



MINUS18: Queer youth now 2025

Minus18's *Queer Youth Now 2025* delivers the largest national survey of LGBTQIA+ youth, highlighting experiences of discrimination, the importance of allyship, and gaps in school support.

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The Young and Resilient Research Centre: The Digital Experiences of Australian Youth

The Young and Resilient Research Centre's *Digital Experiences of Australian Youth* explores how young people access trustworthy information online, informing strategies for safer, more inclusive digital spaces.

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Telstra Foundation: Youth Advisory Council Sleep Challenge

The Telstra Foundation's Youth Advisory Council Sleep Challenge investigates the impact of technology on sleep, trialling practical solutions to promote healthier habits and wellbeing.

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Telstra Foundation Index 2025 blogs

Read further insights about digital access and connectivity, skills, safety and wellbeing

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The last word



If there's one last thing I've learned, it's that amplifying youth voices isn't just important, it's essential. Growing up around my mum's rapidly growing tech company, I watched her work side-by-side with young people every day, teaching them, learning from them, and proving that innovation thrives when youth are invited to the table.

Seeing that gave me the chance to learn, to teach myself, and to realise that young people don't just adapt to change, we drive it. We ask the questions others overlook, we bring the perspective that pushes boundaries, and when you give young people a platform, you're not just investing in the future, you're letting the future speak.

That is exactly the kind of thing I have learned from working with Telstra Foundation's Youth Advisory Council.

Youth Advisory Council Member, Jasmine, 16, ACT



