



# Parents' Perspectives:

## Summer Media Use and the Return to School



**Boston Children's Hospital**  
Digital Wellness Lab

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# Parents' Perspectives: Summer Media Use and the Return to School

The methodology and results summary can be found on Page 8 of this report.

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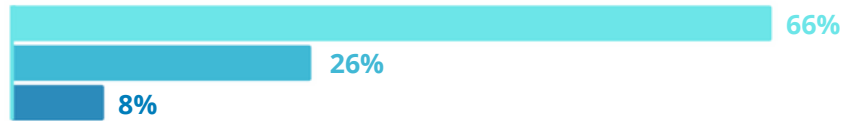
# CHILDREN'S SUMMER MEDIA USE 2021

## According to parents, pandemic levels of media use continued into the summer

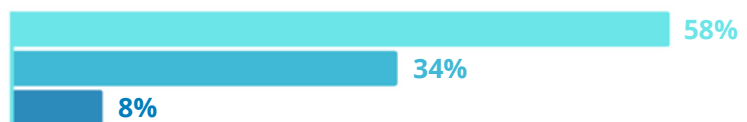
Compared to the most recent school year and the previous summer, parents reported children using screen media even more frequently.

- More often
- About the same
- Less often

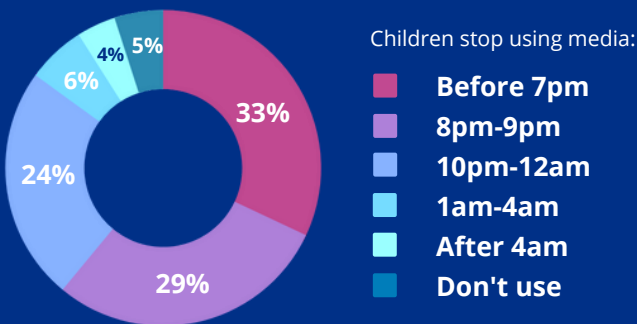
### Media use this summer vs. the school year



### Media use this summer vs. last summer



This summer, while most parents reported that children stopped using media before 10pm, many children still used media past midnight.



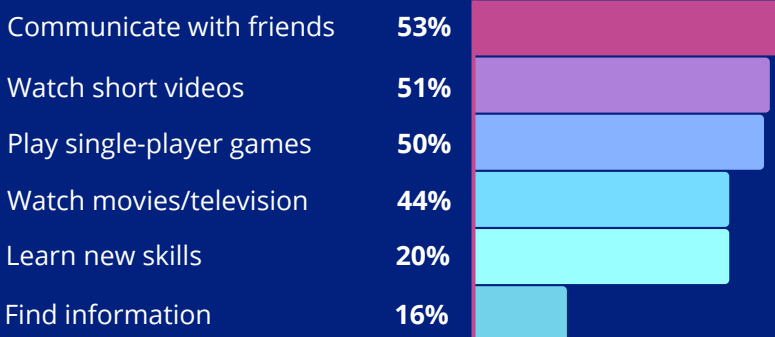
**73%**

of parents surveyed said in-person get togethers happened a few times a week or less.

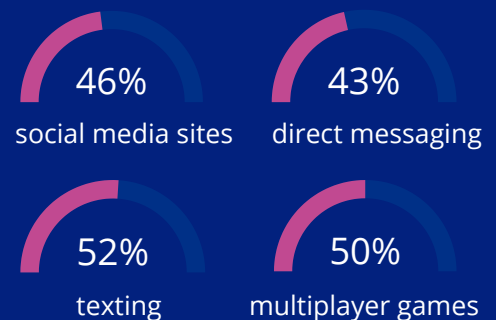
1 in 4 parents encouraged their child to increase media use over the summer.



Children regularly used screen media this summer for socializing and entertainment.

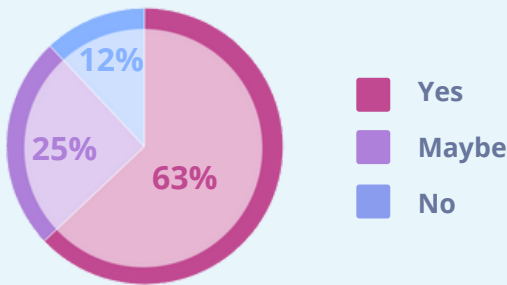


and many communicated with their friends at least once a day via...

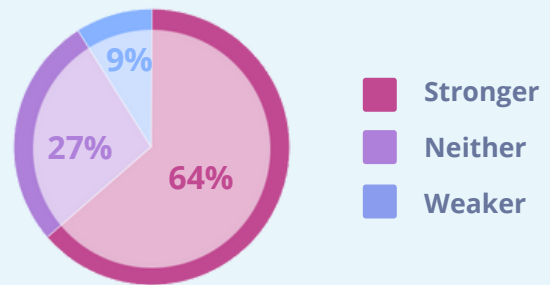


## Parents reported that online communication provided their children with social support and connections to peers

More than half of parents said that their child received social and emotional support as a result of communicating online with friends.

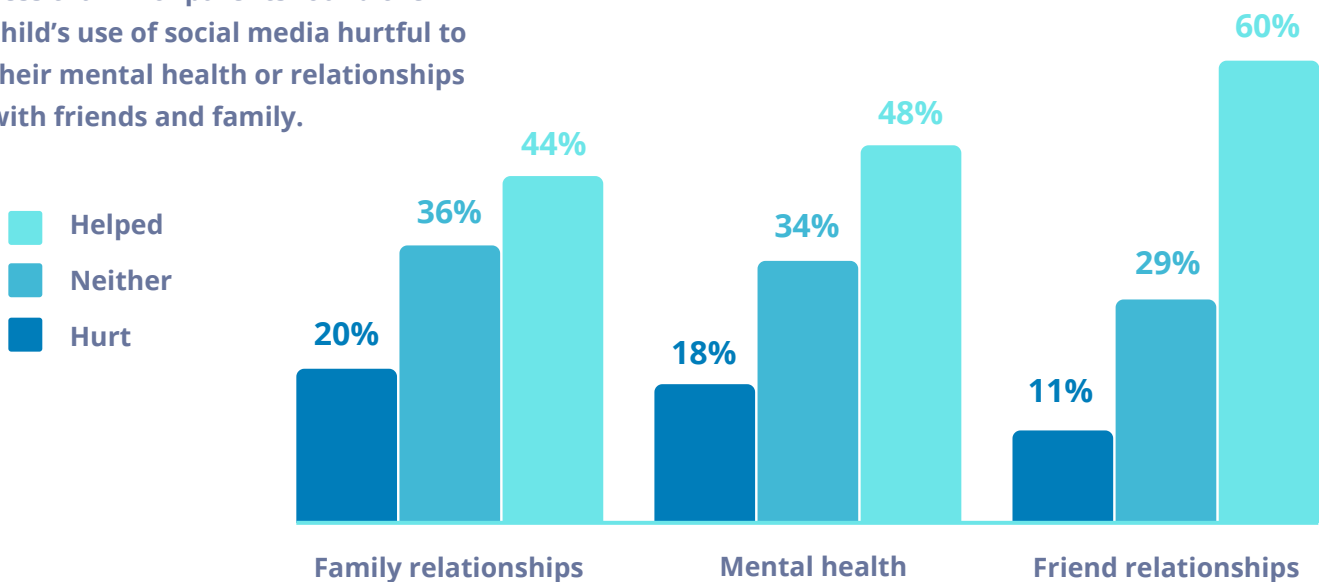


Parents reported that their child's online communication and game play lead to stronger friendship ties.



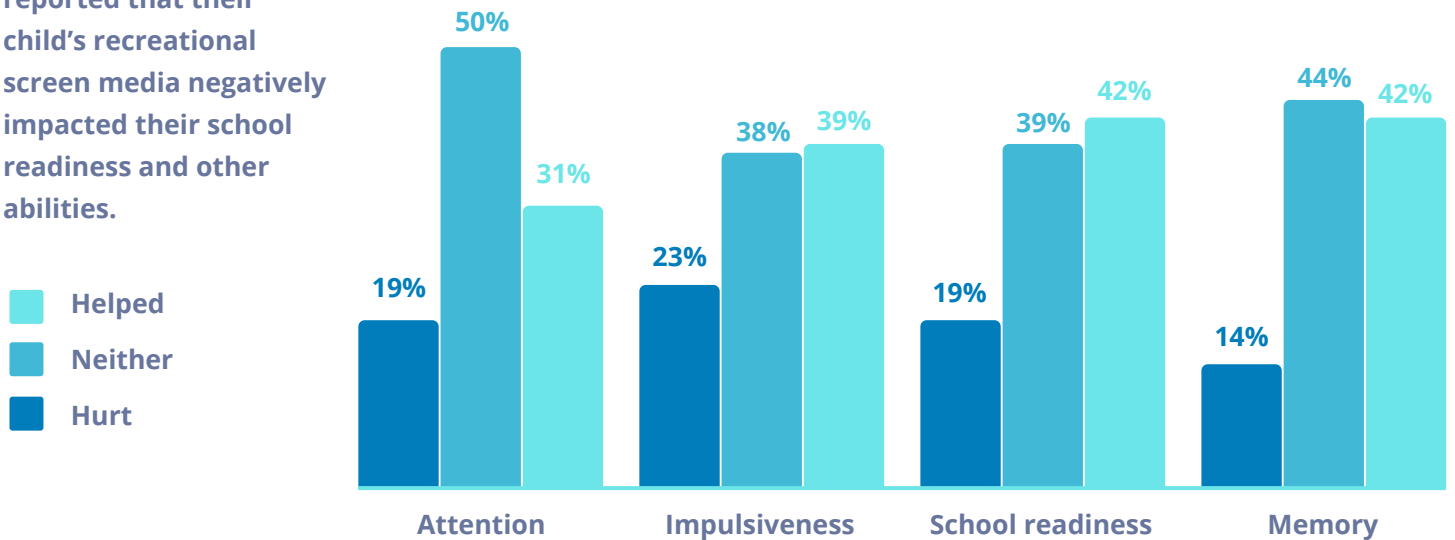
## Using social media to connect with friends helped children's mental health and relationships

Less than ¼ of parents found their child's use of social media hurtful to their mental health or relationships with friends and family.



## Parents saw recreational screen media as helping their child's important school-related abilities

Less than ¼ of parents reported that their child's recreational screen media negatively impacted their school readiness and other abilities.



## Many parents found that their child's overall well-being was helped when their child used screen media for...

### Socializing



Talking with friends



Using social media

### Entertainment



Watching short videos



Playing single player games

### Learning



Learning new skills

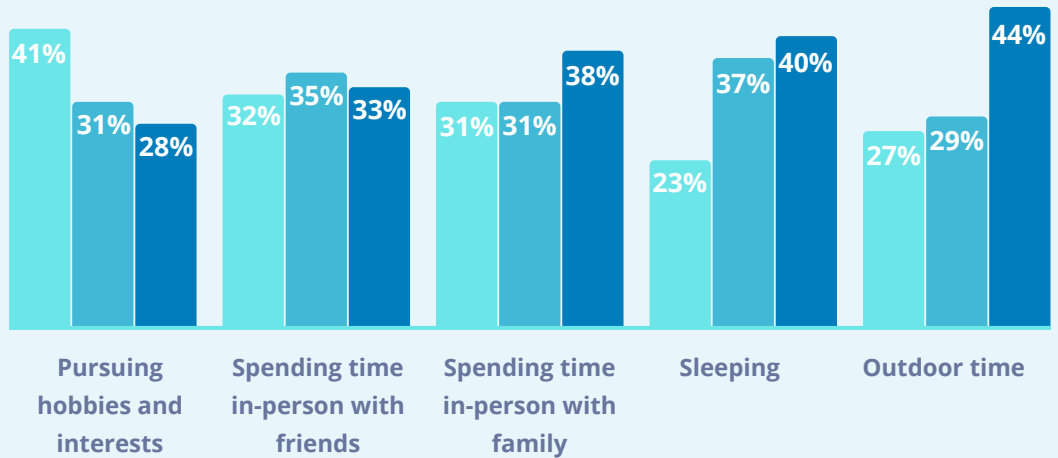


Answering questions

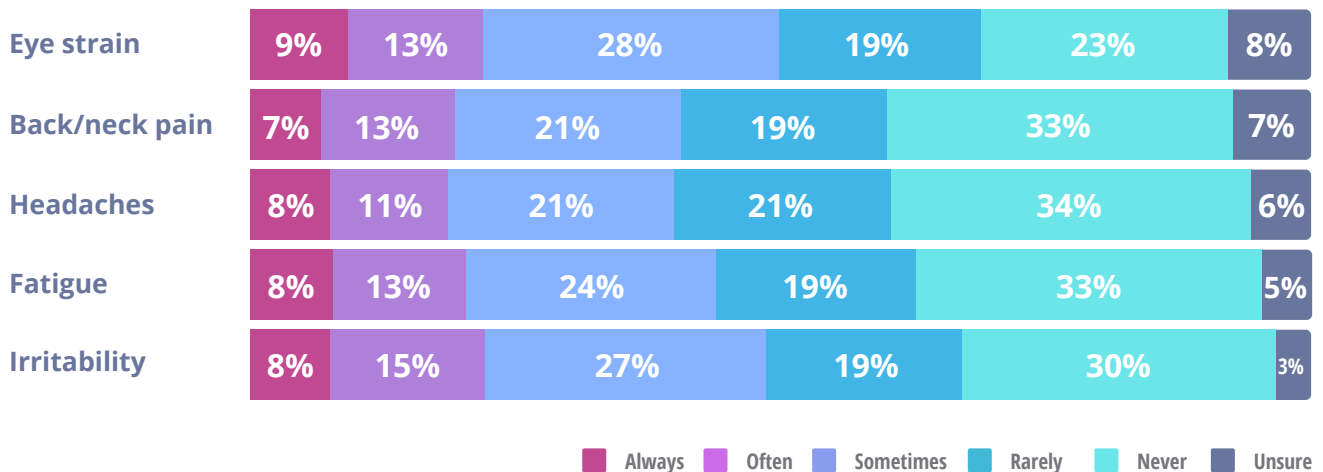
## Screen media both encouraged and interfered with different activities this summer



While the highest percentage of parents reported that their child's screen media interfered with outdoor time and sleep, many also reported that it encouraged their children's pursuit of hobbies and interests.



## After a typical day of screen media use this summer, parents reported that their child experienced the following...



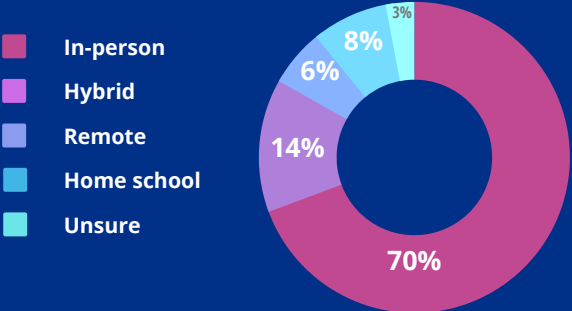
**73%**

of parents reported that their child experienced one or more of these physical symptoms at least sometimes.

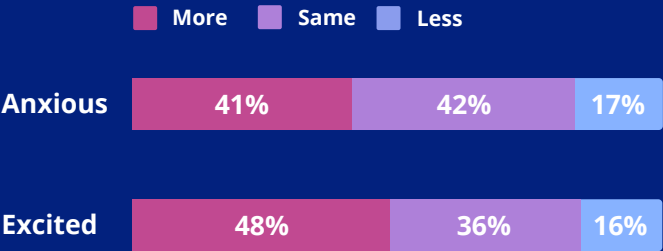
# RETURN TO SCHOOL

## Children were reported as experiencing mixed emotions about returning to school this fall

### Children will be attending school...



### Children are more anxious *and* more excited about returning to school this upcoming year.



1 in 5 children will still experience some form of online learning this fall.

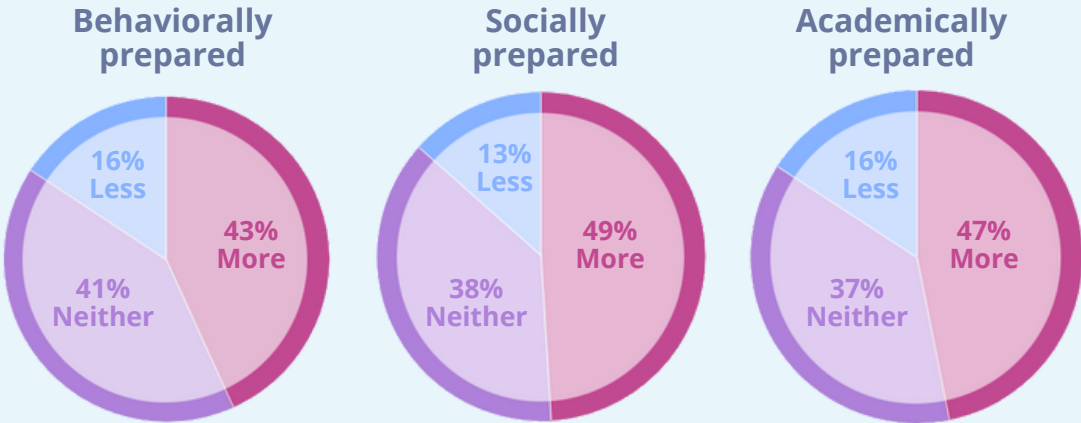


64%

of children will be required to wear a mask at school.

## Many parents reported that their child's media use this summer has made them more prepared for returning to school

Despite the challenges of the previous school year, parents are feeling mostly positive about how their child's summer media use helped prepare their child for returning to school.



# Methodology and Results Summary

Throughout the pandemic, children's media use increased, both through remote-schooling and through staying connected with friends and family. Now, with more opportunities for normal summer activities, the question becomes "did young people continue high levels of use or return to more typical, pre-pandemic levels?" Further, with the return to in-person schooling, how are families feeling? Prepared? Anxious? Excited? The goal of this survey was to explore the thoughts and feelings of a diverse sample of parents surrounding their children's media use over the summer and their return to school.

Building in part off of findings from our first Pulse Survey, this survey sought to address the following questions:

1. How are school-aged children using media during the summer of 2021?
2. What impacts have parents observed regarding this use, both positive and negative, and what concerns do they have regarding its social, academic, mental, and physical impact?
3. How are parents and children feeling about the upcoming school year and what concerns do parents have regarding their child's return to school?

The findings reported here come from a nationwide online survey of 1,447 parents of children in grades K-12. As with our first pulse survey, participants were recruited through Alchemer, an online research service that partners with over 350 existing survey panels with a total reach of over 437 million users worldwide. Adults (18+) in the United States with a child in grades K-12 were invited to respond. A variety of quotas, including grade of child, race/ethnicity, annual household income, and type of school were used to obtain a broadly diverse sample of responses. The breakdown was as follows:

- By grade: Parents of children in elementary school (K-1, 18.4%; 2-4, 24.6%), middle school (5-8, 28.3%), and high school (9-12, 28.6%).
- By race/ethnicity: 64.6% White/non-Hispanic; 12.8% Black/non-Hispanic; 4.1% Asian; 13.2% Hispanic/Latino; and 5.1% mixed race or other.
- By annual household income (HHI): HHI < \$50K (42%); HHI \$50K - \$99K (29.3%); and HHI > \$100K (26.8%).
- By type of school: Public school (79.9%), charter school (6.8%), private school (7.7%), and homeschool (5.5%).

Percentages included in this report are based on valid responses: Participants who responded "I don't know" or for whom the question was not applicable were not included in the associated calculations.

The Boston Children's Hospital IRB reviewed the survey methodology and classified the study as exempt. The survey was conducted from July 30-August 19, 2021. Wording for all the questions as well as associated descriptive statistics are available at <https://digitalwellnesslab.org/research/pulse-surveys>

## Summer Media Use and its Observed Impact

The majority of parents in this survey reported that their child used media more often during this summer than during the previous school year (65.9%) and the previous summer (58.2%). On average, children were reported as spending 8.4 hours using screen media on a typical day this summer, which the majority of parents felt was either a little too much time (39.9%) or way too much time (20.5%). 33.8% of parents said their child uses media up until 10pm or later on a typical summer day.

What were they doing during all that time? More than 50% used media to communicate with friends and



listen to music. Other frequently reported activities included watching short videos (e.g., YouTube) and playing single-player video games. Nearly a third of parents reported their children connecting with friends more than once a day through texting, social media sites, and multiplayer gaming. In-person get-togethers occurred less frequently with 72.7% of parents saying they happened “a few times a week” or less.

In general, parents felt that their child’s online communication had more positive than negative implications. Over half of the parents felt that online communication and game play offer social emotional support (62.7%) and lead to stronger friendship ties (63.7%). 70% report that this online communication leads to more face-to-face interactions with friends “sometimes” or more frequently. Parents reported that their child’s use of social media and recreational media were generally neutral or positive with social media considered a little/a lot helpful to friend relationships (59.7%), readiness for school (46.1%), memory (46.8%), mental health (48.4%), and family relationships (44.7%). Recreational media use was similarly reported as helpful to friend relationships (51.9%), readiness for school (41.6%), memory (42.2%), mental health (43.2%), and family relationships (39.1%). 24.7 % of parents did report that recreational screen media use hurt their child’s physical health either a lot or a little, and 44.3% responded that it interfered (a little or a lot) with their child’s outdoor time.

A non-inconsequential number of parents reported that their child experienced physical problems after a day of media use. 49.8% reported that their child experienced eye strain (or other eye problems) sometimes or more frequently, 39.9% reported headaches, and over 40% reported back or neck pain (40.6%), fatigue (43.9%), or irritability (48.6%) at the same regularity.

Overall, it seems that young people continued to increase their screen media use over this summer and parents considered it at least slightly too much time. School aged children used many different formats for connecting with friends and parents considered this type of communication as having a positive impact on their friendships. Physical pain and other problems including some that are typically uncommon in children were reported as occurring fairly frequently after a typical day of media use.

### **The Return to School**

69.9% of parents reported their child will be attending school in person, with 19.7% attending a hybrid or fully remote format. Of those students returning to the classroom, 63.5% of parents reported that their child would be required to wear a mask while 18.7% were still unsure. Parents reported their child’s remote learning experience in the 2020-2021 school year to being somewhat/very positive (48.5%). In general, parents reported that their child is completely or moderately prepared to return to school behaviorally (61.7%), socially (63.3%), and academically (63.2%). Although 41.3% of parents reported their child is more anxious to return to school than a typical year, 48.6% reported that their child is more excited.

Over 40% of parents felt their child’s media use made them much or a little more prepared for school behaviorally (43.3%), socially (49%), or academically (46.9%). The biggest challenges parents cited regarding their child’s return to school revolved around COVID-19 restrictions (mask wearing, social distancing), returning to a more normal routine, and socializing/making friends.

Even in the face of uncertainty, young people are reported to feel excited and prepared to return to school this year. According to their parents, their continued high uses of media did not interfere with this preparation and, for many, may have contributed positively to it. Parents’ biggest concerns this fall relate to COVID-19 restrictions in schools.

## Conclusion

It is evident from this survey that young people used media at higher levels this summer than in previous years. The elevated use that arose during the social distancing policies of the COVID-19 response did not appear to subside during a time when such restrictions were reduced. Parents, it seems, did not find their child's increased use of screens detrimental. In fact, most saw it as helpful for social relationships, school readiness, and other critical skills and abilities. A considerable number of parents did report that their child experienced physical problems after a typical day using media indicating the need for additional research and outreach to address these issues. As children return to school, many of their parents see them not only as well prepared, but indicate that their summer media use helped with that preparation. Students are both excited and anxious about the new school year reflecting the overall uncertainty that they, and all of us, are facing this fall.

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## Our Mission

The Digital Wellness Lab exists to understand and promote wellness in the digital age. By synergizing thought leaders from tech, entertainment and health sciences globally, we can build a digital environment that advances the wellbeing of families, society and humanity at large.

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