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Gen Alpha 2026 Media and Entertainment Trends

Key takeaways

1. **TV leads brand discovery, but the window is closing as kids age.** Television holds the top spot across all age bands, but social media climbs 17 points between ages 0–3 and ages 10–12 — the steepest trajectory of any channel. By ages 10–12, TV and social media are essentially tied at 50% and 49%.

2. **School entry is the master switch for Gen Alpha's digital life.** Across nearly every dimension in this data — device access, allowance, social media use, financial independence — ages 7–9 is the inflection point. Tablet ownership peaks. Linked credit card access expands. Allowances jump from 45% to 67%. Children aged 7 are much more active participants in household spending.

3. **Gen Alpha uses AI, and parents are conflicted.** Nearly a third of children ages 0–12 have used an AI chatbot for homework in the past 90 days. Yet 83% of parents say they're confident their child has a healthy relationship with AI — while simultaneously 65% worry it's making their child less willing to problem-solve. Parents have accepted AI but haven't resolved what they think about it.

4. **Children have strong purchasing influence — and they get better at wielding it with age.** Children ages 4–6 ask to buy something daily at the highest rate of any cohort. By ages 7–9, requests become more persistent rather than just frequent. More importantly, the category mix shifts: toy influence stays high, but grocery and restaurant influence climbs alongside it.

5. **The narrative that screens are crowding out physical childhood doesn't hold up in this data.** The four most popular activities among Gen Alpha sit within four percentage points of each other: watching TV or movies (72%), outdoor activities (70%), non-digital toys (70%), and video games (68%).

About this report

This report presents findings from a Morning Consult survey of 1,018 U.S. parents of children ages 0–12, fielded May 21-26 2026. Respondents were asked about their youngest child in the 0–12 age range. The survey was conducted online and weighted to be representative of U.S. adults with children in this age group by age, gender, education, and region.

Sample composition by child age

- Children ages 0–3: n=321
- Children ages 4–6: n=238
- Children ages 7–9: n=214
- Children ages 10–12: n=245

Margins of error range from approximately ±3.1 percentage points at the full-sample level to ±5.5–6.9 percentage points for individual age-band subgroups.

Screens, Content & AI

The Digital Habits Shaping Childhood

Tablets dominate for Gen Alpha early, but smartphones and laptops take over as Gen Alpha ages

Most children are interacting with screens before they start school. Smartphones reach half of children ages 0–3, and tablets are in 62% of those households — before most kids can read.

The clearest pattern in the table is the diagonal shift that happens around ages 7–9. Tablets peak at 77% in that cohort, then drop back to 64% by ages 10–12 as smartphones climb to 71% and laptops jump to 63%. The device mix isn't just growing — it's changing shape. Younger children get screens optimized for passive consumption and touch. Older children get screens built for productivity and communication.

Game consoles follow a similar arc, peaking at ages 7–9 before plateauing. The one device that keeps climbing without interruption through all four age bands is the laptop — which makes sense given increasing school demands. VR headsets remain a footnote at every age.

What devices Gen Alpha kids have access to by age

% of parents who say their child has access to each device at home or school

	All parents	Ages 0–3	Ages 4–6	Ages 7–9	Ages 10–12
Tablet	69%	62%	72%	77%	64%
Smartphone	62%	50%	64%	66%	71%
Game console	51%	33%	49%	58%	61%
Laptop computer	49%	33%	43%	48%	63%
Handheld console	33%	21%	35%	42%	33%
Desktop computer	28%	19%	33%	29%	37%
eReader	15%	11%	16%	17%	13%
VR headset	13%	7%	14%	14%	19%

Lower access Higher access

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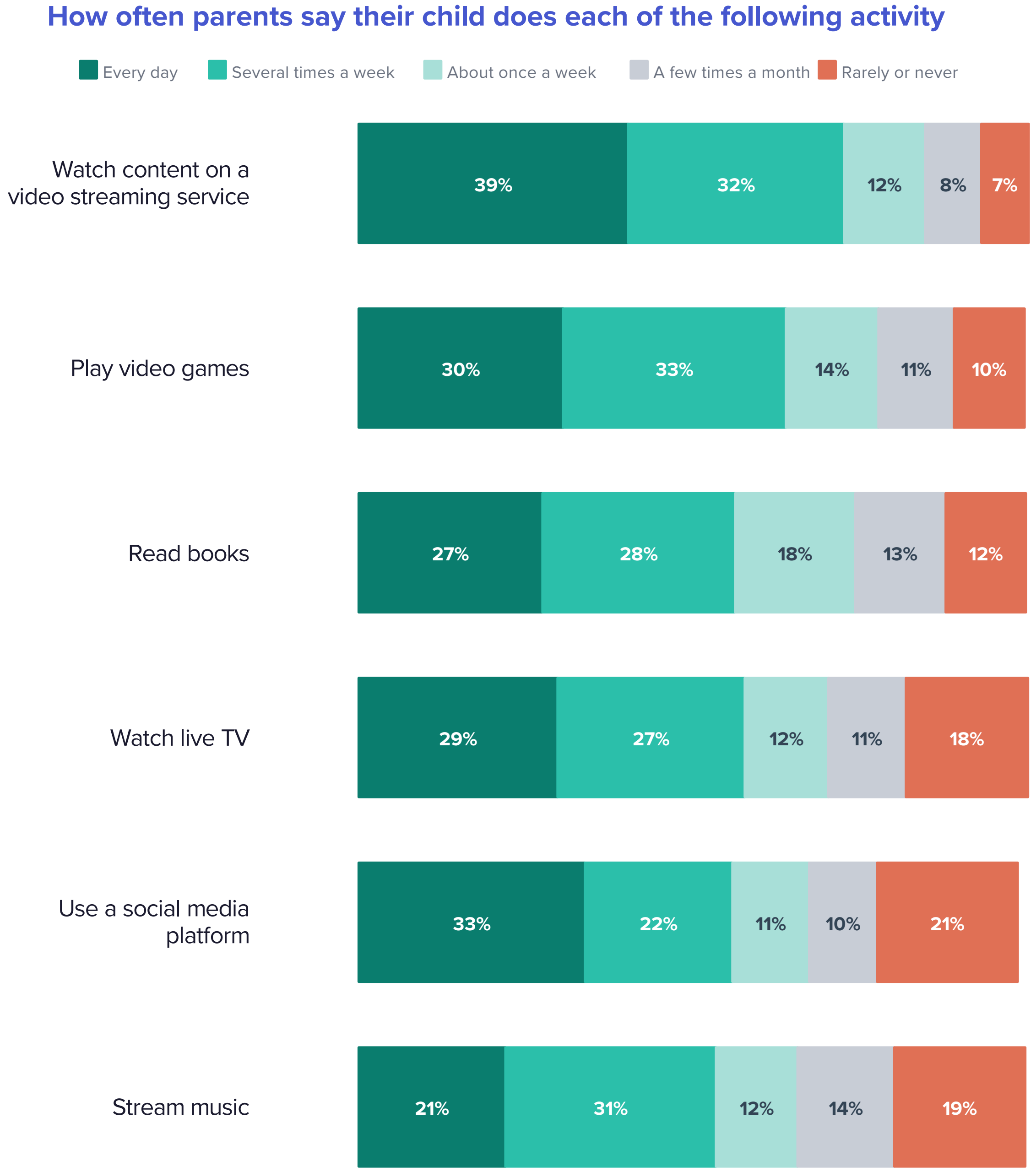
Video streaming and video games surpass reading for Gen Alpha kids

Video streaming leads all activities at 83% weekly, with nearly 4 in 10 children watching every single day. Video games follow closely at 76%.

Social media has the most uneven distribution of any activity on the list. A third of children use it every day, but 21% rarely or never do — the highest "rarely or never" share.



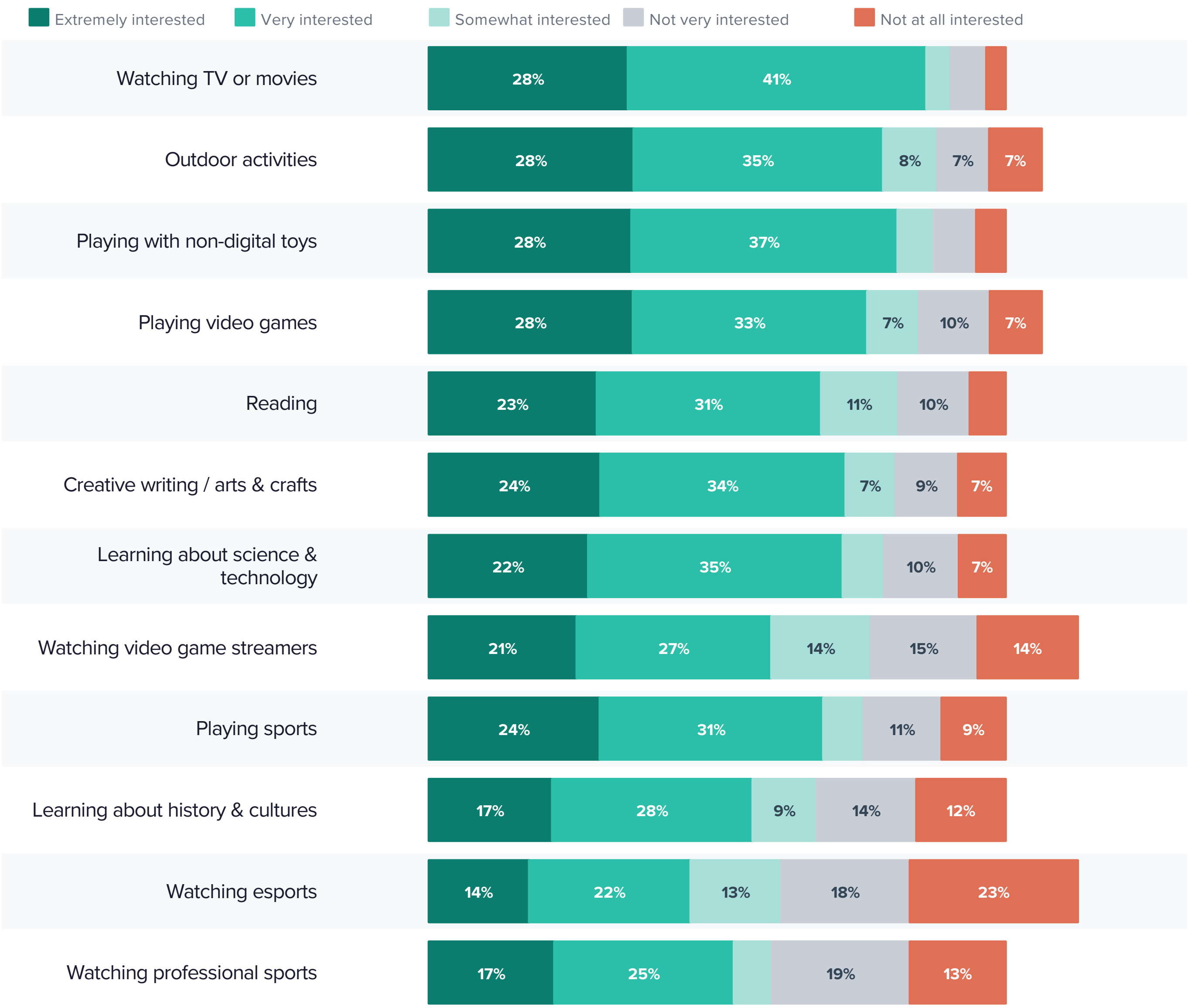
Gen Alpha kids care about non-digital activities, too

The top four activities sit within four points of each other: watching TV or movies (72%), outdoor activities (70%), playing with non-digital toys (70%), and playing video games (68%). The common assumption that digital entertainment has crowded out physical play doesn't hold up here. Children who play video games also go outside. Children who watch streaming also read.

The age breakdown adds texture to several of these findings. Video games show the sharpest climb — interest rises from 69% among parents of 0–3 year olds to 93% at ages 7–9, the single largest age gradient in the dataset. Watching video game streamers follows a similar pattern, going from 59% to 81%, which makes sense: streaming interest typically follows gaming interest, not the other way around.

What activities Gen Alpha kids are interested in

% of parents who say their child is interested in each activity



Even at young ages, parents say they don't have complete control of their kids' online activity

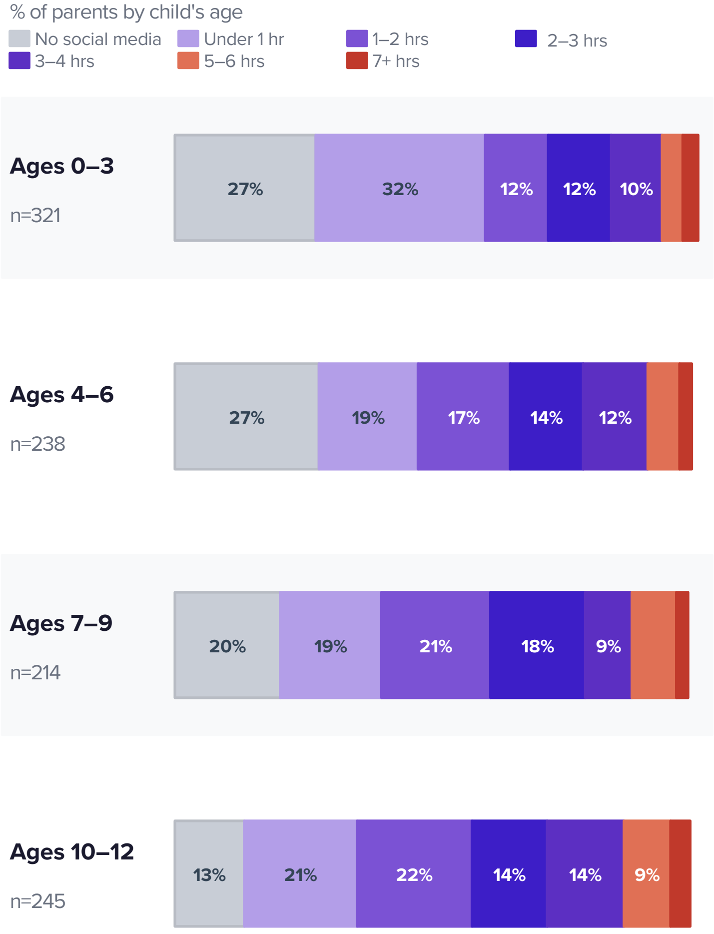
Most children are on social media before they're teenagers — and parents are gradually losing their grip on it.

Among children ages 10–12, just 13% have no social media access at all, down from 27% at ages 0–3. The share spending two or more hours a day on social media climbs steadily across every age band, and by ages 10–12 roughly a third of children are on it for at least two hours daily.

While 80% of parents with toddlers say they completely or mostly control how much time their child spends online, that figure drops to 71% by ages 10–12. Nine percentage points may not sound dramatic, but it represents a meaningful and consistent erosion. As children get older and devices become more embedded in school and social life, the levers parents have to pull get shorter.

Daily social media time

% of parents by child's age

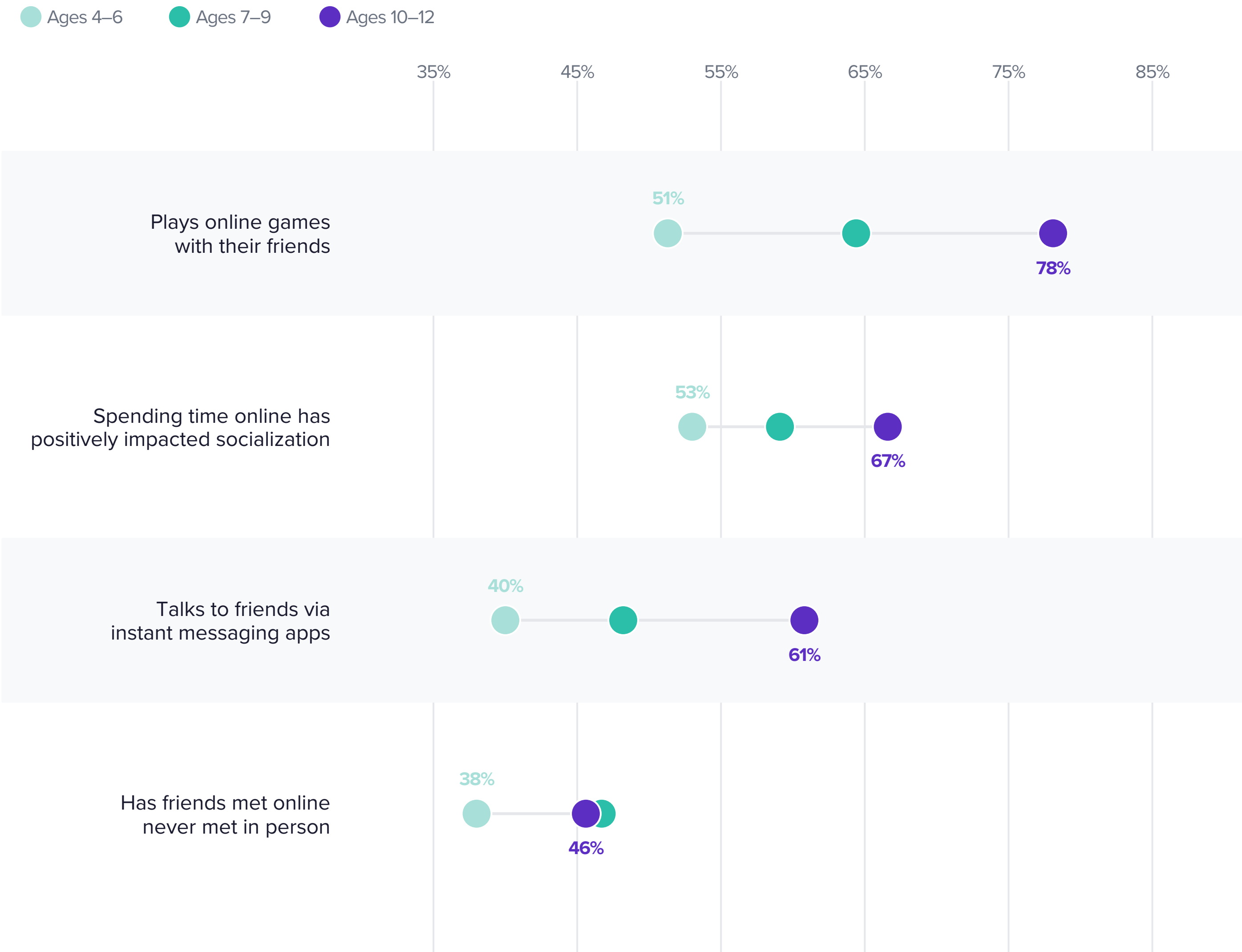


Parental control of online time

% who say they control each "completely" or "quite a bit"

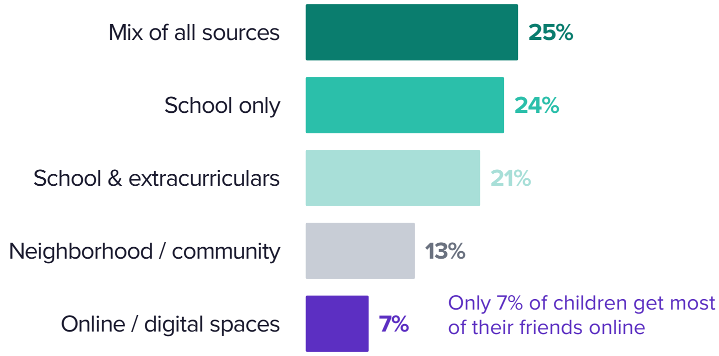
Gen Alpha is socializing online — but in-person friendships still reign as king

% of parents who say each describes their child's online experiences | Ages 4–12 | 2026



Where do children's friends come from?

% of parents who say most of their child's friends come from each source | Full sample | 2026

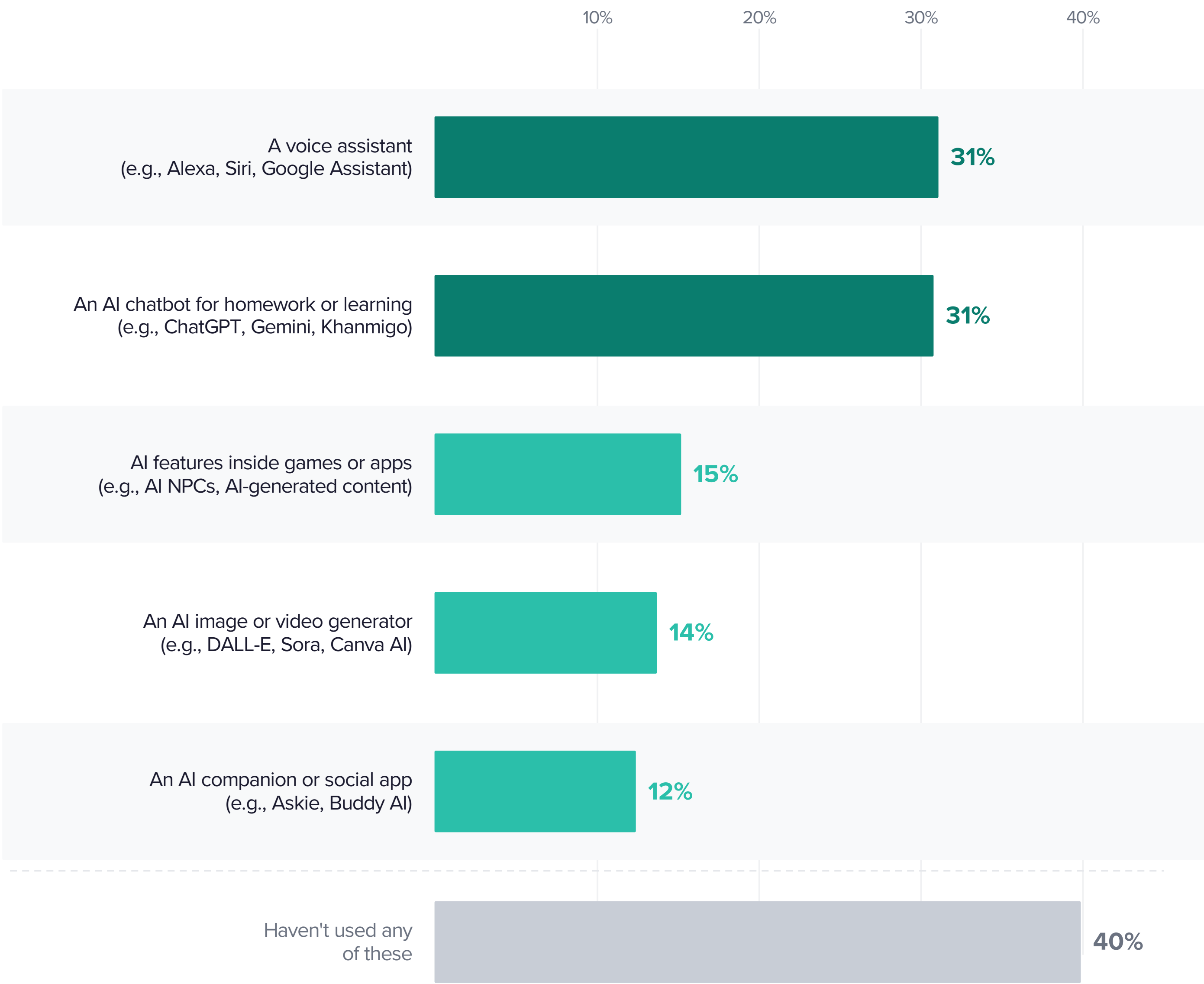


Gen Alpha's AI usage is lower than other online technologies, but homework assistance leads the way

Voice assistants and AI chatbots for homework or learning are tied as the most-used AI tools, each reaching about 3 in 10 children in the past three months. That 31% figure for homework chatbots is worth pausing on. These are children ages 0–12 — a cohort that includes a lot of kids still in early elementary school and some not even in school yet — and nearly a third of their parents say they've used a tool like ChatGPT or Gemini for learning in just the last 90 days.

3 in 10 children used an AI chatbot or voice assistant in the past 3 months

% of parents who say their child used each AI tool in the last 3 months



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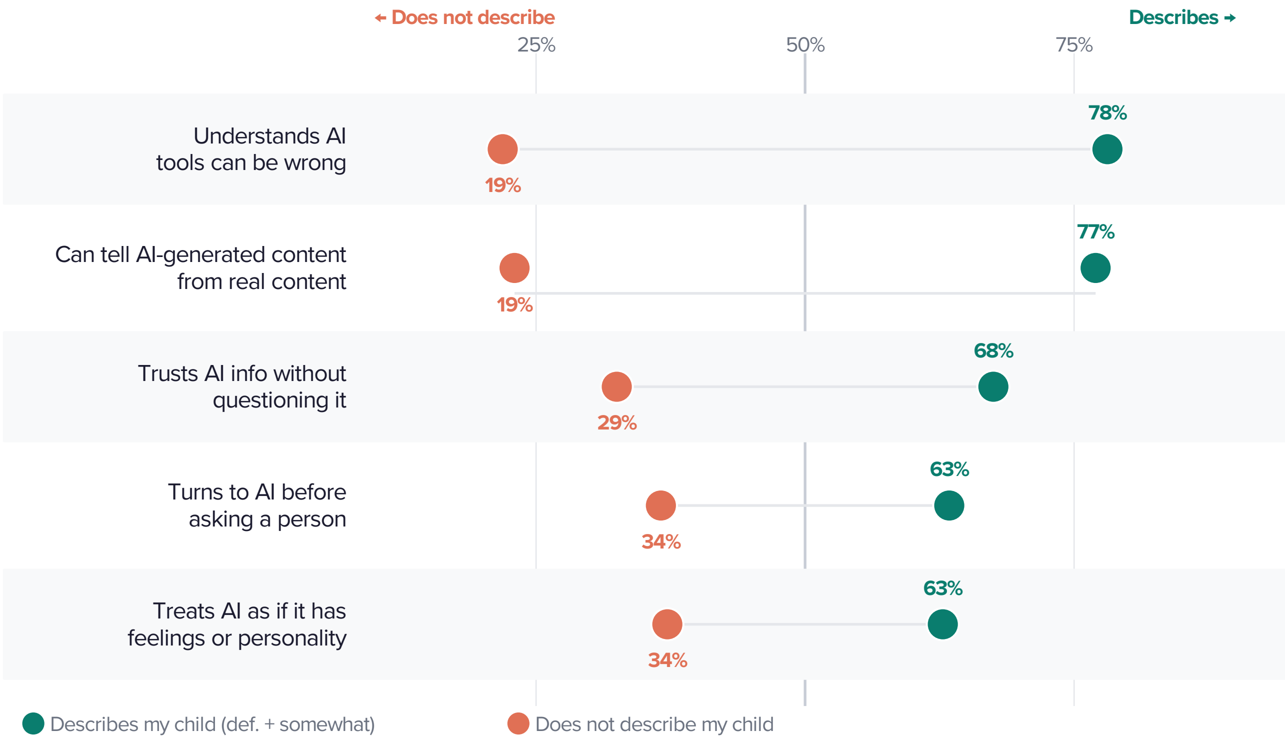
Parents say their kids already have AI literacy, but also have uncritical dependence

Nearly 4 in 5 parents say their child understands AI can be wrong and can tell AI-generated content from real content — both markers of genuine digital literacy. But two-thirds also say their child trusts AI information without questioning it, and 63% say their child turns to AI before asking a person for help. Many parents also worry AI is making their child less willing to problem-solve. A child can know, in the abstract, that AI makes mistakes, and still reach for ChatGPT before raising their hand.

How parents describe their child's relationship with AI tools



How parents feel about their child's AI use

What reassures them

83% Feel confident they understand how their child uses AI

83% Child has a healthy, balanced relationship with AI tools

What worries them

65% Worry AI is making their child less willing to problem-solve

64% Harder to know if child truly understands vs. used AI

Money & Influence

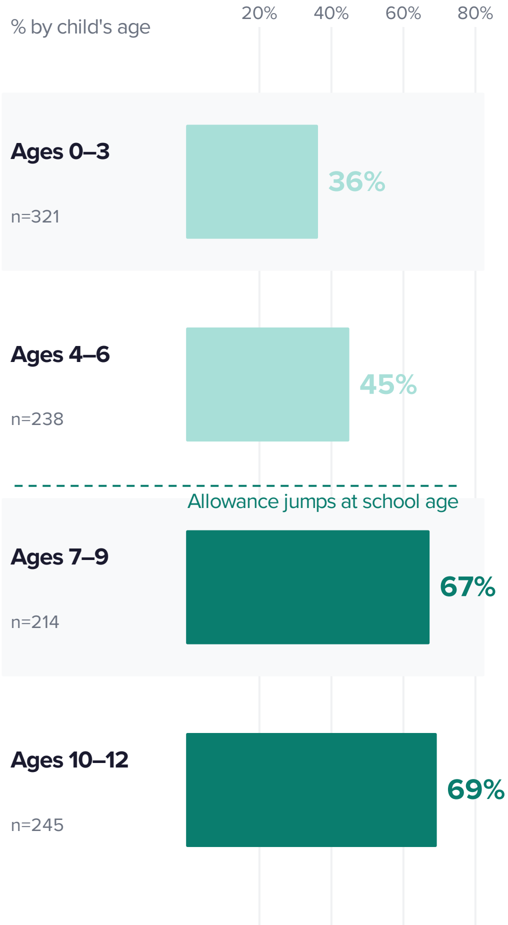
How Gen Alpha Spends and What Influences Them to Spend

Kids spend their own money on food, toys, and games — but habits shift with age

Food and toys lead what children choose to spend on, each at 67%. Games follow at 52%. The more interesting story is what shifts with age. Toy spending declines from 72% among the youngest cohort to 55% at ages 10–12 as children age out of that category. Personal care and makeup nearly doubles from 22% to 35% across the same bands, and clothing climbs from 34% to 46%. By the time children reach ages 10–12 they're spending less like children and more like the consumers they're about to become.

Has an allowance

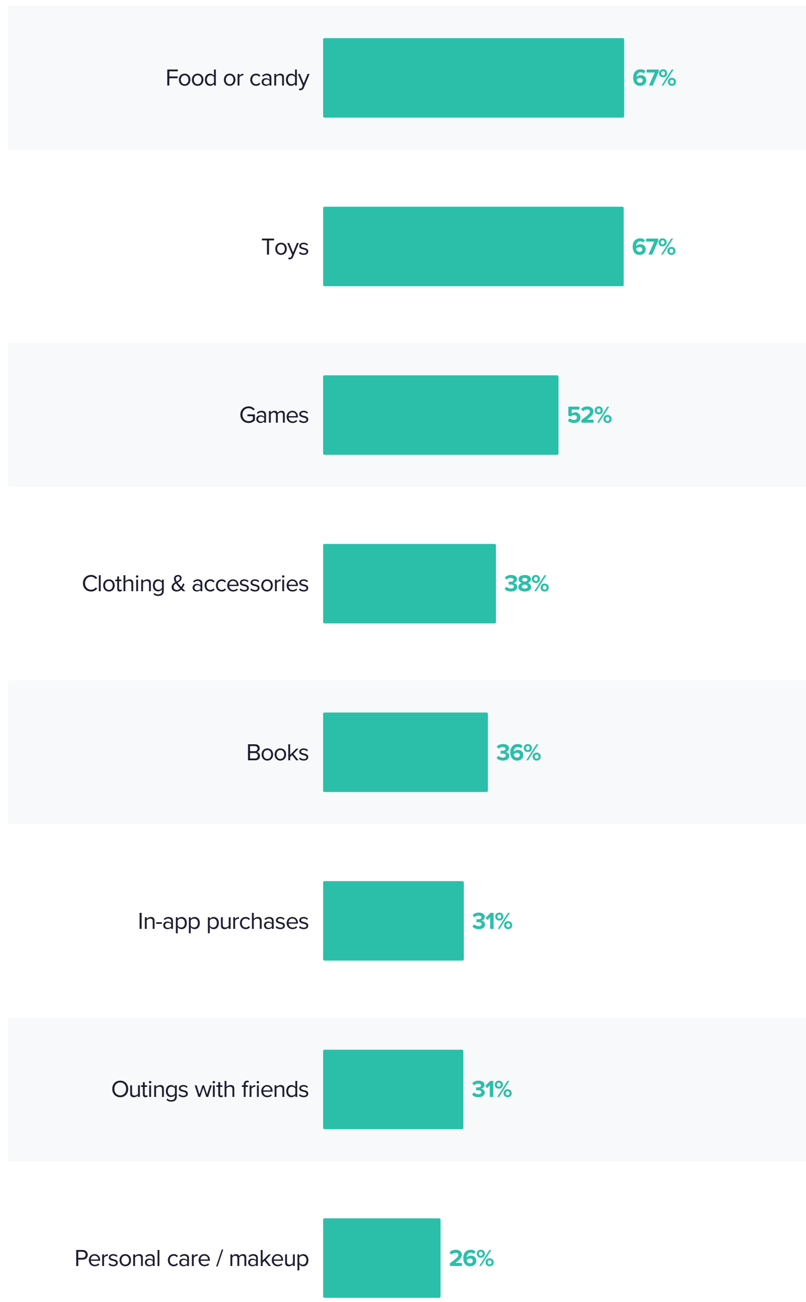
% by child's age



Just 36% of parents of 0–3 year olds give their child an allowance. By ages 7–9 that share jumps to 67% and stays there through ages 10–12. The pattern mirrors what we see elsewhere in this data — school entry is consistently the inflection point where financial independence, like device access and social media use, begins in earnest.

What kids spend their allowance on

% of children who spend own money on each



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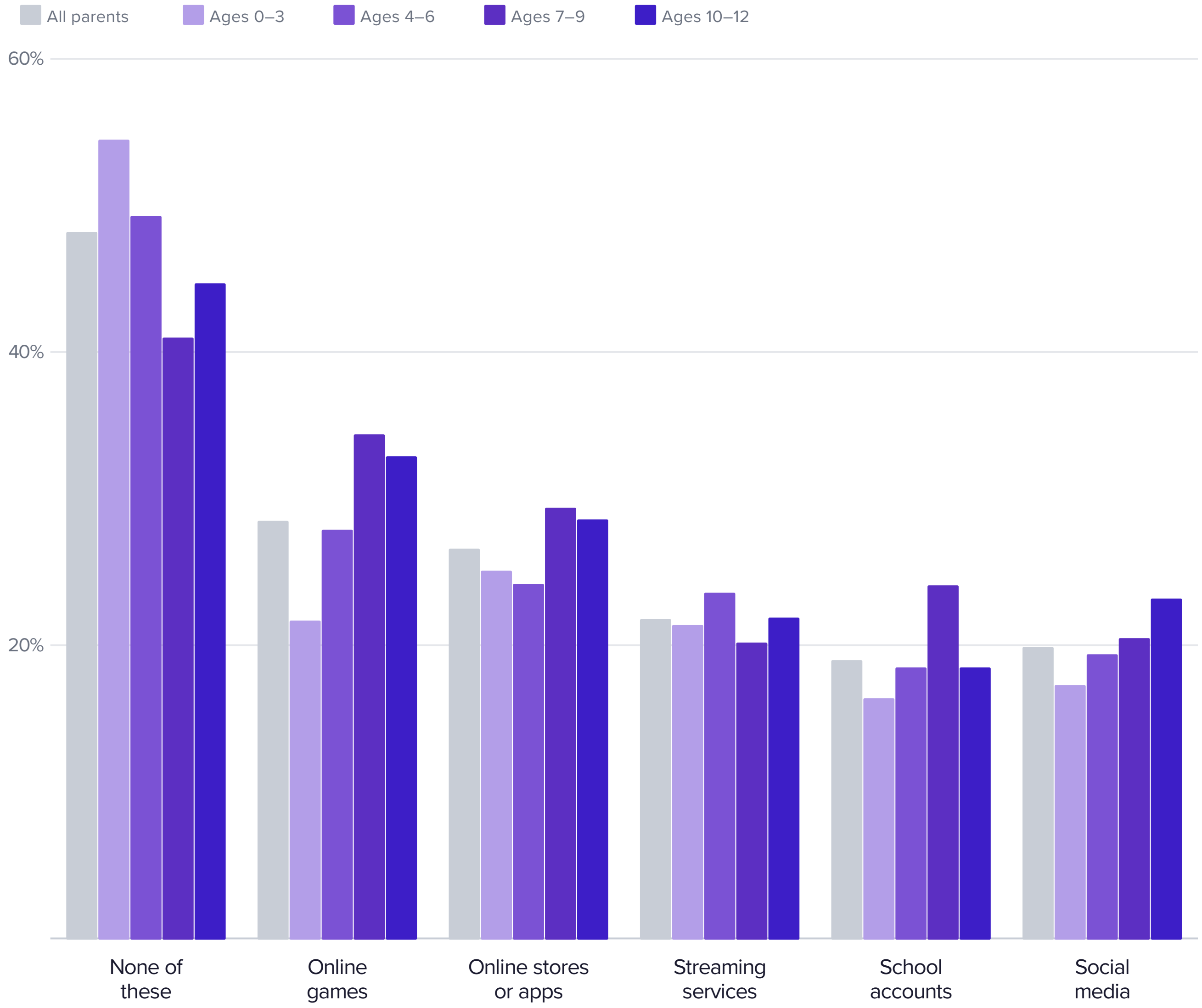
Half of children have a linked credit card in at least one online account

About 52% of parents have connected a credit card to an account their child can access — a meaningful share given how young many of these children are. Online games and online stores lead, each with roughly 28% of parents having a linked card. Streaming services, social media, and school accounts follow in a tighter cluster around 19–22%.

Among parents of 0–3 year olds, 54% have no linked cards anywhere. That drops to 41% by ages 7–9 as children enter school, get devices, and start spending in games and apps. The direction is consistent: as children age, linked payment access expands.

Where parents let kids use linked credit cards

% of parents who have a credit card linked to each account that their child can use | By child age | 2026



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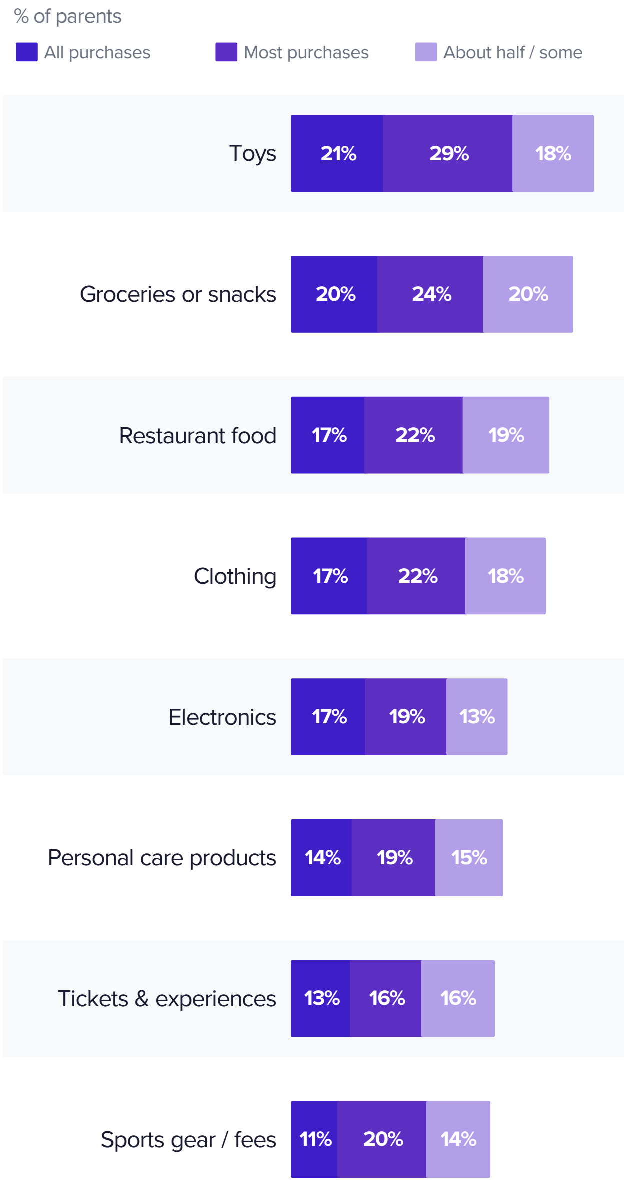
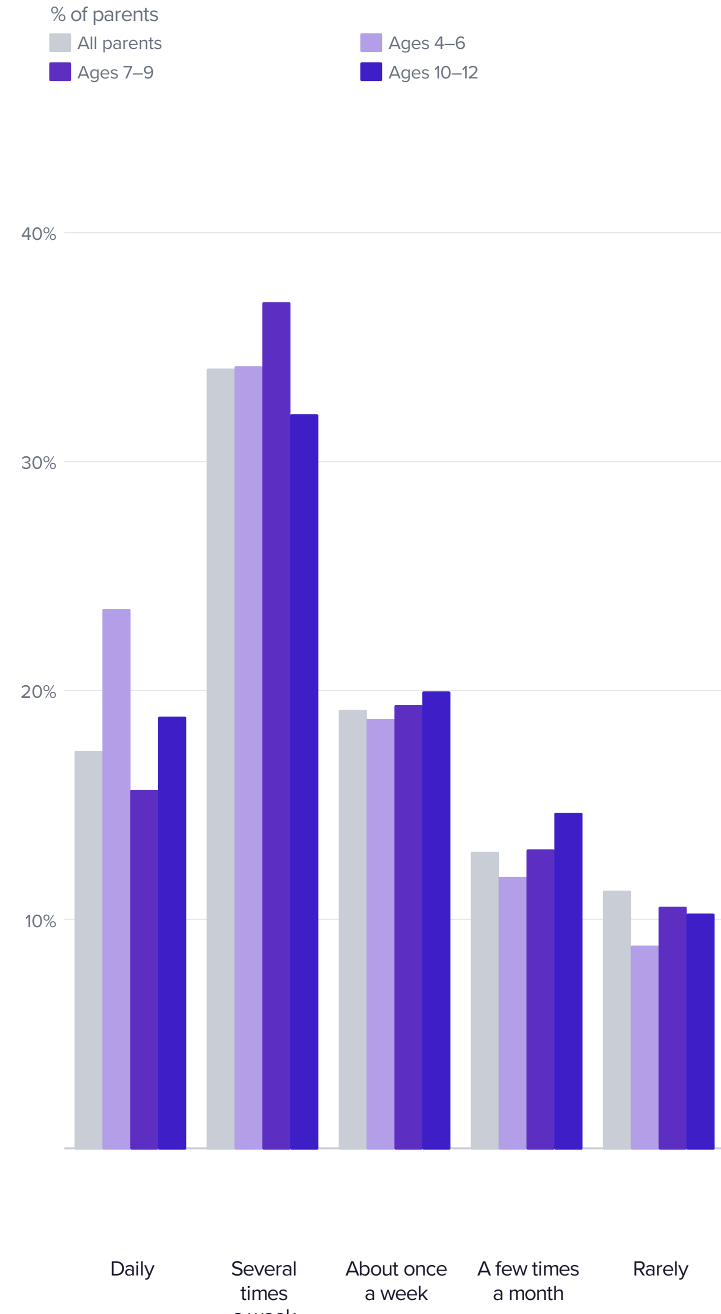
Kids have the power of persuasion — and they're using it

Children ages 4–6 are the most likely to ask for their parent to buy something daily — 24% do, compared to 16–19% for the other age bands. By ages 7–9 the "several times a week" category peaks, suggesting requests become more regular and persistent rather than just frequent. The share asking rarely or never is lowest at ages 7–9 and 10–12. On the left panel, toy influence stays high but grocery and restaurant influence climbs with age — a shift from "I want that toy" to a broader awareness of what the household is buying.

Child's influence on recent purchases



How often child asks to buy something



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TV leads brand discovery, but social media is closing in

Across all parents, TV leads at 46%, followed closely by other children and peers at 41%, and social media at 38%. Influencers and content creators rank last at 28%.

TV's lead holds through ages 7–9 but barely — 51% of parents in that cohort cite it, compared to 47% for peers and 39% for social media. By ages 10–12 TV and peers are tied at 50%, and social media has jumped to 49%. For children in their final years of primary school, brand discovery is happening across every channel simultaneously. Social media shows the sharpest trajectory of any channel — rising from 32% at ages 0–3 to 49% at ages 10–12, a 17-point climb. Influencers follow the same arc, going from 21% to 34%. Both channels are structurally tied to social media access and screen time, which as earlier slides showed, expand substantially between ages 7 and 12.

How children are learning about brands

% of parents who say their child learns about new brands and products in the following ways

	All Parents (0-12)	Ages 0–3	Ages 4–6	Ages 7–9	Ages 10–12
TV	46%	39%	46%	51%	50%
Other children / peers	41%	28%	43%	47%	50%
Social media	38%	32%	32%	39%	49%
Advertisements	30%	23%	32%	38%	33%
Online influencers or content creators	28%	21%	28%	30%	34%

Lower Higher

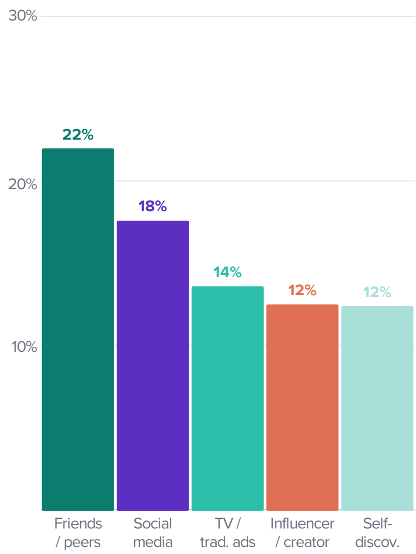
Peers and social media lead brand discovery across every category

Children are most likely to first hear about a brand from a friend or peer, or from social media — and the two sources are essentially interchangeable depending on the category. Peers edge out social media for clothing (22% vs. 18%) and food (21% vs. 20%), while social media leads for toys and video games. The one category that breaks the pattern is personal care and beauty, where all five sources cluster tightly between 10–16% with no clear dominant channel. Parents of children are often unsure how their child encountered a beauty brand.

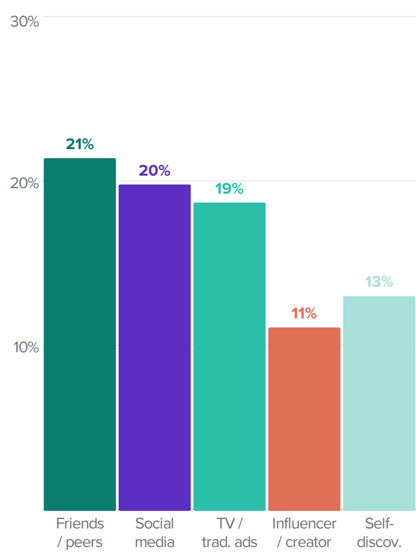
% of parents who say this is where their child first saw/heard about a brand or product | Full sample | 2026

Friends / peers   Social media   TV / trad. ads   Influencer / creator   Self- discov.

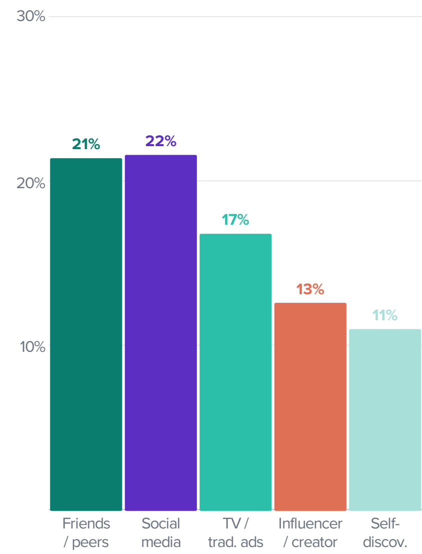
Clothing or footwear



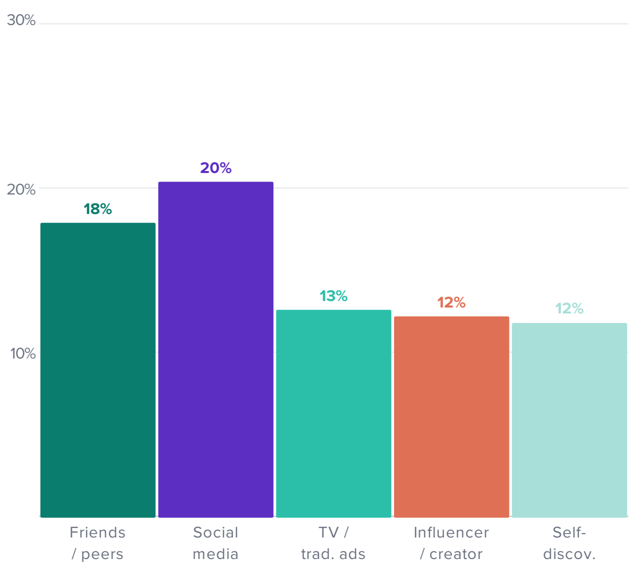
Food, snacks or drinks



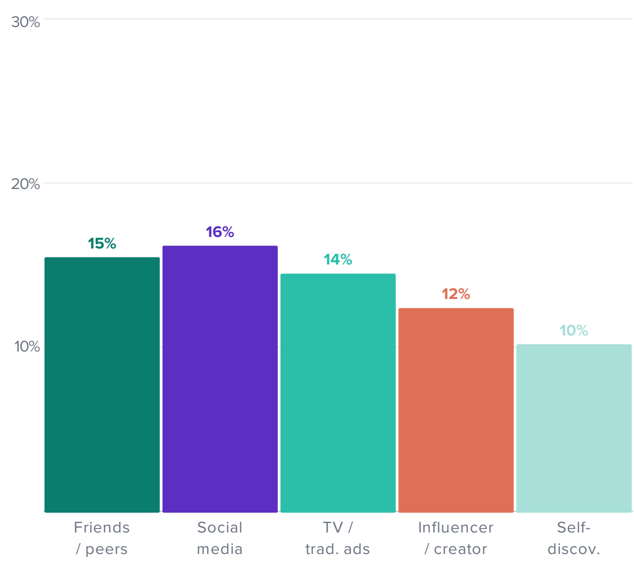
Toys or physical games



Video games



Personal care or beauty



Growing Up

What Parents Want for Gen Alpha — and What Gen Alpha Worries About

What Gen Alpha parents say is important to them

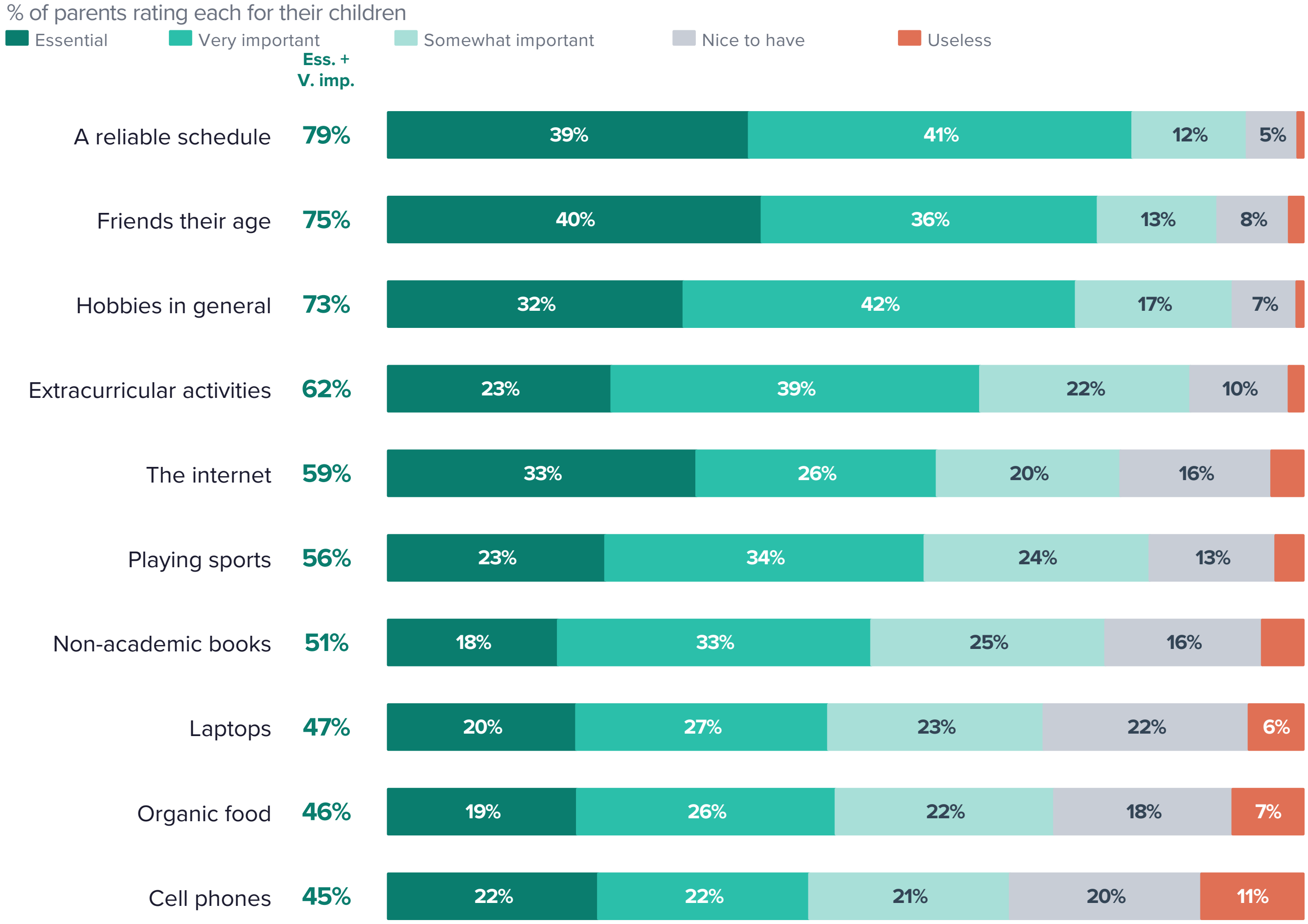
Ask any parent what their child needs to thrive and you'll get similar answers: time with friends, a hobby to call their own, and a day with some predictable shape to it. Nearly four in five parents rate a reliable schedule as essential or very important, and similar shares say the same about friends and hobbies. These are the only items that score above 70% on the combined measure, and they hold up consistently regardless of the age of the child or the household's childcare budget.

Cell phones sit at the very bottom of this list: Despite being in many children's hands, only 45% of parents consider them truly important, and nearly 1 in 10 call them useless.

Parents at the high end of the childcare spending spectrum (a reasonable proxy for income) are dramatically more likely to rate almost everything as important. Extracurricular activities jump 31 points between the lowest and highest spenders. Sports jumps 38 points. The internet, laptops, and even organic food all follow the same pattern.

Friends, hobbies, and a reliable schedule are parents' top priorities

% of parents rating each for their children



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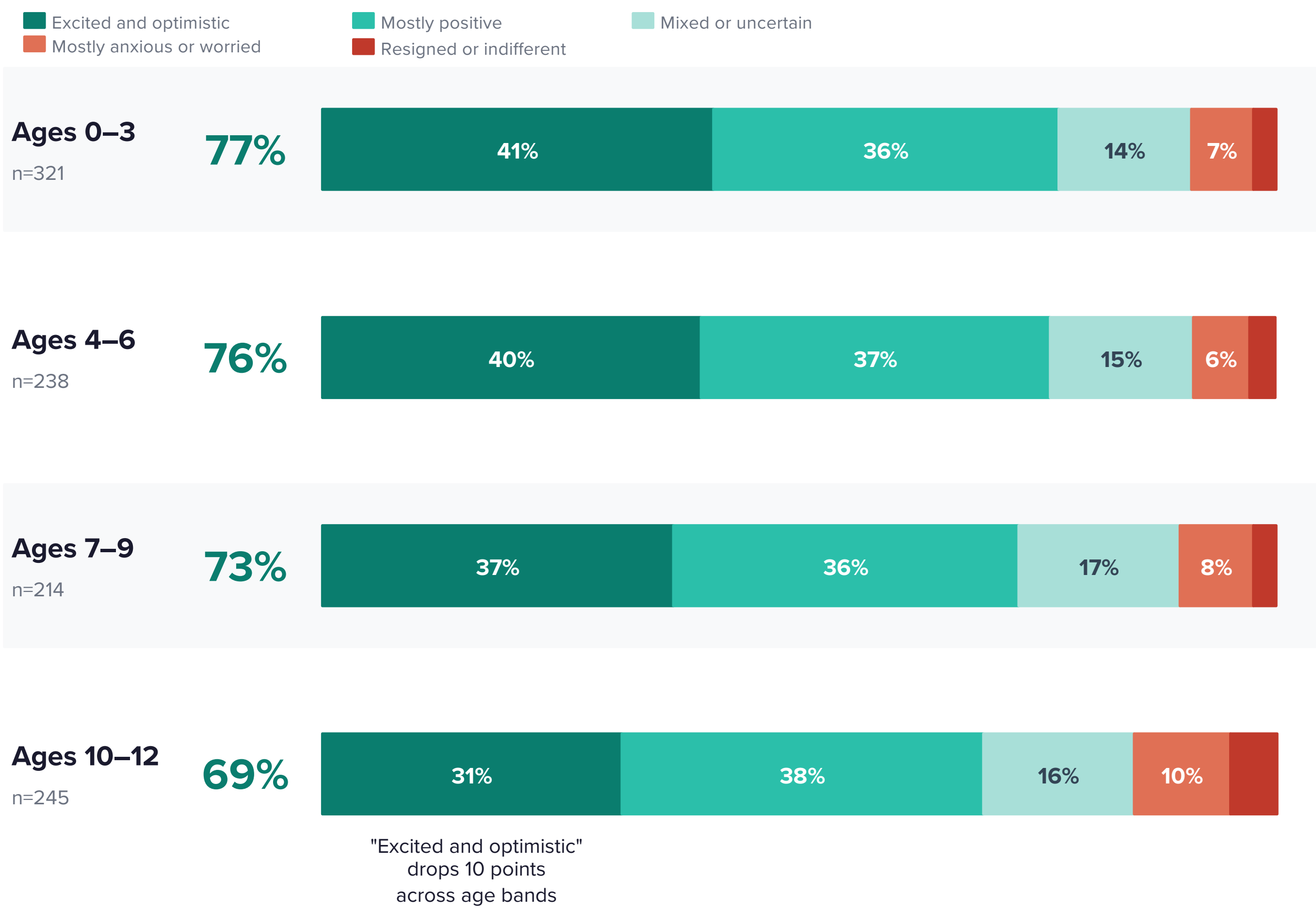
As children get older, parents grow less certain about their futures

When children are still toddlers, optimism comes easily. Nearly four in five parents of 0–3 year olds describe their child's emotional tone about the future as positive, with 41% saying their child seems genuinely excited about growing up. At that age, the future is abstract — full of possibility and not yet complicated by the actual experience of school, friendships, social comparison, or the news.
That changes as children age. By the time kids reach 10–12, the share describing their child as excited and optimistic drops to 31%, while the share reporting anxiety or worry nearly doubles. The overall positive rate falls 8 points across the age bands.

The jump happens gradually from ages 0–3 through 7–9, then steepens in the 10–12 band. That tracks with what parents of school-age kids describe elsewhere in this survey: more device access, more social media exposure, and a growing awareness of the world outside the household.

Gen Alpha loses their optimism as they age

Emotional tone parents say their child uses most when talking about their future | By child age | 2026



Social acceptance is children's top concern, and it intensifies as they get older

For a ten-year-old, the lunch table is more immediate than the labor market. The concerns that land are the ones children can already feel — social acceptance, not AI job replacement.

Source: Morning Consult survey of U.S. parents of children ages 0–12, May 2026. Ages 7–9: n=214; Ages 10–12: n=245; Full sample: n=1,018. Younger age cohorts excluded due to high 'has not expressed concern' rates (30–35%).

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