



Shock and Inform: Motivating Parents to Action on Online Child Safety

October 2024



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RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

Teaching children about online safety is crucial in today's digital world, where the internet offers both opportunities and risks. Parents must be vigilant, informed, and engaged to ensure their children's safety in an ever-evolving digital landscape. However, with the list of parental concerns seemingly endless, it is unclear where online safety ranks among their fears or their willingness to take action to educate themselves, their children, or advocate for greater change.

To measure awareness and concern for child online safety as well as identify evocative messages to alert and motivate parents to action, an online survey of parents and caregivers was conducted in France (n=500), Poland (n=505), the Netherlands (n=510), Spain (n=540), and Sweden (n=589). The same questionnaire fielded in all five countries from September 27-October 9, 2024.

A complete and thorough analysis was conducted to arrive at the findings, conclusions, and recommendations included in this report. For brevity's sake, if an analysis did not yield anything statistically significant or relevant, it was not included.

Throughout this report, the term "European" is used to represent the five countries included in this study, not all of Europe, and the term "parent" is used to represent both parents and caregivers. Graphs and charts may not add to 100% due to rounding. In some instances, the number of respondents differs from 2,644 as some questions branched and were only seen by a subset of respondents based on their previous answers. All data was tested for significant difference at the 95% confidence level.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

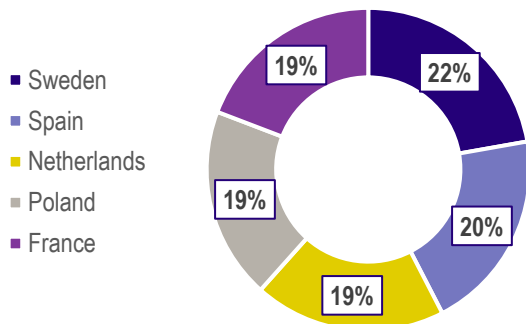
A majority of surveyed parents rank online safety as their foremost concern for their children; they are fearful about exposure to harmful content, such as sexual and pornographic material, online predators, and contact with strangers. Parents largely feel confident and well-equipped to talk to their children about online safety issues – relying on their instincts to guide them -- but their universal shock at a variety of statistics about online child abuse point towards there being a lot more to learn.

Pivoting from the alarm raised by NCMEC statistics, messages stressing the importance of equipping children with tools to protect themselves and channeling the anger felt towards government and private companies not doing enough to protect children are likely successful strategies.

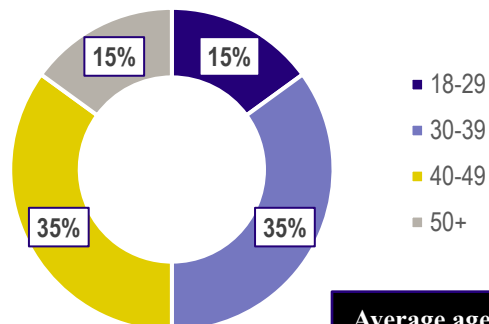
Social media presents the most effective channel for reaching this audience, regardless of country, with Facebook and Instagram being most universally referenced for credible news.

DEMOGRAPHICS OF RESPONDENTS

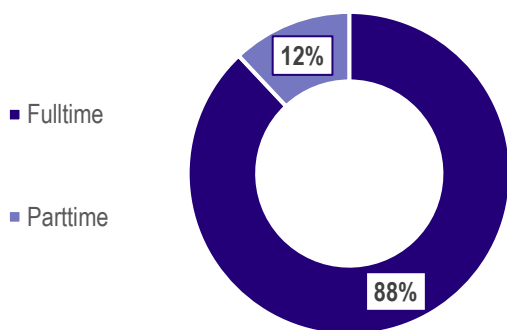
Country of residence (n=2,644)



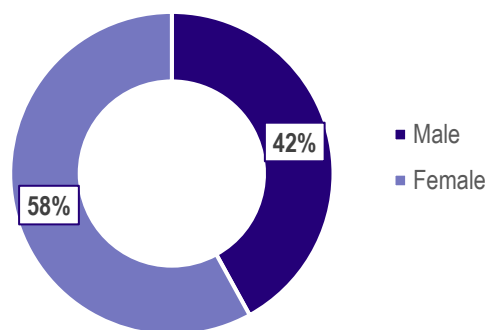
Age (n=2,644)



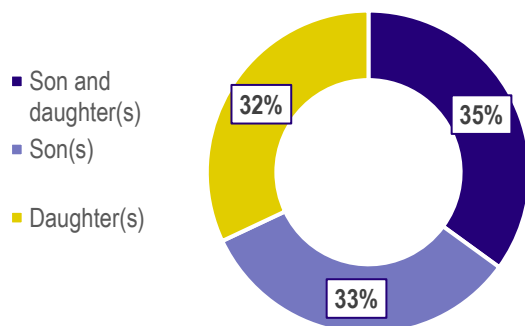
Parental status (n=2,644)



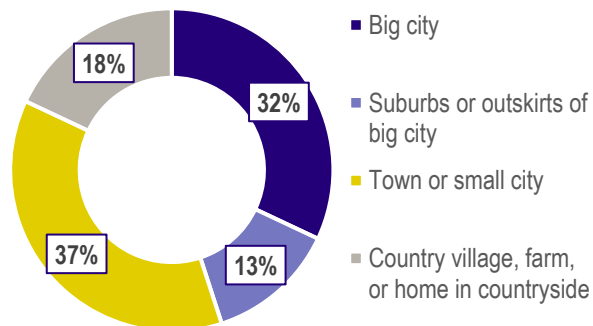
Gender (n=2,644)



Parents of...(n=2,644)



Community type (n=2,644)



DETAILED FINDINGS

A. Current landscape of online child safety from the parents' perspective

On average, one-half (55%) of European parents say online safety is their biggest concern for their children's wellbeing and development, ranking higher than mental (52%) or physical (48%) health, sleep quality (44%), social skills (41%), or academic performance (40%). This is the top concern among parents in Sweden (42%), Netherlands (40%), and Poland (48%). Parents in France (75%) and Spain (71%) are much more likely to be concerned about online safety than parents in other countries, however both the mental (78% and 75%, respectively) and physical (76% and 76%, respectively) health of their children is slightly more important to them than online safety. Nevertheless, parents in these countries are more likely to be concerned about all aspects, so little stock should be placed in their disproportionate concern for online safety.

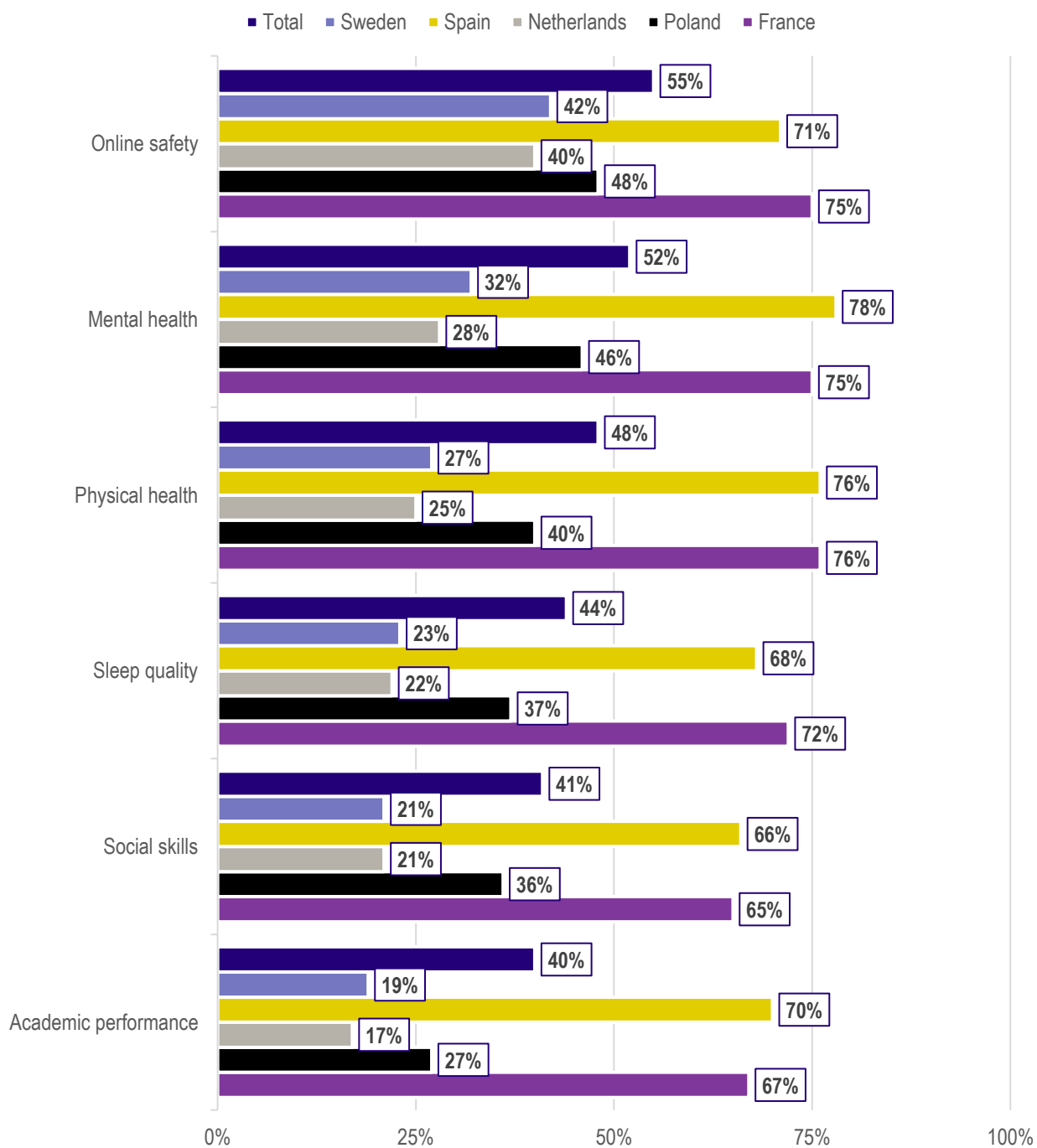
Mothers (57%) are slightly more likely than fathers (52%) to be concerned about their child(ren)'s online safety as are parents who live in a big city (60%), compared to parents who live in smaller communities, like the suburbs (50%), a town or small city (55%), or somewhere more rural (49%).

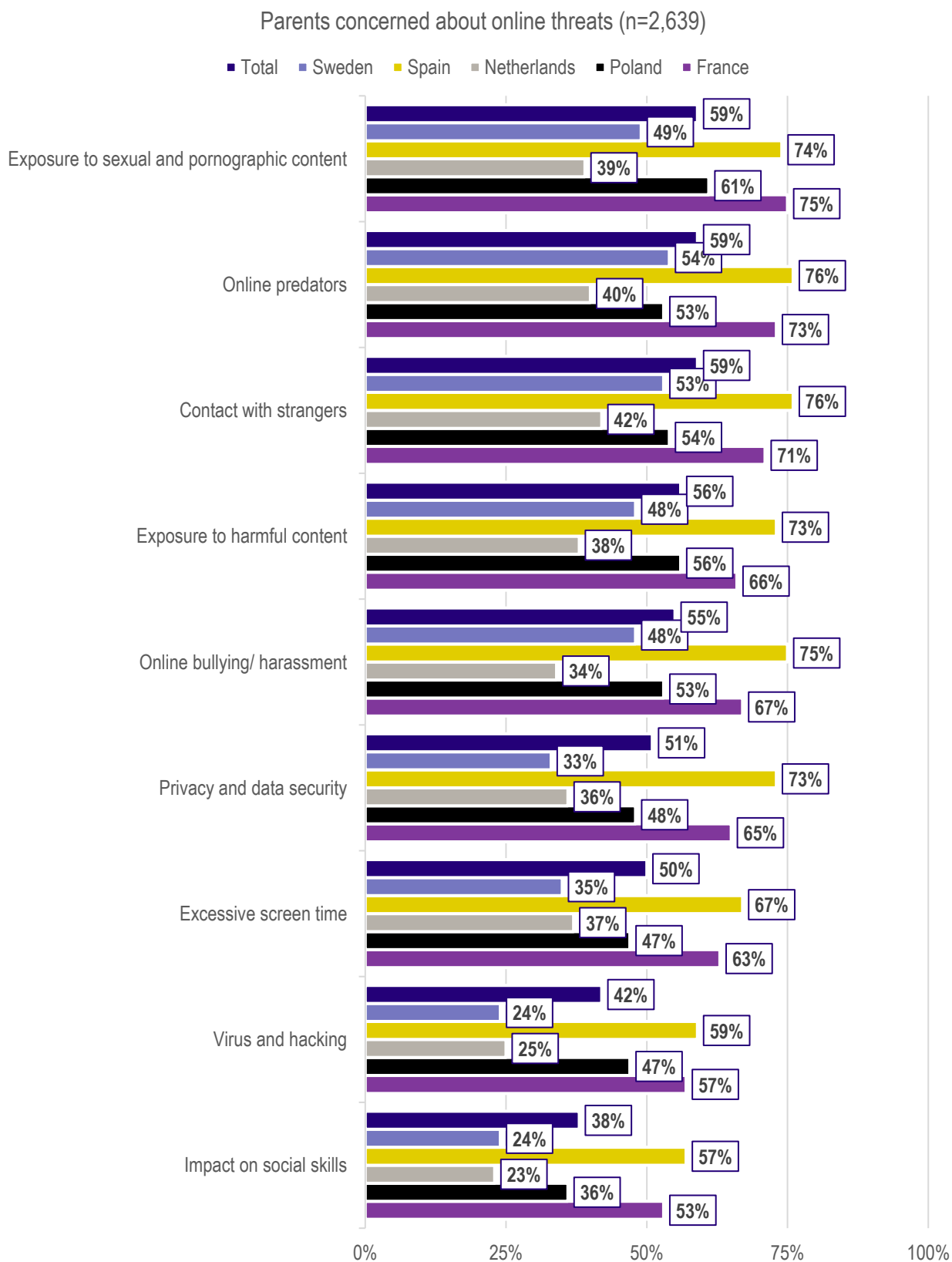
Three in five parents are concerned about their child(ren) being exposed to sexual and pornographic content online (59%), online predators (59%), and their child making contact with strangers (59%) when online. A majority are also worried about exposure to harmful content (56%), online bullying and harassment (55%), privacy and data security (51%), and excessive screen time (50%). Fewer parents are concerned with viruses and hacking (42%) or the internet's impact on their child(ren)'s social skills (38%) than the previously mentioned threats to their safety. Parents of families living in a big city are more concerned about each item than those living in smaller communities.

Parents in Sweden are most concerned with the threat of online predators (54%); in Poland (61%) and France (75%), they are most worried about exposure to sexual and pornographic content (61%). Those in Spain are equally concerned with online predators (76%) and contact with strangers (76%) – the latter being the top concern among parents in the Netherlands (42%), though they are, overall, less concerned by every potential threat than their counterparts.

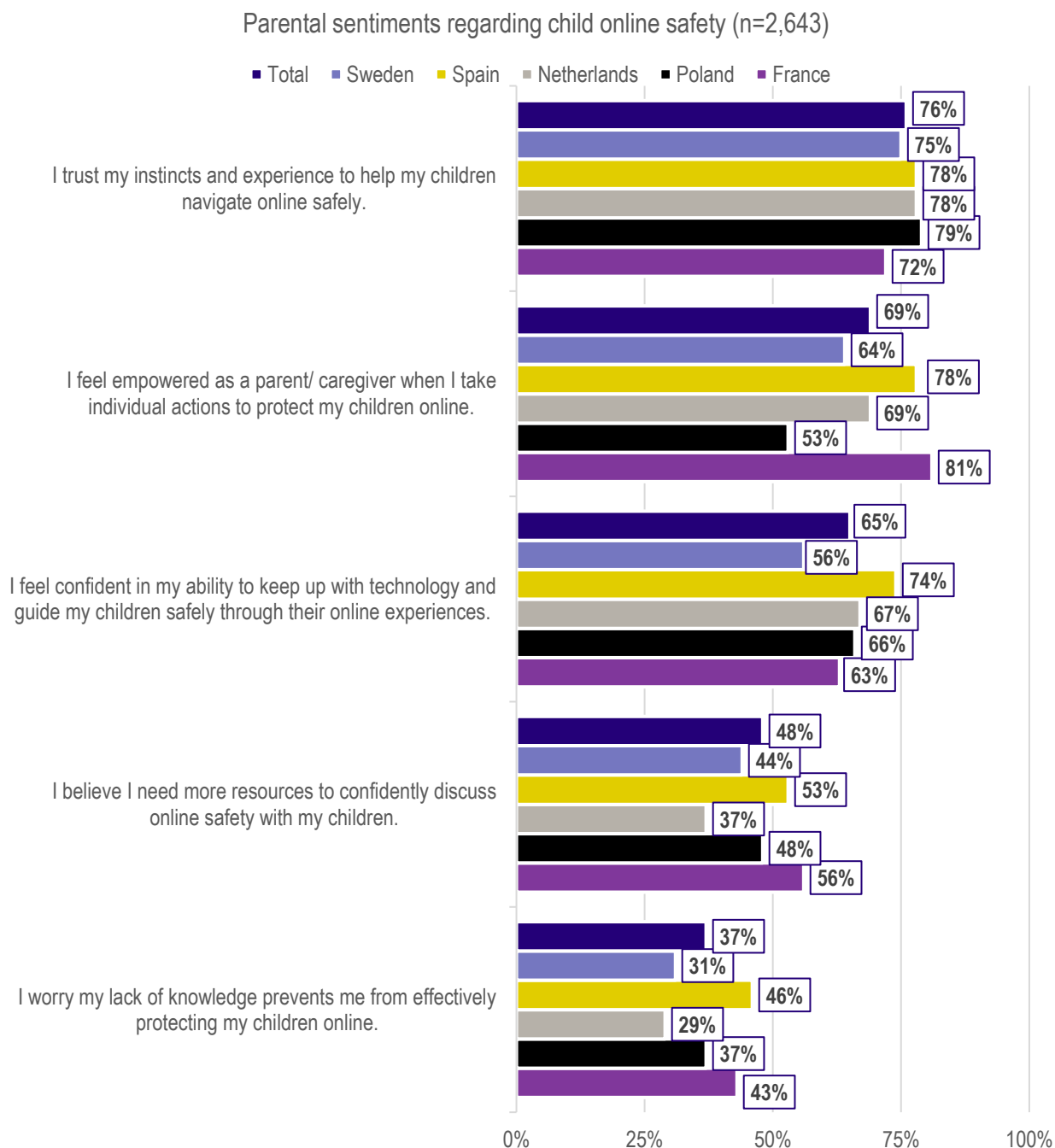
As observed earlier, parents in Spain and France are much more likely than their counterparts in other surveyed countries to be concerned with each of these factors while parents in Sweden and the Netherlands are less likely to be concerned. This should not be interpreted as parents in these respective countries care more or less than others; it may simply be culturally more appropriate to reveal or downplay such concerns.

Parental concerns regarding child(ren)'s well-being and development (n=2,635)



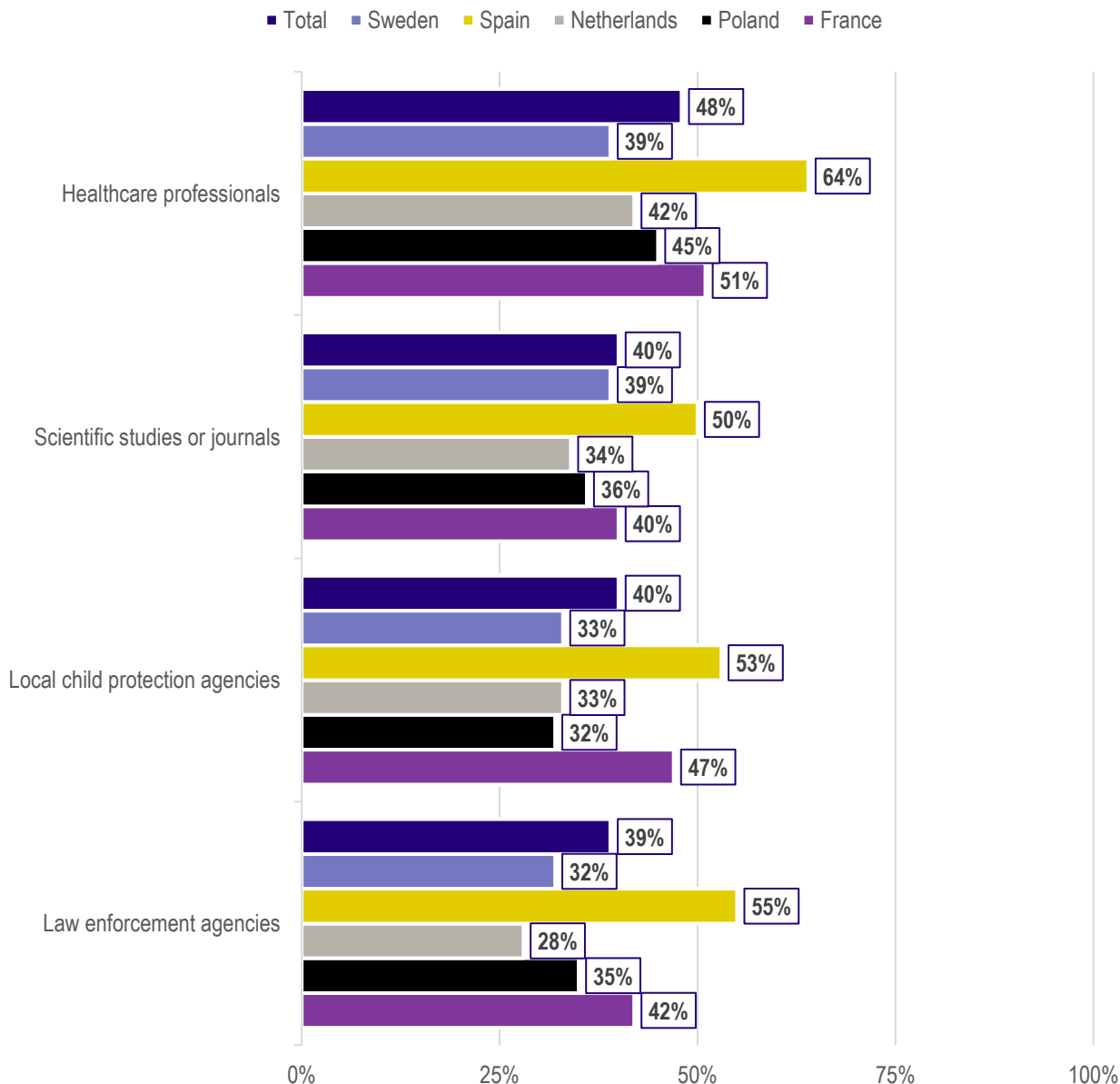


Overall, most parents feel equipped and ready to tackle the challenge of keeping their children safe online. Seven in ten parents (69%) feel empowered when they take individual actions to protect their children online and two-thirds are confident (66%) when they talk to their children about internet safety. Three-quarters of parents trust their instincts and experience to help their children navigate online safety (76%) and nearly as many feel confident in their ability to keep up with technology and guide their children through online experiences (65%). However, about one-half acknowledge they need more resources to confidently discuss online safety with their children (48%). Only one-third worry their lack of knowledge prevents them from effectively protecting their children online (37%).

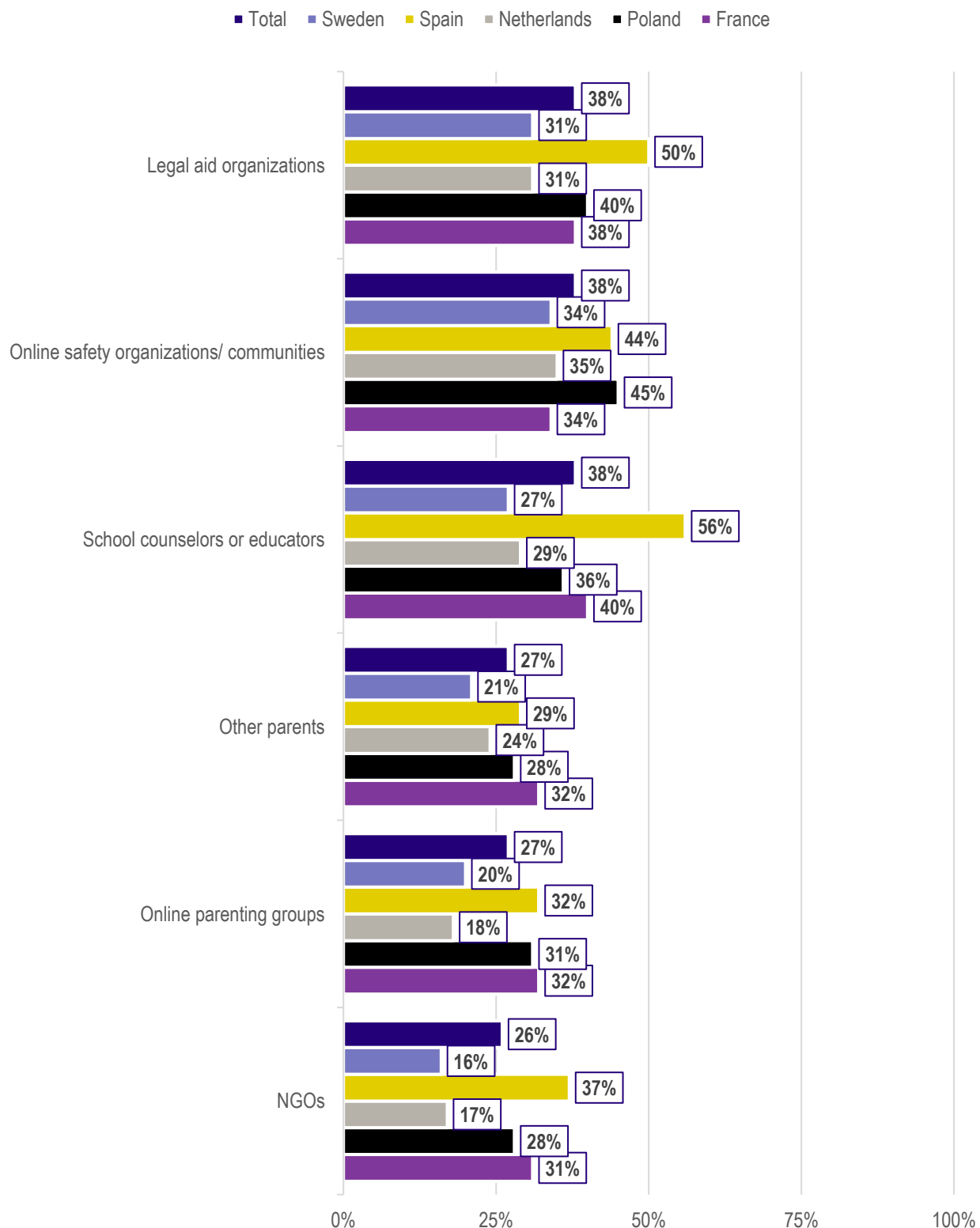


Nearly one-half (48%) of parents trust health care professionals when it comes to providing credible resources and information regarding child online safety while two in five trust scientific studies or journals (40%), local child protection agencies (40%), and law enforcement agencies (39%). Unfortunately, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) rank last in terms of being a credible source of this type of information for parents, with only one-quarter (26%) saying they would look here for resources and support.

Credible sources of information regarding child online safety (n=2,635)

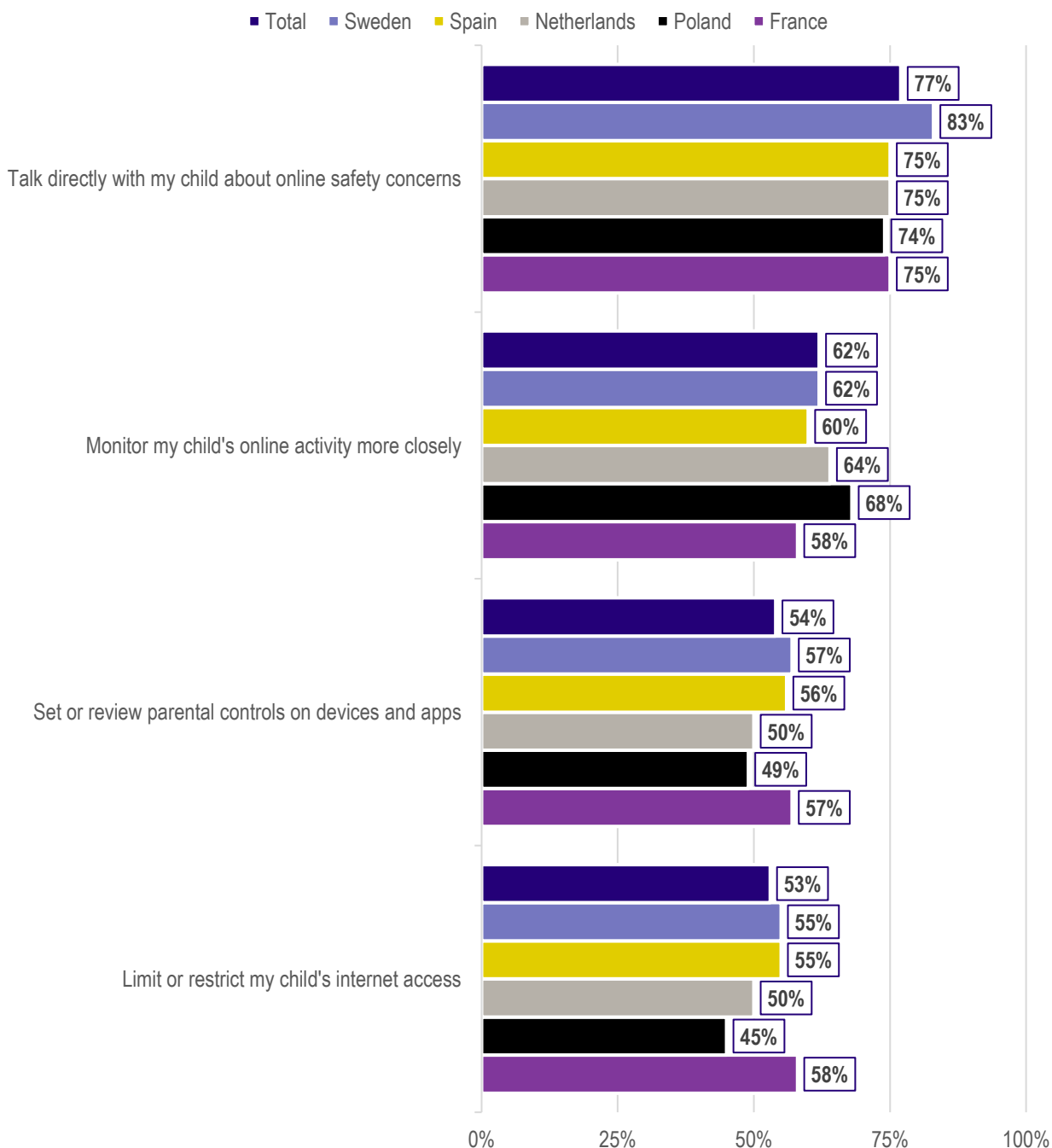


Credible sources of information regarding child online safety (cont.) (n=2,635)

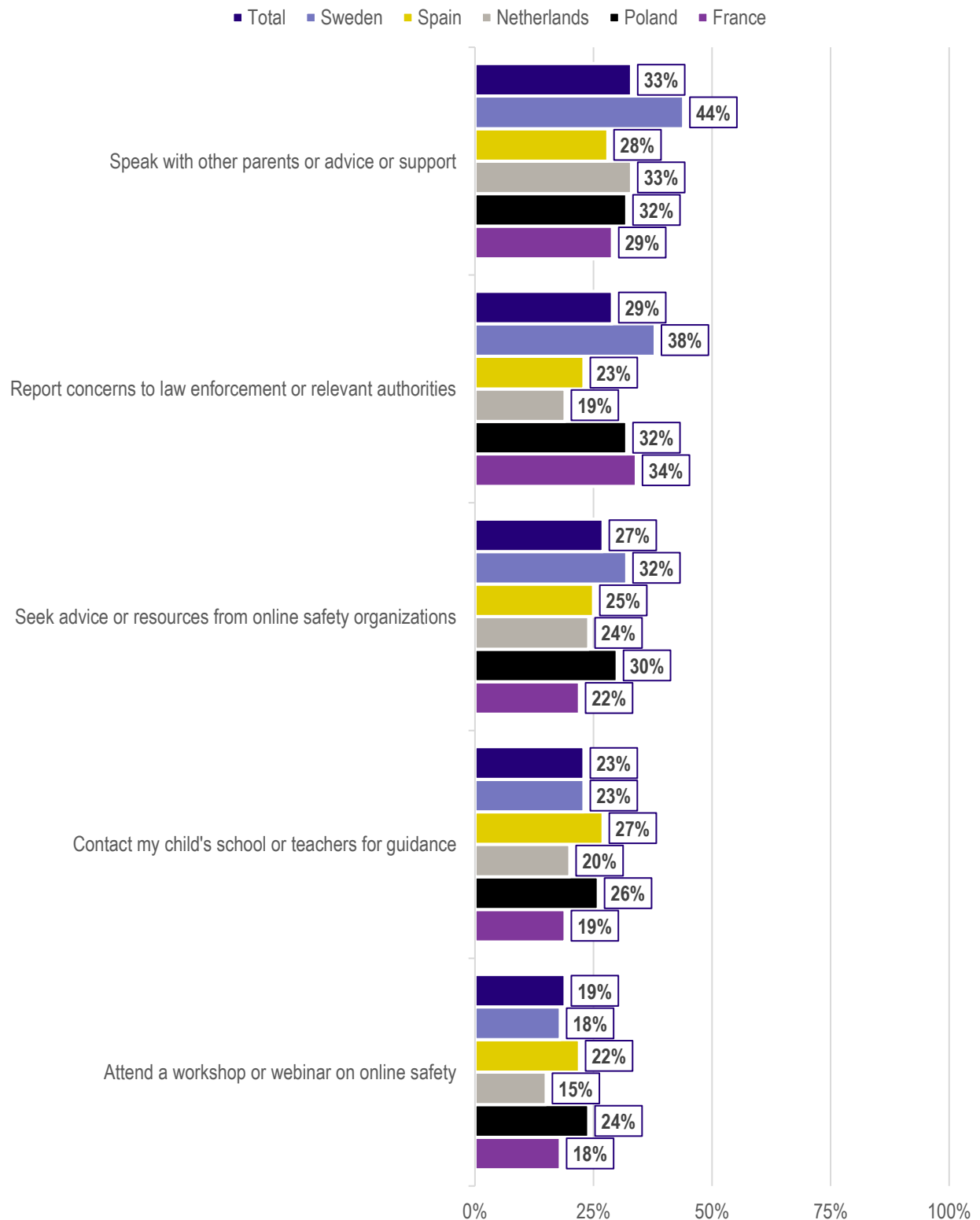


To keep their child(ren) safe online, three-quarters of parents (77%) plan to talk directly with their child(ren) and three in five (62%) would monitor their online activity more closely. A majority would set or review parental controls on devices and apps (54%) and limit or restrict their child(ren)'s internet access (53%). Fewer would seek advice or resources from online safety organizations (27%) or attend a workshop or webinar on online safety (19%).

Actions parents would take regarding their child's online safety (n=2,644)



Actions parents would take regarding their child's online safety (cont.) (n=2,644)



B. Taking action against online child abuse

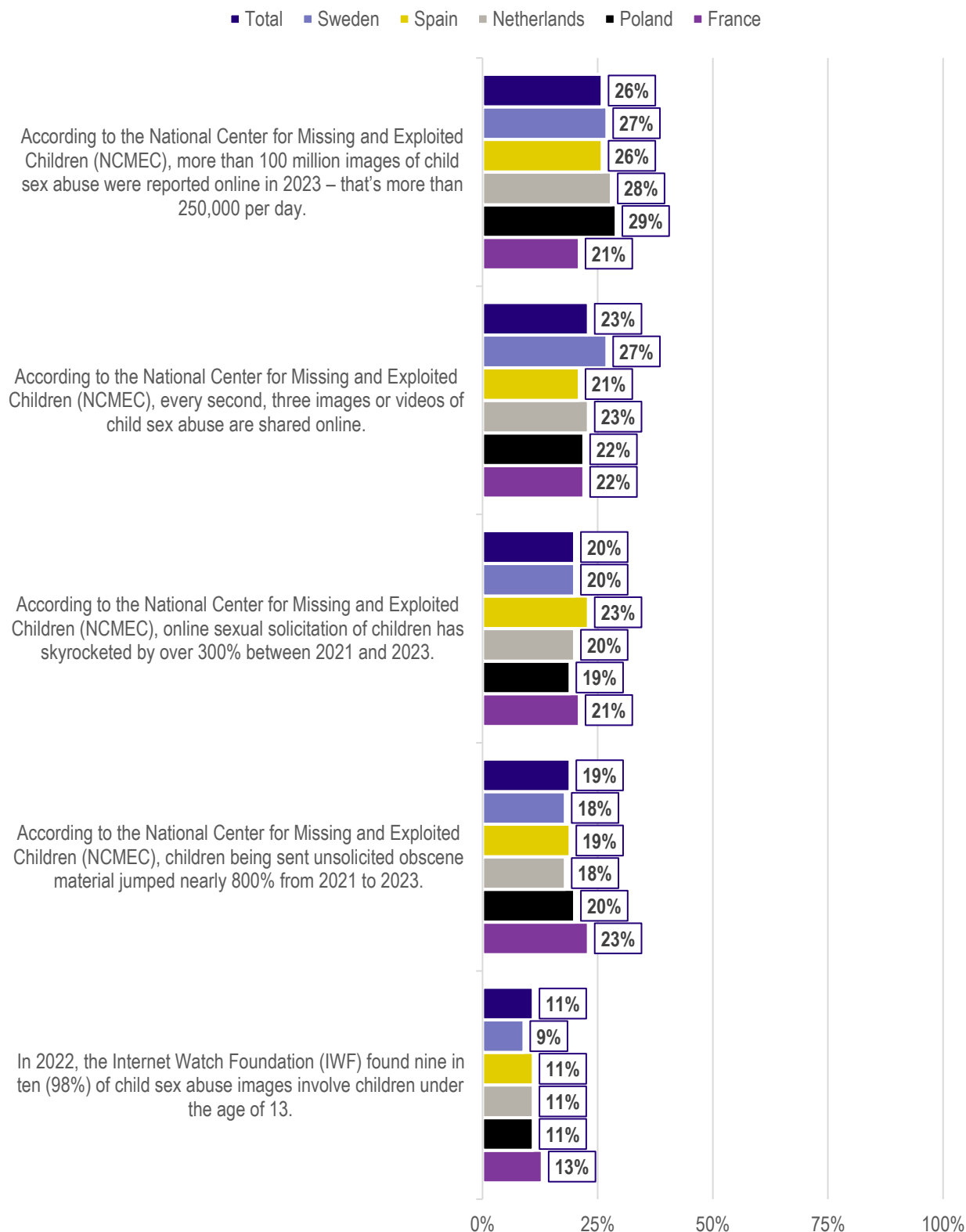
One-quarter of parents find the following statistic most attention grabbing (26%) and motivating to take action (26%): *“According to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC), more than 100 million images of child sex abuse were reported online in 2023 – that’s more than 250,000 per day.”* The other statistics from NCMEC also fared well – garnering attention from roughly one in five parents -- while the single statistic from another source (Internet Watch Foundation) did not perform as well (11% attention grabbing, 14% motivating to take action).

When parents learn the government and private companies have the power to protect children online but do not make it a priority, the most common response is anger (28%) followed distantly by sadness (14%) and disbelief (12%). Channeling this anger, one-third of parents (34%) are likely to participate in a collective effort to enhance online safety for children if they were confident such an initiative would be effective; factoring in those who are also “somewhat likely” to take such an action, this rises to three-quarters (76%) of parents.

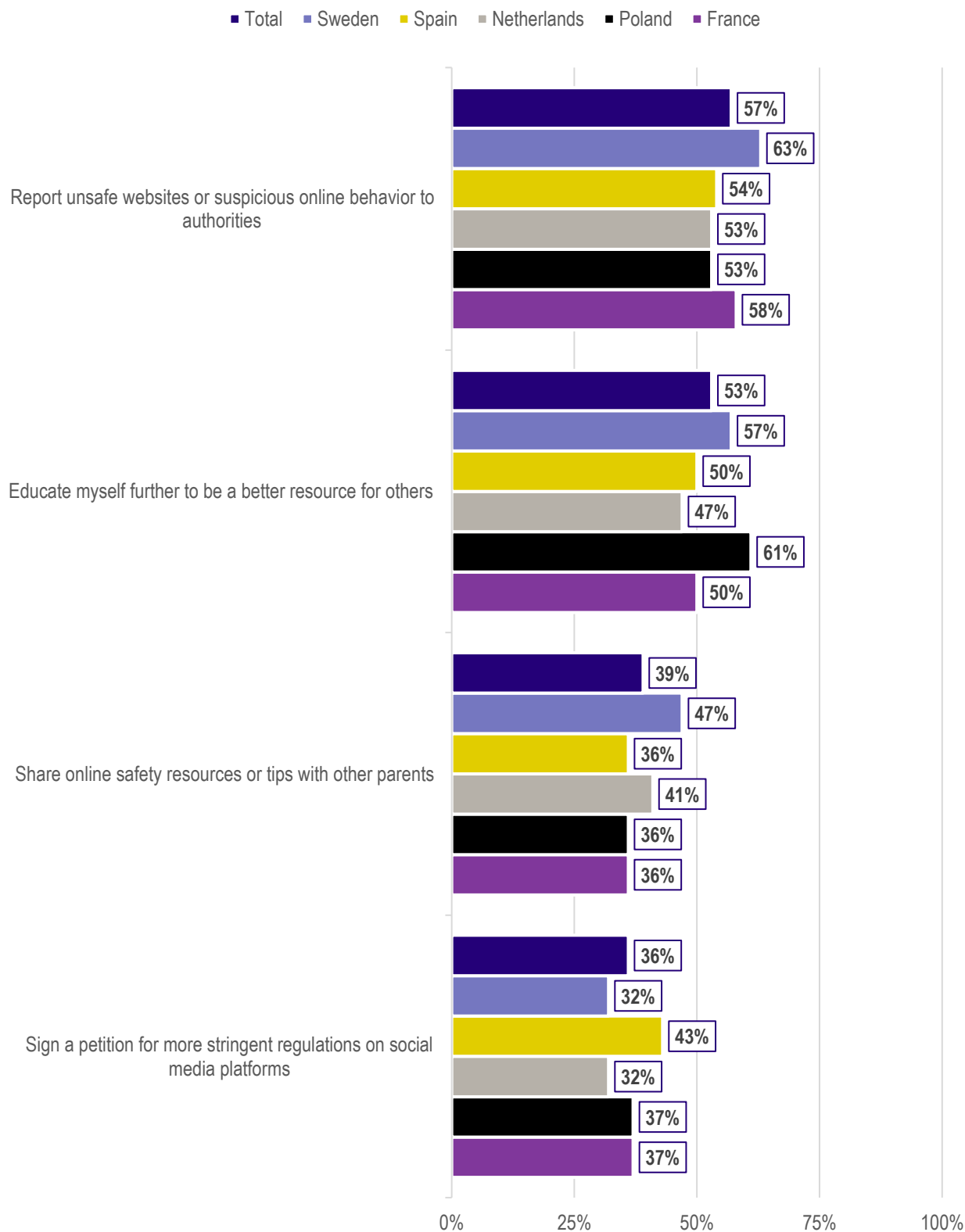
A majority of parents say they would report unsafe websites or suspicious online behavior to authorities (57%) and educate themselves further to be a better resource for others (53%) while two in five (39%) say they would share online safety resources or tips with other parents.



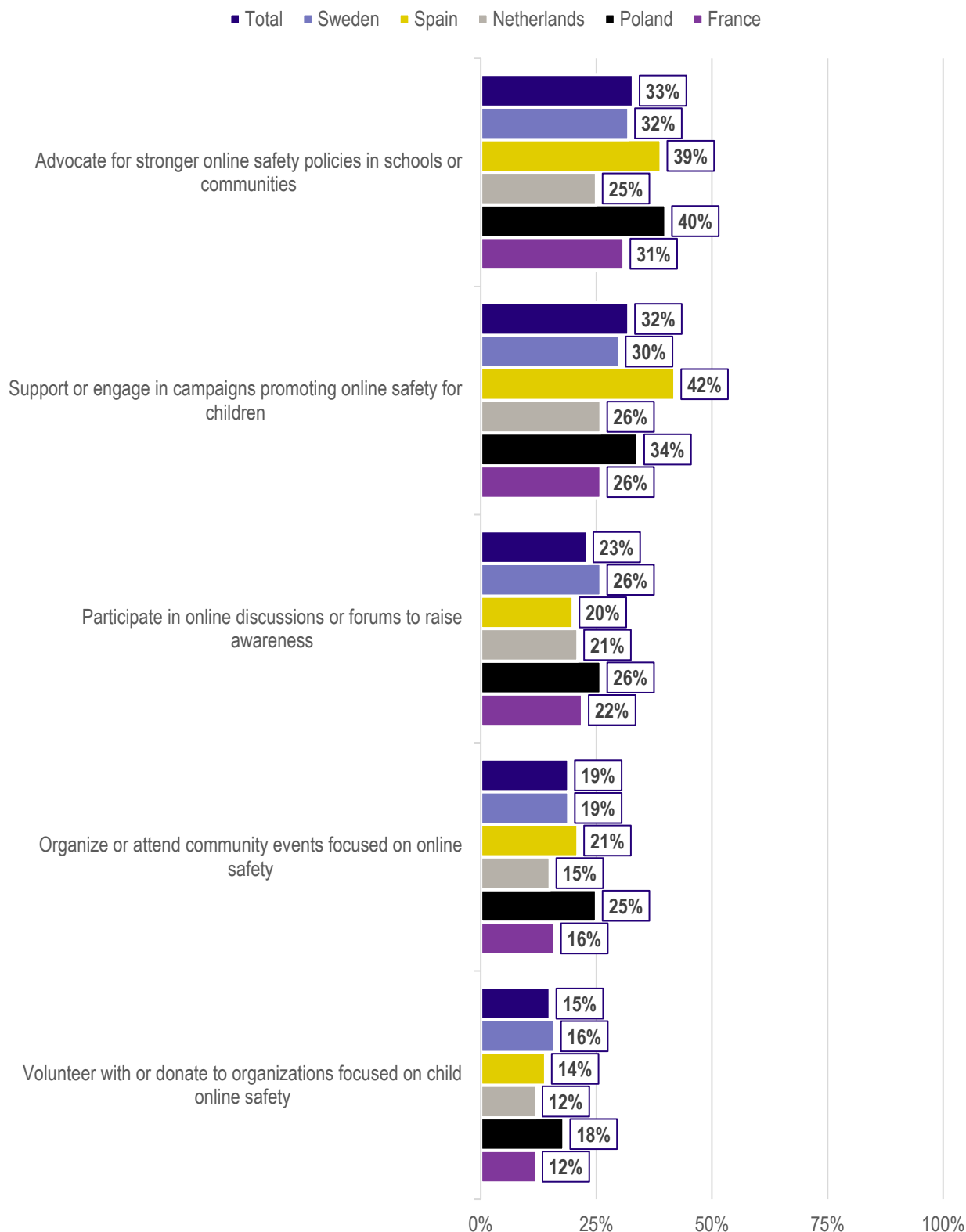
Most attention-grabbing statistic (n=2,644)



Actions parents would take to increase children's safety online (n=2,644)



Actions parents would take to increase children's safety online (cont.) (n=2,644)



C. Resonate messages and communication strategies

Three in five parents respond well to all tested messages, but the following two stood out among the rest both overall and in each of the surveyed countries:

“Our role as parents is to empower our children to grow and develop into healthy, responsible adults – and part of that includes teaching them how to stay safe in the real world and online.”

“We can’t be everywhere at once, so it is important to teach our children about proper online safety practices to avoid child sexual abuse.”

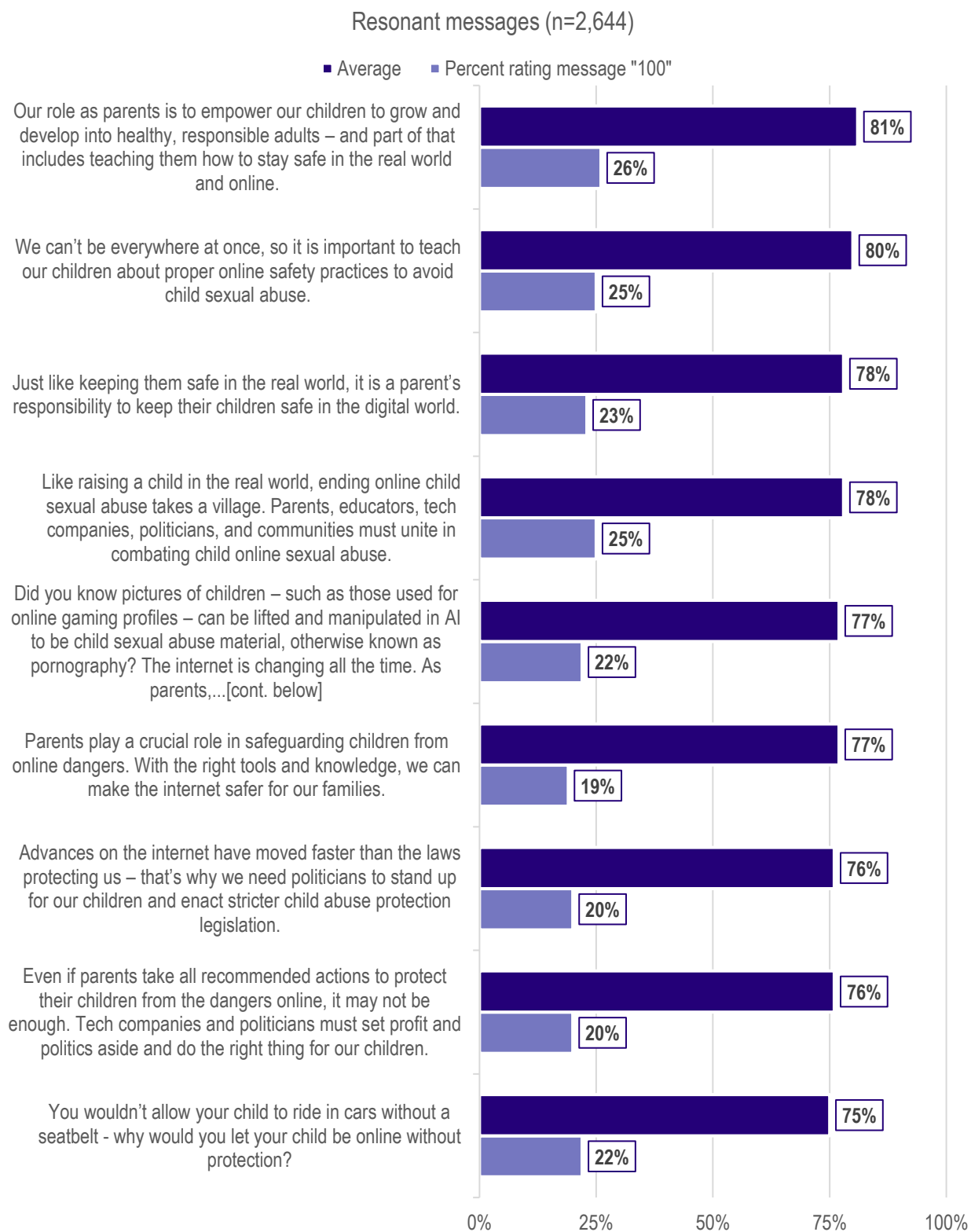
These messages resonate with four in five parents (81% and 80%, respectively) and one-quarter (26% and 25%, respectively) even rate them “100” out of 1-100, saying they are “extremely compelling.” While themes of taking personal responsibility to keep children safe online are impactful, it is these messages emphasizing the importance of equipping children with the tools to keep themselves safe which parents find most evocative.

Resonate messages organized by country can be found in Appendix A.

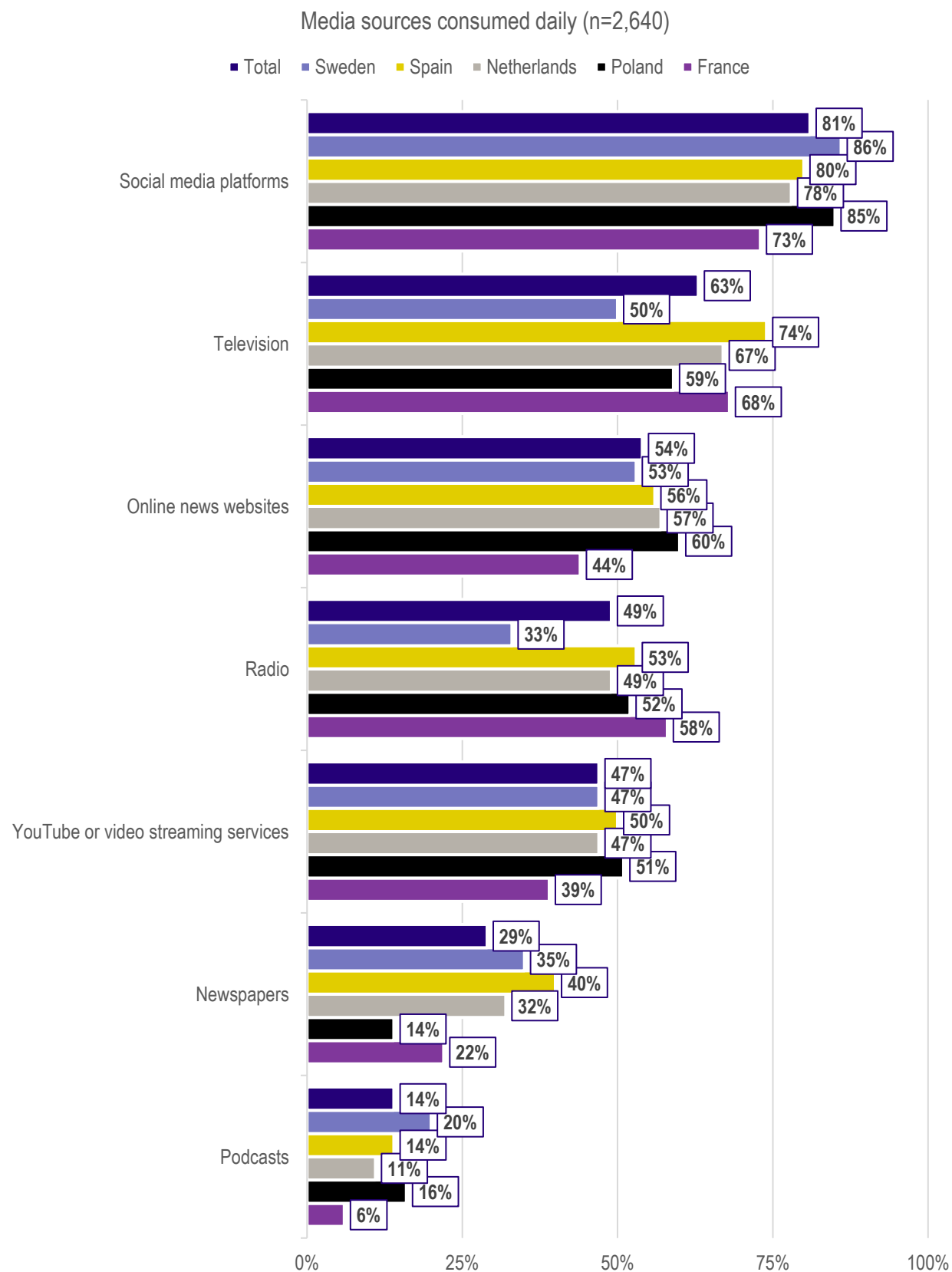
Four in five parents (81%) can be reached through social media, a majority of whom are on Facebook (64%) and/or Instagram (59%). However, this does vary slightly by country as those in Spain are most likely to be on Instagram (62%) and WhatsApp (59%), the latter of which is also popular in the Netherlands (56%); TikTok is more popular in the Netherlands (42%) than in other countries. Social media really seems to be the best place to most reliably reach this parent audience, though a majority also say they consume news from television (63%) and online news websites (54%).

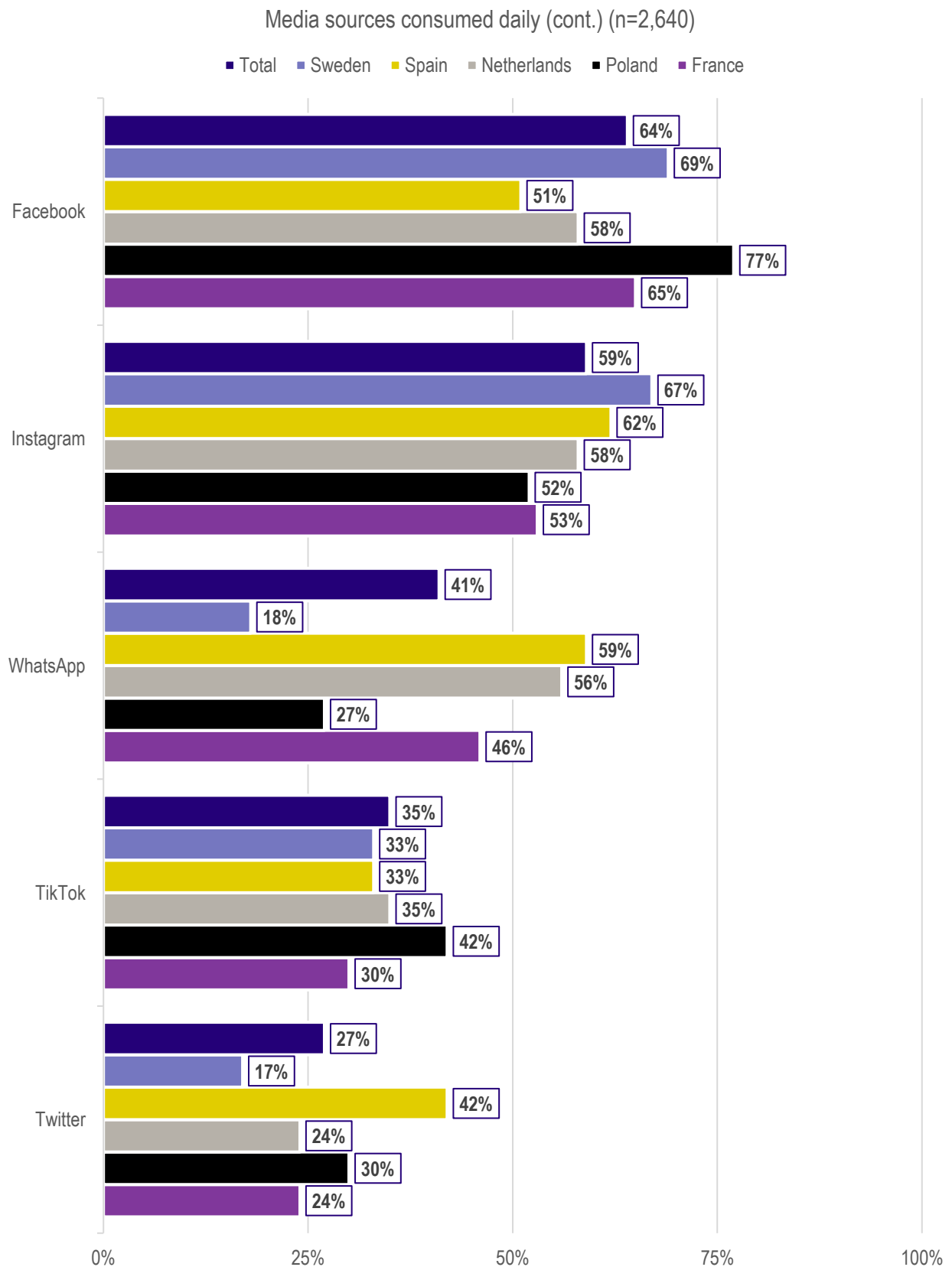
Those who favor the most popular two messages do not have any drastically different media consumption habits than the parent audience, at large. They are slightly less likely to be found on TikTok than the average parent.





[Cont]... we need to stay ahead of the curve and educate ourselves and our children on ways to avoid risky or unsafe online behaviors.





CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

For parents in Sweden, the Netherlands, and Poland, online safety is their top concern for their children – and a majority in Spain and France are also very concerned about this issue. This is an excellent starting point for parents as they are already clued into this issue's importance. However, many parents already feel informed and confident when they speak to their child about online child safety, therefore, it is important for messaging reaching parents to disrupt this notion. Introducing statistics which may challenge a parents' idea of what they think they know on this topic could help them realize there is still a lot to learn both on the potential online risks to child safety and strategies to keep their child safe.

Statistics from NCMEC are effective with parents from all countries, particularly the one reading, "According to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC), more than 100 million images of child sex abuse were reported online in 2023 – that's more than 250,000 per day." This information is likely new, shocking, and disturbing to parents which well-positions them to be open to both learning more about this topic – particularly since so many already feel they are informed – and ready to take action. Parents are angry the government and private companies have the power to protect children online but are not doing more, so channeling this anger into activism could be productive.

If only one or two messages are to be used across all audiences, it would be best to place the following messages on social media platforms, namely Facebook and/or Instagram: "Our role as parents is to empower our children to grow and develop into healthy, responsible adults – and part of that includes teaching them how to stay safe in the real world and online;" and/or "We can't be everywhere at once, so it is important to teach our children about proper online safety practices to avoid child sexual abuse." Other messages employing themes of equipping children to be autonomous and keep themselves safe may also be effective.

If country-specific campaigns are to be run, the following is recommended:

Sweden

Strongest messages: "Our role as parents is to empower our children to grow and develop into healthy, responsible adults – and part of that includes teaching them how to stay safe in the real world and online;" and/or "We can't be everywhere at once, so it is important to teach our children about proper online safety practices to avoid child sexual abuse."

Best placement: Social media (Facebook and Instagram)

Spain

Strongest messages: "Our role as parents is to empower our children to grow and develop into healthy, responsible adults – and part of that includes teaching them how to stay safe in the real world and online;" "We can't be everywhere at once, so it is important to teach our children about proper online safety practices to avoid child sexual abuse;" and "Like raising a child in the real world, ending online child sexual abuse takes a village. Parents, educators, tech companies, politicians, and communities must unite in combating child online sexual abuse."

Best placement: Social media (Instagram and WhatsApp, followed by Facebook)

Secondary placement: Television

Netherlands

Strongest message: *“Our role as parents is to empower our children to grow and develop into healthy, responsible adults – and part of that includes teaching them how to stay safe in the real world and online.”*

Secondary messages: *“We can’t be everywhere at once, so it is important to teach our children about proper online safety practices to avoid child sexual abuse;” and “Just like keeping them safe in the real world, it is a parent’s responsibility to keep their children safe in the digital world.”*

Best placement: Social media (Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp)

Secondary placement: Television

Poland

Strongest messages: *“Our role as parents is to empower our children to grow and develop into healthy, responsible adults – and part of that includes teaching them how to stay safe in the real world and online;” and “We can’t be everywhere at once, so it is important to teach our children about proper online safety practices to avoid child sexual abuse.”*

Best placement: Social media (Facebook, followed by Instagram and TikTok)

Secondary placement: Online news websites + television

France

Strongest message: *“Our role as parents is to empower our children to grow and develop into healthy, responsible adults – and part of that includes teaching them how to stay safe in the real world and online.”*

Secondary message: *“Like raising a child in the real world, ending online child sexual abuse takes a village. Parents, educators, tech companies, politicians, and communities must unite in combating child online sexual abuse.”*

Best placement: Social media (Facebook, followed by Instagram)

Secondary placement: Television

Parents feel empowered when they take proactive steps to protect their children, including online and a majority of surveyed parents are interested in both educating themselves more so they can be a resource to others and learn how to report unsafe websites or suspicious behavior to authorities. However, only one in five are likely to attend a workshop or webinar on this topic, so it is important to find ways to get this information in front of parents.

Parents from all surveyed countries find health care professionals to be the most credible sources of information regarding online child safety. Therefore, it may be impactful if communications to come from or accompanied with images of healthcare professionals, like pediatricians and child psychologists.

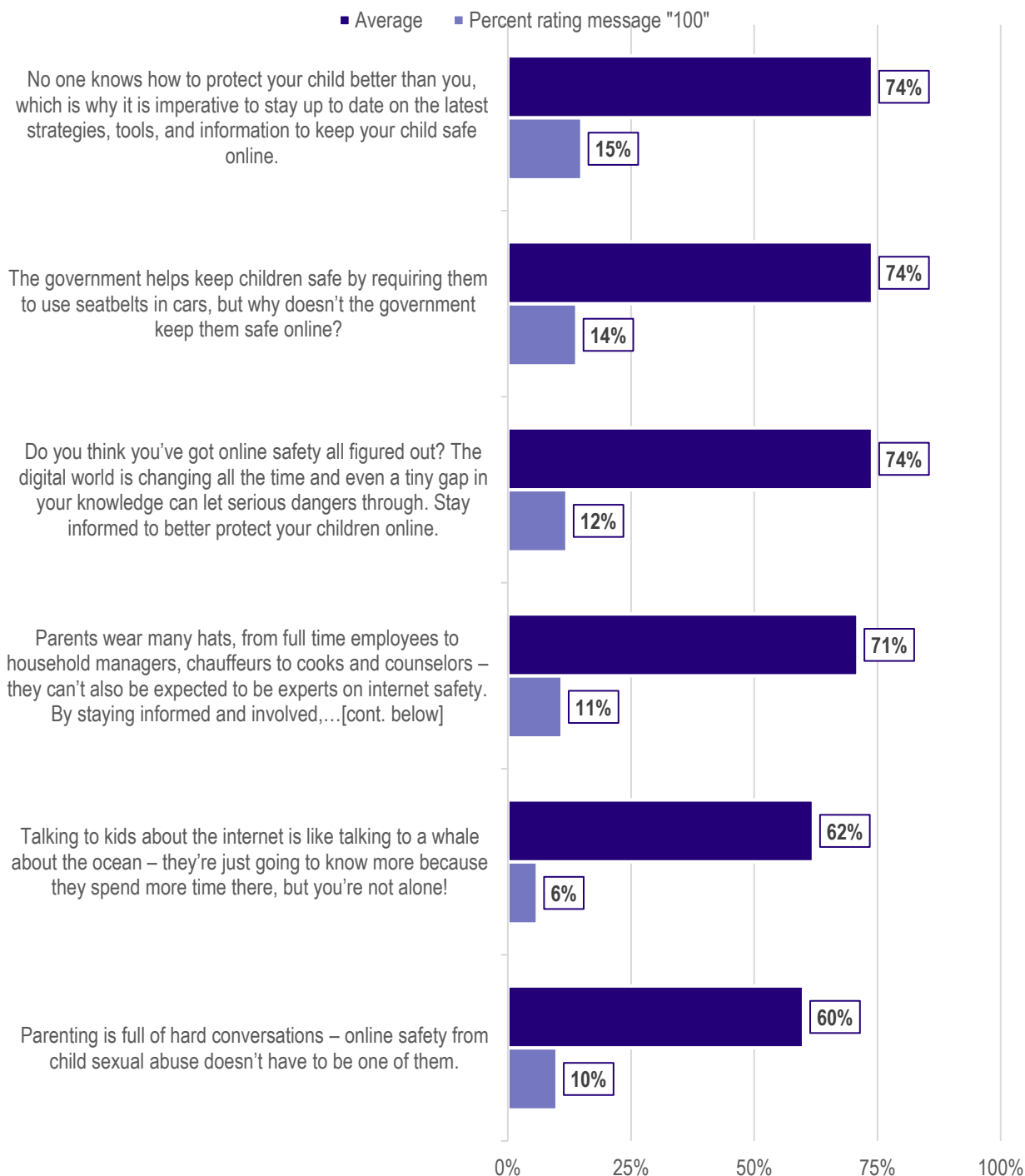
Appendix A: Resonant messages by country

FRANCE: Resonant messages (n=500)



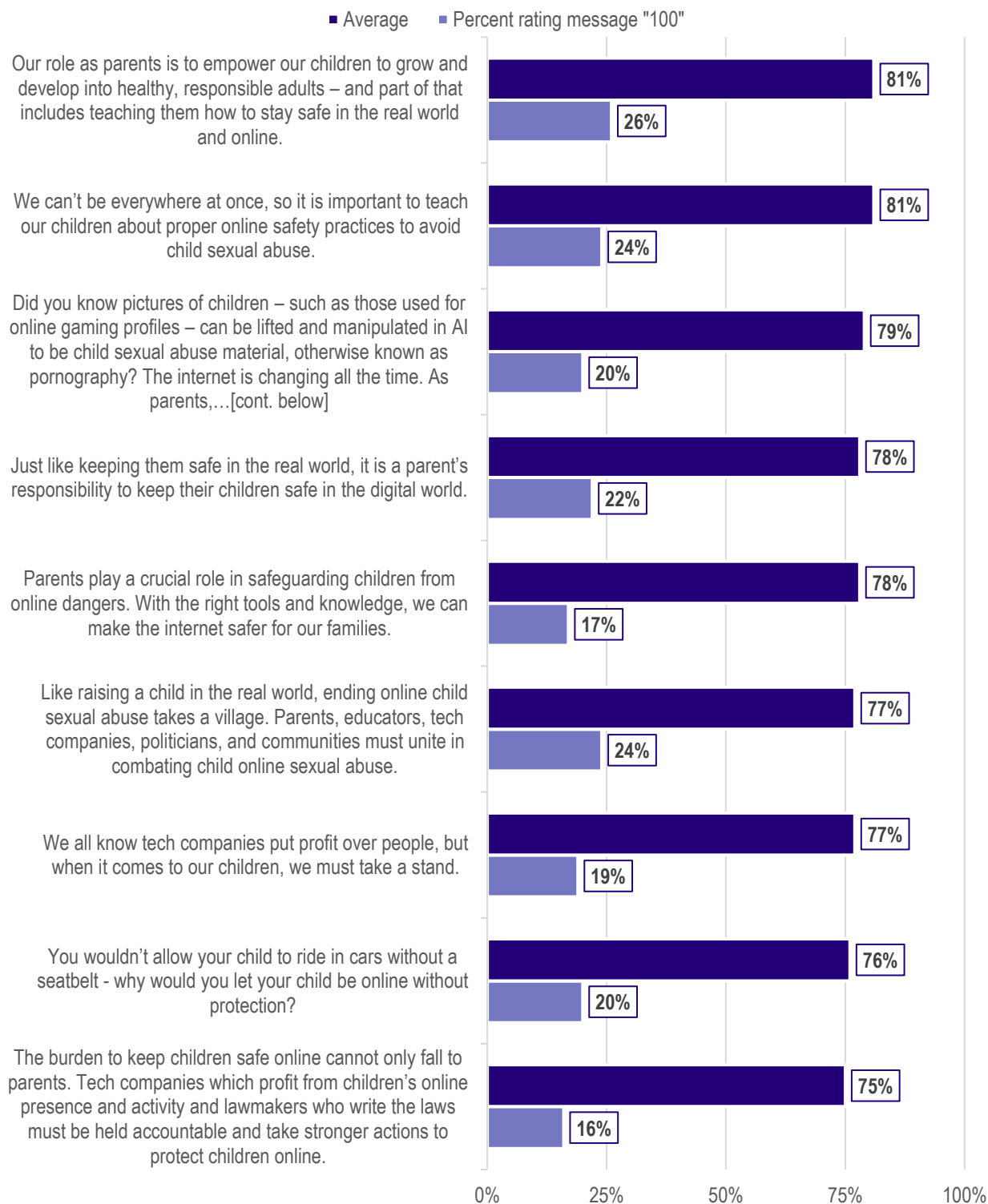
[Cont.] ...all the time. As parents, we need to stay ahead of the curve and educate ourselves and our children on ways to avoid risky or unsafe online behaviors.

FRANCE: Resonant messages (cont.) (n=500)



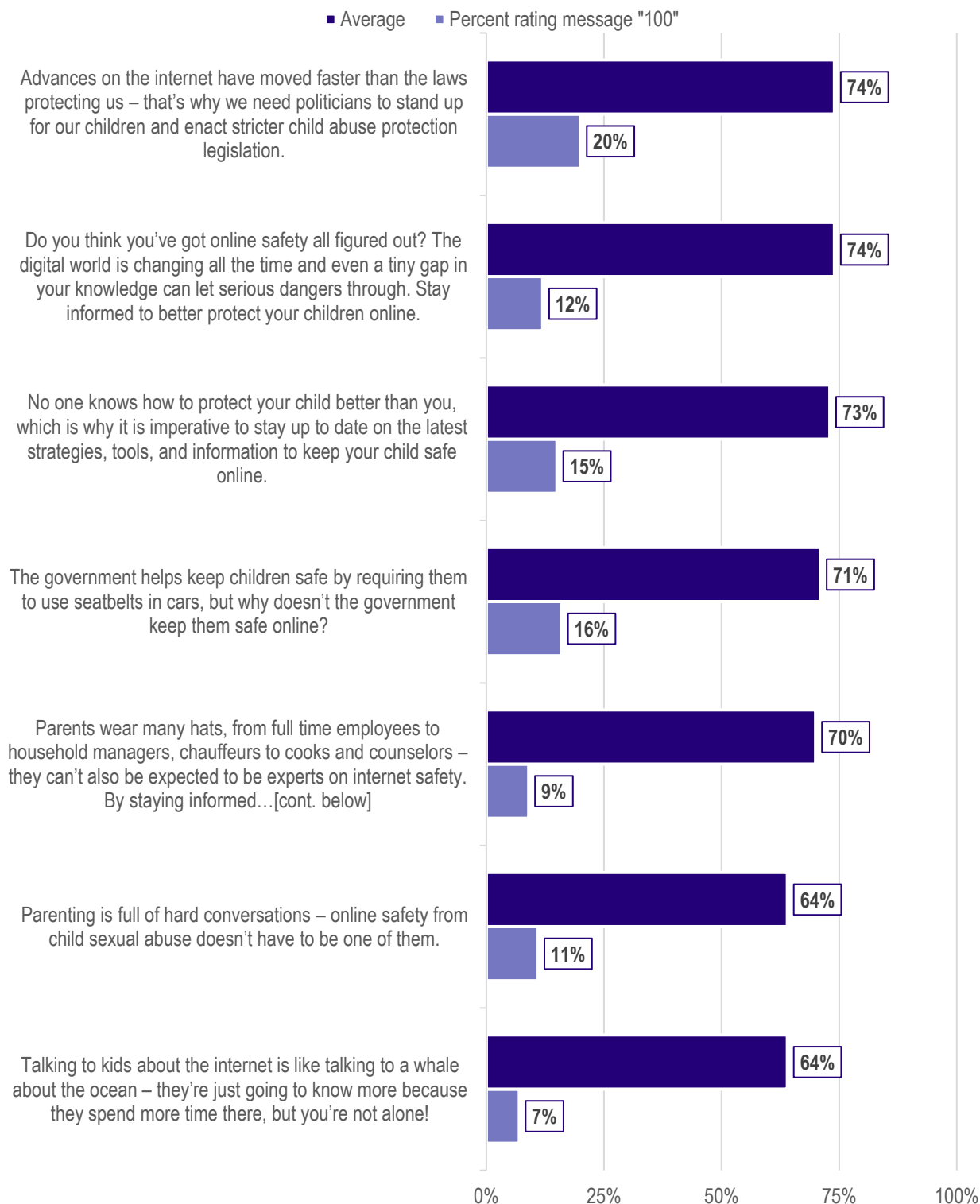
[Cont.] ...you can create a secure digital space for your child to learn, play, and thrive.

POLAND: Resonant messages (n=505)



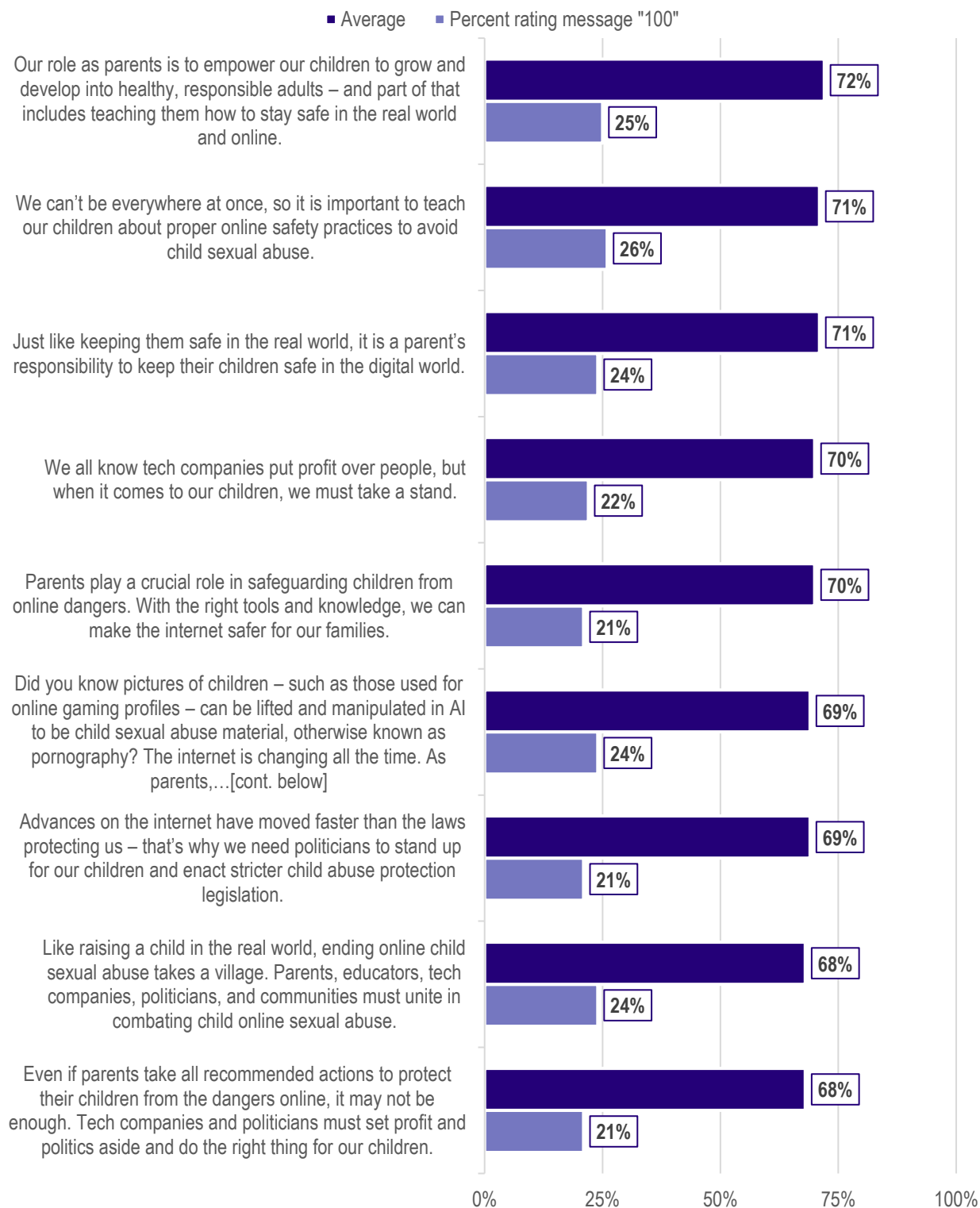
[Cont.] ...we need to stay ahead of the curve and educate ourselves and our children on ways to avoid risky or unsafe online behaviors.

POLAND: Resonant messages (cont.) (n=505)



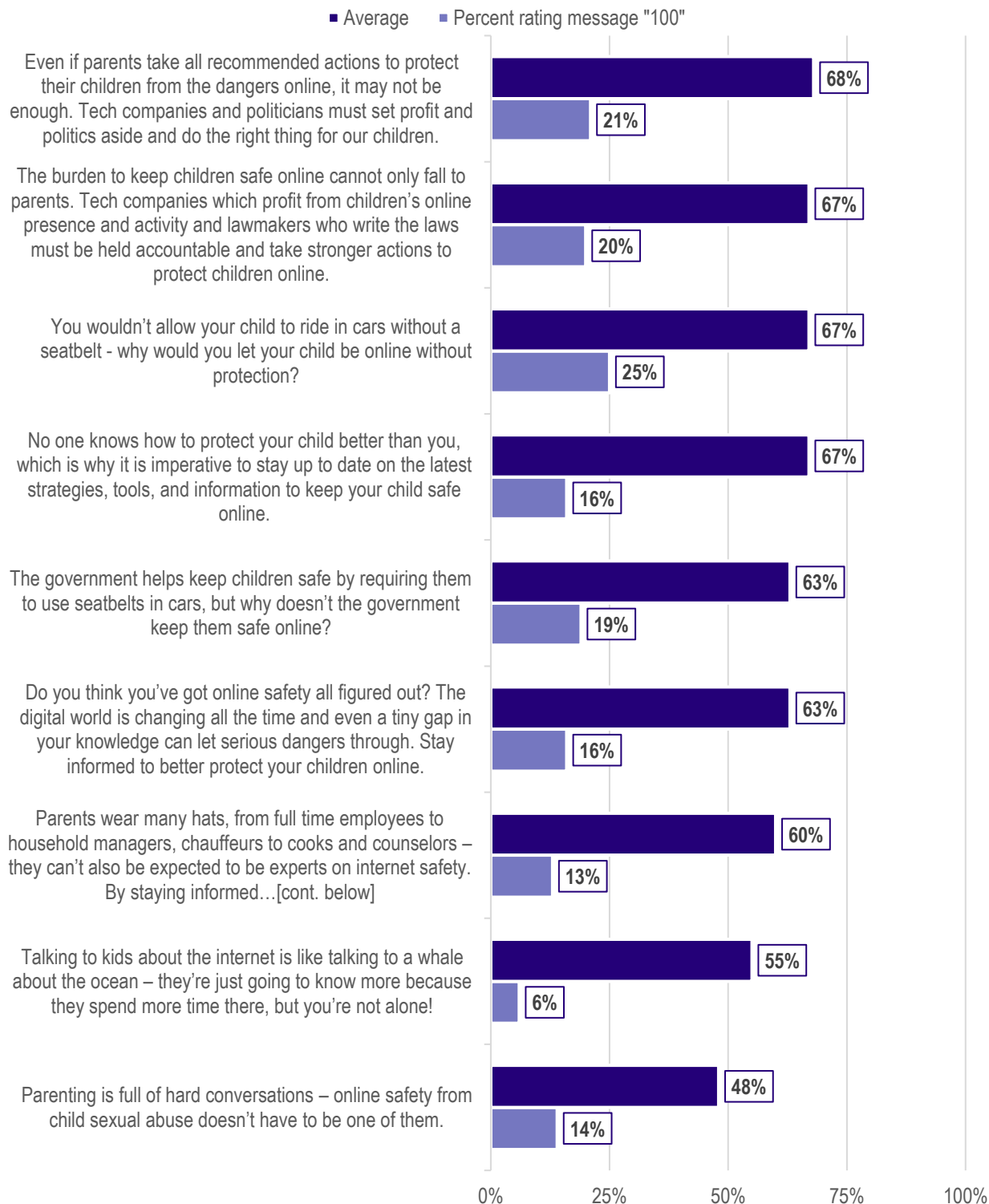
[Cont. [...and involved, you can create a secure digital space for your child to learn, play, and thrive.

NETHERLANDS: Resonant messages (n=510)



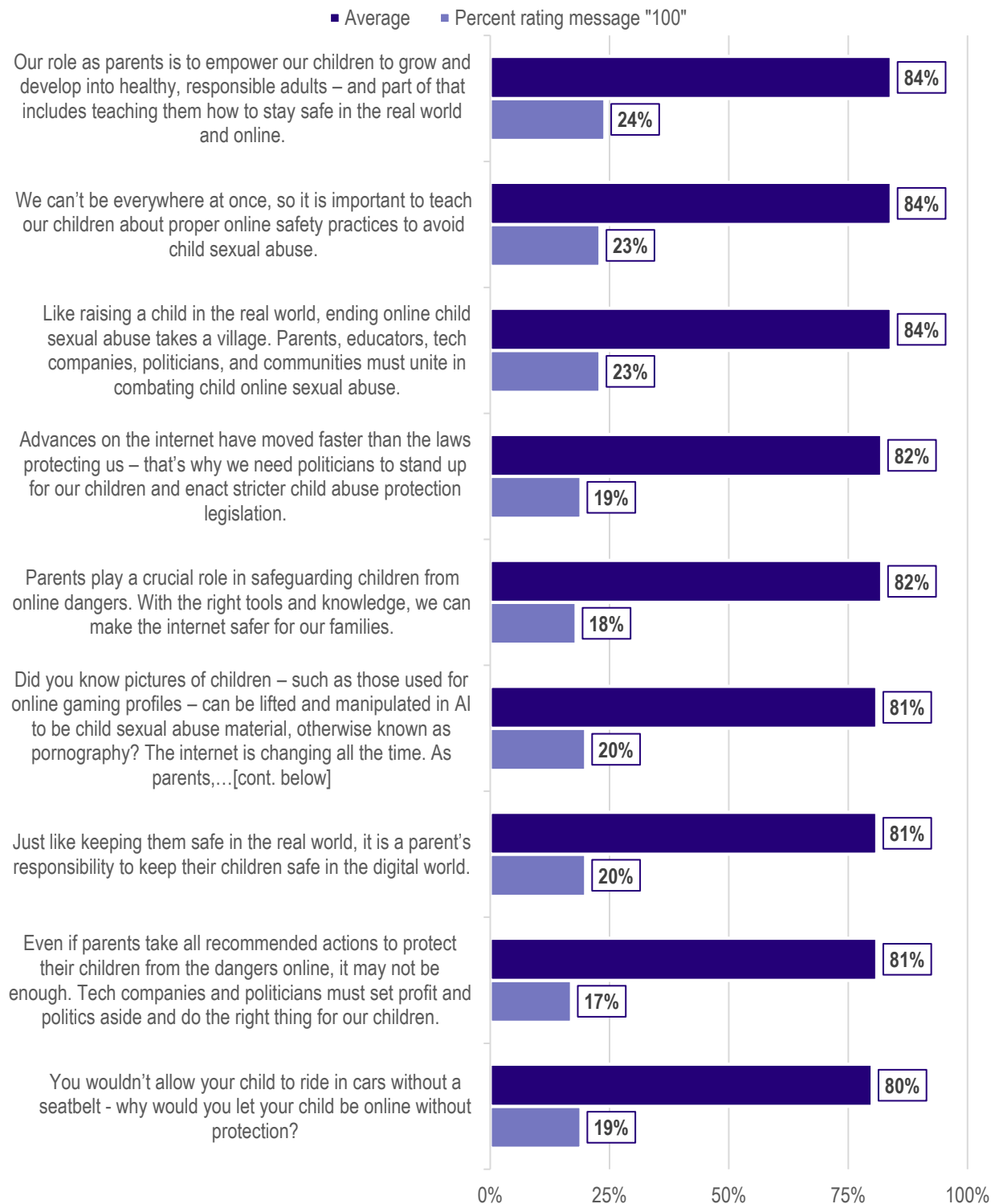
[Cont.] ...we need to stay ahead of the curve and educate ourselves and our children on ways to avoid risky or unsafe online behaviors.

NETHERLANDS: Resonant messages (n=510)



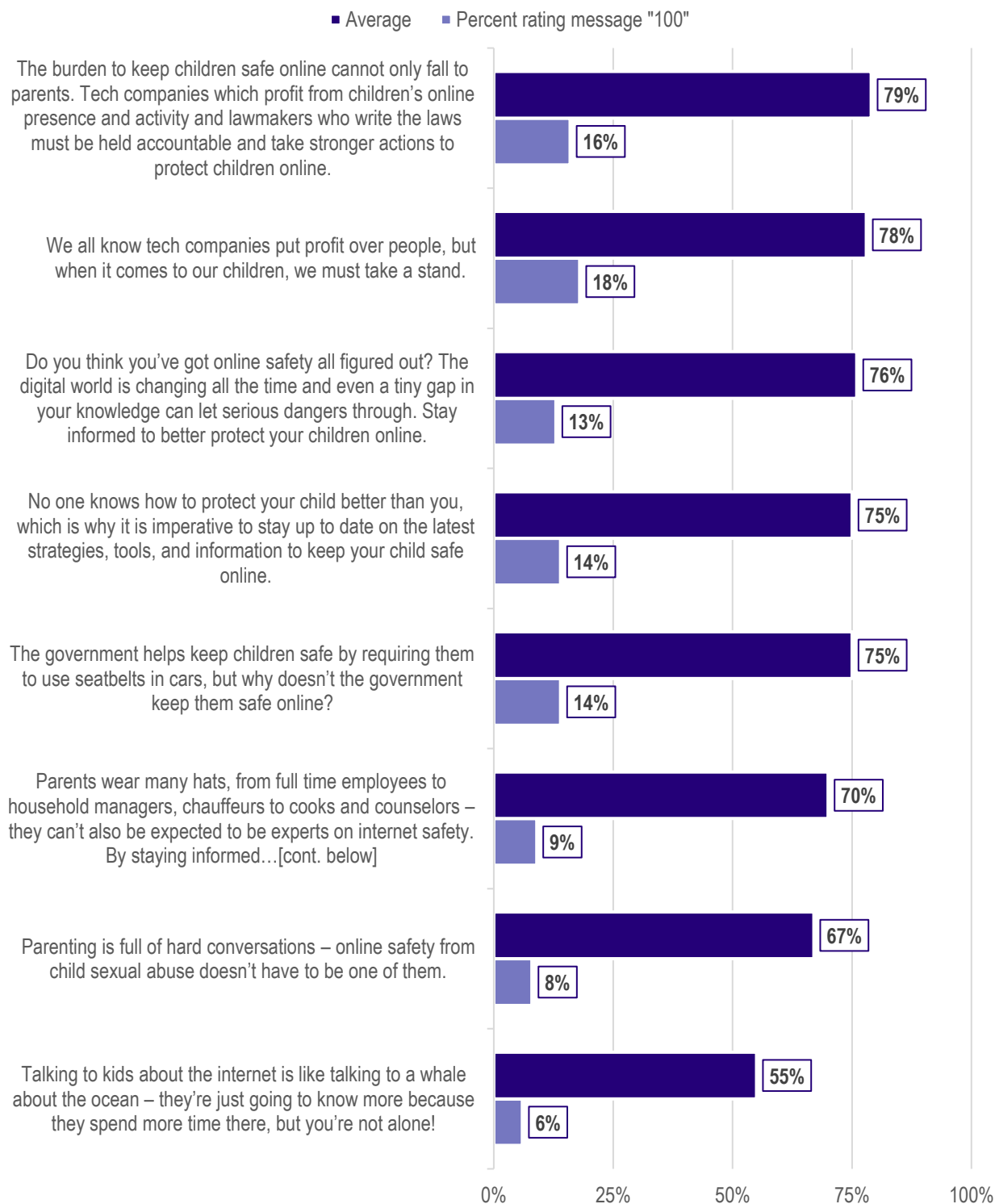
[Cont.] ...and involved, you can create a secure digital space for your child to learn, play, and thrive.

SPAIN: Resonant messages (n=504)



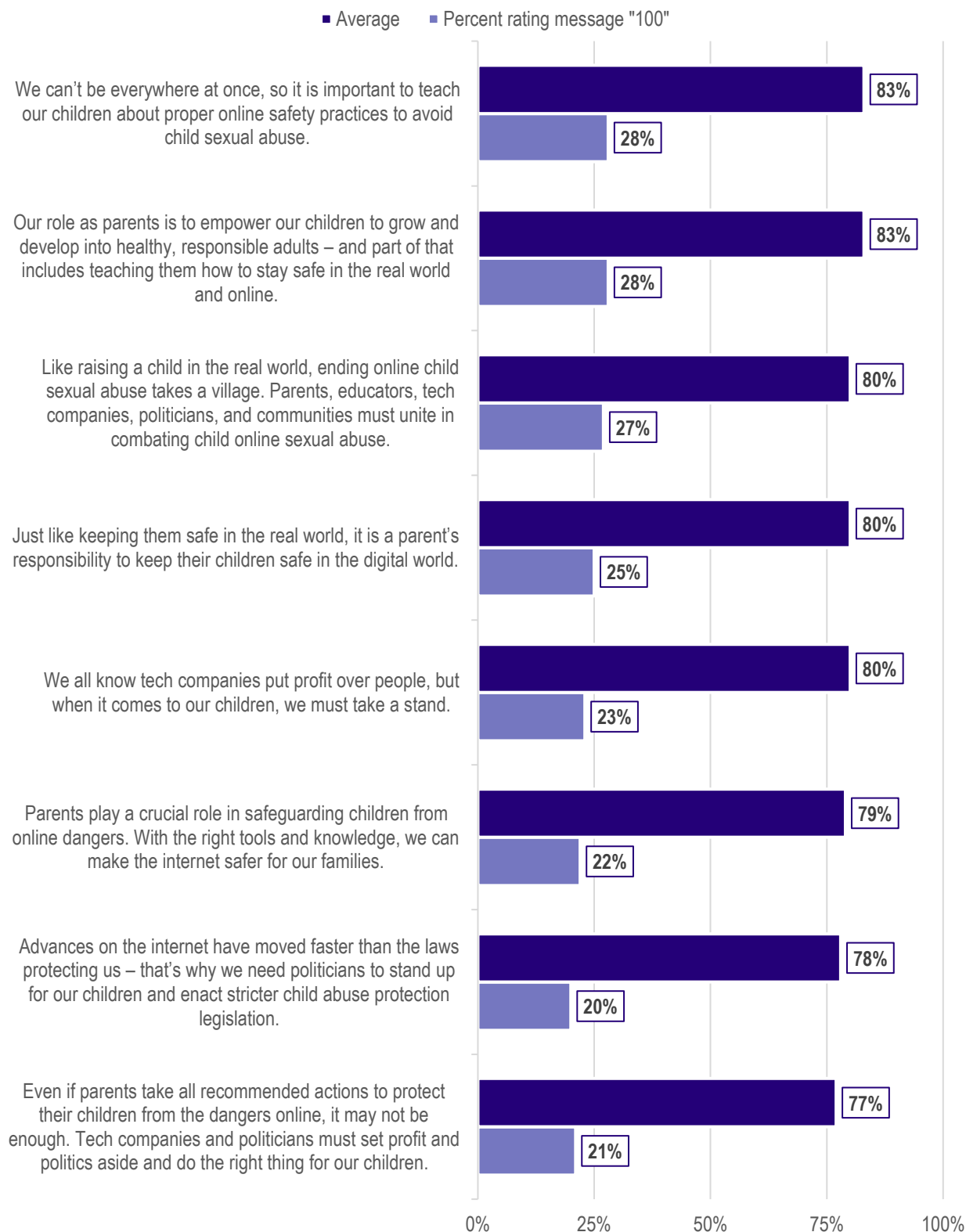
[Cont.] ...we need to stay ahead of the curve and educate ourselves and our children on ways to avoid risky or unsafe online behaviors.

SPAIN: Resonant messages (cont.) (n=504)

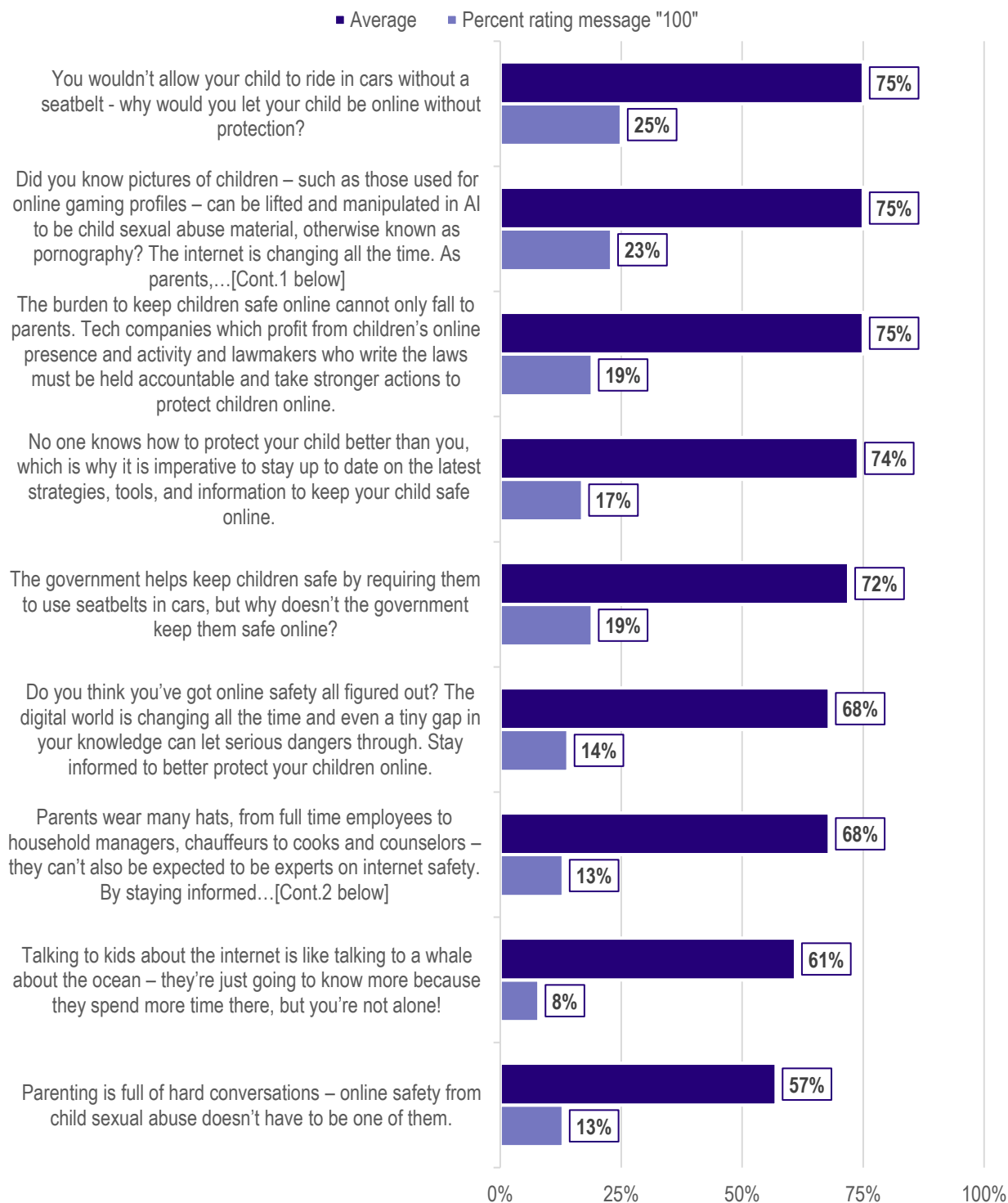


[Cont.] ...and involved, you can create a secure digital space for your child to learn, play, and thrive.

SWEDEN: Resonant messages (n=589)



SWEDEN: Resonant messages (cont.) (n=589)



[Cont.1] ...we need to stay ahead of the curve and educate ourselves and our children on ways to avoid risky or unsafe online behaviors.

[Cont.2] ...and involved, you can create a secure digital space for your child to learn, play, and thrive.