

The Minimum Digital Living Standard



Behind the MDLS: partners and funders



**Loughborough
University**

Centre for Research
in Social Policy



UNIVERSITY OF
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Good Things
Foundation



NOMINET



**Nuffield
Foundation**



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Digital
Inclusion
Alliance Wales



Limitations of taking an individual view

Digital inclusion is about **all aspects of everyday life**, especially interacting with people and culture – not just using services

We know that access to digital equipment and services is partly or wholly **household based** not individual

We know from prior studies (e.g. Nuffield Me and My Big Data) that **individuals rely on close family and friends for support**

Access to health is one of the main digital needs

Te
Test results
Pr
Prescriptions
Ph
Public health information
Mh
Mental health
Gp
Consultations
Hs
Hospital appointments
Sg
Support groups

Periodic Table of Internet Elements

Me	He	Fn	Et	Gv	Cl	Ed	Et	Cm	Cr	Se	Mo
Medical	Health	Finance	Employment Training	Government services	Cloud	Education	Environment	Community	Crime	Social media	Mobile devices
Te	Sh	Pc	Jh	Wc	Oa	Se	Vi	Og	Se	Ff	Na
Test results	Search engines	Police	Job hunting	Waste	Online groups	Search engines	Video	Organizing	Self	Finance & money	Navigation
Pr	Ha	Fi	Ap	Be	Pe	Cl	Ga	Cg	Re	Vc	Ac
Prescriptions	Healthcare	Finance	Applications	Business	Performance	Classification	Games	Collaborative groups	Review and ratings	Navigation	Healthcare management
Ph	Hh	De	Ne	Im	Nw	Ol	Gm	Su	Bl	Sm	Vo
Public health	Healthcare	Debt	Networking	Immigration	News	Online	Games	Support	Blog	Support groups	Video
Mh	Mm	In	It	Uc	De	Hw	Eb	Vo	Pl	Em	Db
Mental health	Medical equipment	Insurance	Information technology	University	Debt	Hardware	Education	Volunteering	Politics	Email	Database
Gp	Mn	On	Wk	Co	Mp	Li	Mu	Oc	Mc	Im	DI
Consultations	Medical equipment	Online	Work	Cooperation	Medical equipment	Libraries	Music	Online	Medical equipment	Immigration	Database
Hs	Bl	Ob	Tx	Me	El	Kn	Mv	Vp	Vr	Ev	Sm
Hospital appointments	Blog	Online	Texting	Medical equipment	Electronics	Knives	Medical equipment	Volunteering	Virtual reality	Events	Smart
Sg	Ct	En	Sh			St	Ra		Ar	Od	Pm
Support groups	Cloud	Energy	Software			Stamps	Radiation		Art	Online	Programs

Kat Dixon, 2022

Needed a different approach– MDLS?

- Novel approach to understanding digital inclusion and exclusion based on households not individuals
- **NOT just a list of kit and broadband speeds**
- Builds on the established Loughborough University Minimum Income Standards model and methodology
- Is **built from a consensus consultation with citizens and households**, with some expert input, not from a 'top down' assessment
- **Focuses on a Minimum Standard that citizens agree a Household needs to meet a basic life all would value**
- *Minimum basket of digital goods, skills and services households need in order to have an adequate quality of life and participate in society.*
 - OR: What digital access, kit, skills, home facilities, community faculties and support and so forth are needed to deliver a social, work, family, educational, entertainment, community and civic minimum living standard

Behind the MDLS: evidence



MDLS definition and contents were developed using the Minimum Income Standard methodology.

17 focus groups with members of the public – freshly recruited at each stage. Nominet funded focus groups with young people.

Decisions from each group fed into the next stage to reach a final consensus.



Pilot survey with 207 households with children.

A UK-wide in-person survey of 1,582 households, with a sample representative of the whole UK. Data collected on 4,616 children and adults.

Statistical analysis to explore and visualise links between survey data and other social, economic, cultural, digital, and local area metrics.

Stakeholder sessions with public, voluntary and private sectors to look at MDLS with regard to disability, ethnicity, rurality, poverty, housing.

MDLS-Wales: extra focus groups with members of the public, interviews with eight families, and stakeholder engagement in Wales.

What is the Minimum Digital Living Standard?



Bottom-up: what members of the public say is 'enough' to feel included

Benchmark: below this level, it may be harder to take part in society

Holistic: functional skills and critical skills and digital goods and services; a household needs all, in combination, to meet the MDLS

Starting point: extra or different ways to meet MDLS may be needed in some households (e.g. disability related)

Evidence-based: established using the Minimum Income Standard methodology; also a survey of over 1,500 households, focus groups with professionals from relevant organisations, and interviews with families

Proof-of-concept: tests the approach with 'households with children'



A minimum digital living standard includes having accessible internet, adequate equipment, and the skills and knowledge people need.

It is about being able to communicate, connect and engage with opportunities safely and with confidence.



What is 'enough' for households with children?

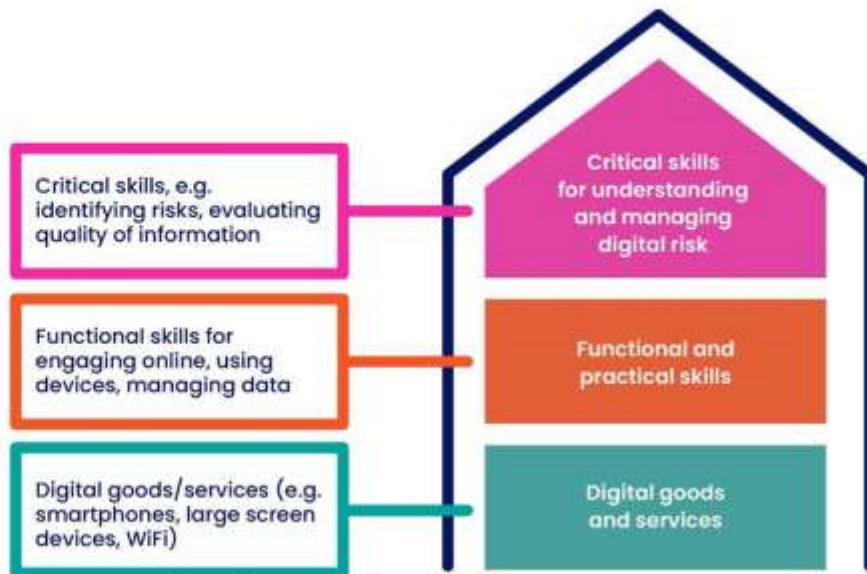


Parents and young people defined what is 'enough' for a household with children to feel digitally included.

They thought about:

- What devices (entry level) and internet services a household needs to take part in society
- What skills they need for practical tasks and digital safety
- How needs change with family size and school stages

These are the MDLS 'contents'.



MDLS 'contents'



MDLS is a starting point for thinking about family needs, barriers, and how needs can be met.

All elements are needed – in combination – for a household with children to feel digitally included.

Digital goods and services

Home Broadband	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> With sufficient reliability and speed to support all family members to access the internet at the same time
Mobile phone and data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An entry-level smart phone per parent and secondary school age child + 5GB data per month each An extra 3GB of data per month if they have a child of pre-school or primary school age.
Large screen device	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A laptop, tablet or PC per household – parent(s) and first child share one device. An additional device for every further school age child.
Headphones	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A set of headphones for school age children
Television and TV subscription	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A smart TV, entry-level 32" screen An entry-level TV subscription service (e.g. Netflix, Disney+) in addition to a TV licence
Access to online gaming	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An adequate large screen device and access (via an entry-level subscription or other means) for school age children to be able to participate in online gaming with their peers

Functional skills

Using digital devices, programmes and the internet	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Using device functions Using apps and programmes Downloading apps and programmes Saving and recovering documents Connecting devices to the internet/hotspots Changing settings
Engagement online	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Using Zoom/Teams/Google classrooms Performing browser searches Using school apps (homework, school-home communication) Creating an email account and sending emails Online bookings and forms (e.g., appointments) Cashless/online payments
Managing and monitoring digital devices and data usage	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Creating and sorting files and folders Turning off devices properly Deleting old files to manage device storage Monitoring and managing phone data usage

Critical skills

Managing security	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Using secure passwords Knowing about and avoiding in-app purchases Using phone safety features out and about (e.g., 'triple tap' or '30S') Monitoring banking activity online Removing bank card details to avoid accidental purchases <p>Knowing how to apply parental controls</p>
Interacting with others	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Evaluating what details to share online Identifying risks (e.g., scams, unsafe links, catfishers, groomers) Evaluating friend requests Managing social pressures and time online
Sharing and receiving information	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Evaluating quality of information (e.g., identifying mis/disinformation or unrealistic images) Knowing how to avoid and report inappropriate/offensive content Understanding digital footprint

Skills

The skills outlined below are needed by parents, and colours indicate the age/stage by which children need to begin developing these skills, according to parents and young people.

1 Pre-school 2 Early primary school 3 Late primary school 4 Early secondary school 5 Late secondary school

Digital access is essential for family life



Greater implications for families already facing challenges

- Universal Credit, with risk of sanctions / loss of benefits
- Reporting as homeless or registering for social housing
- Accessing health services, online support networks
- Proving identity for residency or seeking asylum
- Maintaining relationships in separated families

Families may need extra or different ways to meet MDLS

- Accessible kit or software – disability, neurodivergence, language barriers
- Gaming – a 'lifeline' for children on the autism spectrum – broadband needs
- More mobile data to keep in touch – especially if a health condition or disability
- Children's skills more significant if parents rely on them to use the internet

Some are meeting needs but at what cost?

- Sharing devices; unable to replace or update devices
- Relying on mobile phones; restricting mobile data use
- 'No choice' but to pay for higher price broadband
- Having to borrow, use credit, make sacrifices to keep (children) online

What about social tariffs?

- Low awareness of social tariffs
- Insufficient for a families' needs
- Exit fees inhibit switching providers

"A phone call is not as nice as a video call, is it? And obviously, with them living so far away, it's better for them to see my face than just hear my voice"

Parent

"I've tried a couple of broadband, especially ones for people on benefit. So cheaper broadband – fantastic financially, but useless for internet, because it's like the lowest speed"

Parent

MDLS Survey: Design and data



The final MDLS Survey was conducted in people's homes in 2023

- It is a nationally representative sample of 1,582 households from all UK administrations, providing separate data on 4,616 individuals
- A $\pm 2.46\%$ margin of error for a 95% confidence level against a population of 8,196,000 UK households

Data was collected from one household respondent who was an adult with parental responsibility. Data was collected on:

- Household device ownership and access to the Internet
- Respondent's view of household members' confidence with key skills

Collecting data on practical skills and critical skills identified in MDLS:

- We did a pilot survey of 207 households (603 adults and children) and asked the respondent all skills questions about all members
- We then used PCA/Factor analysis to identify a core set of key skills; this gave 2 to 9 skills for each age group of children and for adults

The MDLS Survey of 1,582 UK households provided separate data on:

- | **2,605** adults with parental responsibility
- | **300** other adults
- | **891** secondary school children
- | **1,162** primary school children
- | **681** pre-school children

Headlines: MDLS for households with children



Digital access is essential for family life

Families made clear how this impacts on feeling included, opportunities, and everyday tasks.

Poverty is a barrier to meeting the MDLS

Main predictors of being below MDLS are low socio-economic status, living in a deprived area, being a single parent household, a household with more than 2 children, a household led by someone with disability and/or with non-white ethnicity.

4 in 10 households with children are below the MDLS (45%)

6 in 10 households with children likely meet MDLS for both 'functional' and 'critical' skills (62%); 24% meet this for children only; 9% for parents only; 5% fall short on all

8 in 10 households with children likely meet MDLS for digital goods and services (81%); 6% lack good broadband; 4% lack enough large screen devices; 3% fall short on all.

Digital safety is a big issue for parents and young people

Families saw this as a shared responsibility with schools, state and tech companies.

1 in 4 households with children (27%) have parents missing the critical skills for understanding and managing digital risk.



3.7 million households with children do not meet the Minimum Digital Living Standard.



This is 4 in 10 households with children in the UK today.

Developing a statistical model



Constant 0.793[^](**) (0.341) * p<0.1; ** p<0.05; *** p<0.01

Social grade and area deprivation (compared to AB)

NRS grade C1	-0.267 (0.174)
NRS grade C2	-0.569*** (0.183)
NRS grade DE	-0.774*** (0.212)
Combined IMD rank	-0.00002* (0.00001)

Household composition

Single parent	-0.271** (0.106)
2+ children	-0.521*** (0.125)

Work and benefits

Receives at least one state benefit	-0.318* (0.163)
Chief income earner working	0.363* (0.196)

Health

Respondent has a health issue affecting daily activity	-0.698*** (0.191)
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Ethnicity

Respondent identifies as ethnically non-white	-0.698*** (0.159)
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Town size (compared to a large city)

Smaller city or large town	0.866 (0.561)
Medium town	1.237** (0.558)
Small town	1.550*** (0.546)
Rural area	1.417** (0.573)

Region (compared to London)

East England	-0.932 (0.605)
West Midlands	-1.144* (0.598)
SE England	-1.370** (0.598)
Yorks & Humber	-1.290** (0.605)
Wales	-1.404** (0.635)
SW England	-2.046*** (0.611)
East Midlands	-1.461** (0.619)
Scotland	-2.102*** (0.551)
NE England	-1.651** (0.654)
NW England	-1.978*** (0.608)
N Ireland	-2.478*** (0.655)
Log Likelihood	(-973.519)
Akaike Inf. Crit.	(2,003.038)

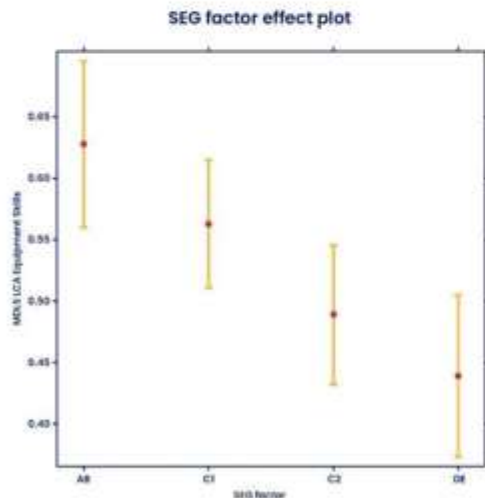
A single-parent household with one child living in an area of relative affluence in South East England **may be 4.5 times more likely to meet MDLS** than a single-parent household with more than two children, living in an area of higher multiple deprivation in North East England, where the parent has a long-term health issue.

A dual-parent household, social grade AB, with two children, working and living in a small town in Wales **may be 5.1 times more likely to meet MDLS** than a dual-parent household, social grade DE, with two children, working but receiving benefits, where parents identify as non-white, and living in a small town in Wales.

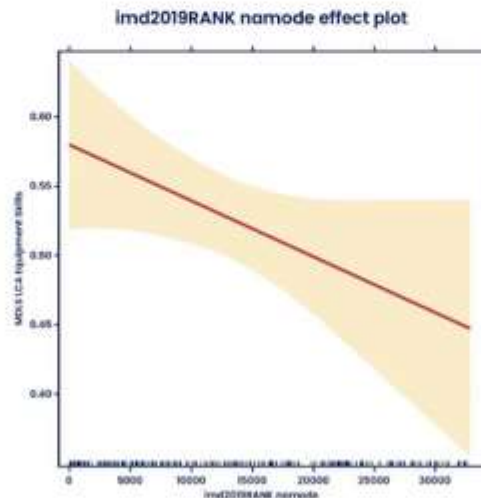
Modelling the chances of meeting MDLS



Households with children in social grades C2, and DE are 1.7 and 2.1 times less likely to meet MDLS than those in social grades A and B



With each worsening decile in the Index of Multiple Deprivation for the household's area, the chance of meeting MDLS falls from 1.0 (least deprived) to 0.59 (most deprived)



Single parents are 1.3 times less likely to meet MDLS than dual-parent households.

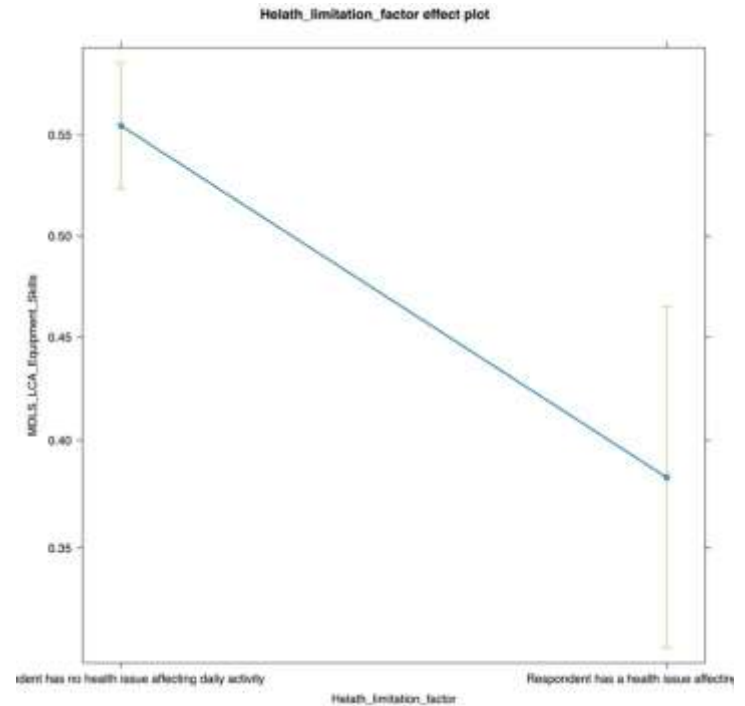
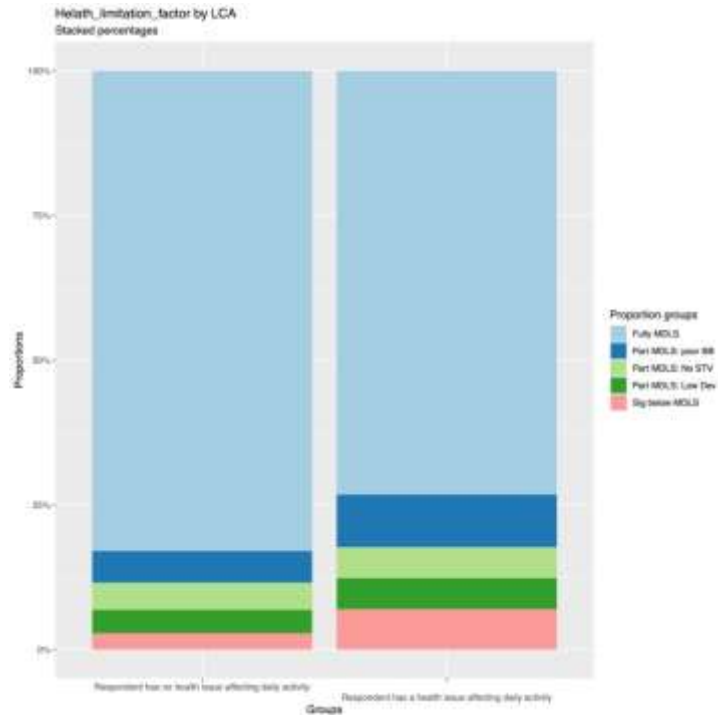
Households with more than two children are 1.68 times less likely to meet MDLS than those with two or less children.

Households where the respondent identified as ethnically non-white are 2.01 times less likely to meet MDLS than those where the respondent identified as white.

Households where the respondent has a health issue affecting daily activity are 2.01 times less likely to meet MDLS than those where the respondent did not.

Households with children getting at least one state benefit are 1.38 times less likely to meet MDLS than those which do not.

Long term ill health and MDLS



**Beyond research:
How is MDLS
being used, by
whom, for what?**



Policy priorities for families below the MDLS



1. Recognise digital access is essential for families

2. Make digital inclusion a cross-cutting government priority for families

3. Find ways to enable more families to afford suitable connectivity

- Ofcom, industry and government to find ways to make essential online public and health services free of data charges
 - Review social tariffs' suitability for households with children - looking at products, price, and promotion
 - Signpost to emergency support, such as the National Databank
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4. Refresh and resource the role of schools in digital inclusion

- Work with teachers, parents and children to review curricula for digital skills
- Work with partners so all children have home access to devices for learning



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This is 4 in 10 households with children in the UK today.

Policy priorities for families below the MDLS



MDLS can be used to review government policies and plans (central, devolved, local government). Priorities identified by professionals in relevant organisations included:

- Review social security benefits to cover digital access costs
- Recognise extra digital access costs for families with special educational needs and disability and support families to meet these
- Mitigate risks for families below MDLS in roll-out of Government Digital Services (such as One Government Login and digital ID verification)
- Mitigate risks for families below MDLS in expanding online NHS and care services (such as NHS App, NHS Wales App, NHS Scotland App)
- Embed digital access into public standards, such as the Decent Homes Standard
- Support families in temporary accommodation and families seeking asylum to access and afford broadband or sufficient mobile data
- Work with the National Digital Inclusion Network to target provision (including free mobile data, devices, support) in areas with high levels of families below MDLS



12.5% of households with children are below MDLS across a mix of digital goods and services, practical skills, and critical skills

MDLS - Health



- MDLS for households caring for children with long term ill health
 - The LifeArc-Kidney Research UK Centre for Rare Kidney Diseases – Led by Dr. Louise Oni
 - DMSI/MDLS team to use MDLS to explore digital needs of families and young people facing long-term Kidney care



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MDLS – Stakeholder engagement update



- **MDLS Scotland** – research underway, reporting in 2025
- **MDLS Wales** – Wales research, Cardiff launch, using MDLS Wales to inform Welsh Gov social housing pilots, National Survey for Wales
- **UK Government policy** – UK Digital Inclusion Action Plan (Feb 2025)
- **UK Government digital services / user research** – online session with Heads of Profession for user research; Get Online Week (led by HMRC); Dept. for Education
- **Place-based / thematic networks**, e.g. Get Online London; LGA Digital Inclusion Network; South Tyneside Anti-Poverty Network; Essex & Herts Digital Innovation Zone; UK Regulatory Network; Monmouthshire Housing Association; Nova Scotia Province (!)
- **Invited input**, e.g. Parliamentary Office for Science & Technology; DigiGov Expo; Global UNDP Playbook; School Librarians Association; Ofcom Communications Consumer Panels; All Party Parliamentary Group on Digital Inclusion; World Economic Forum; Nova Scotia (!)
- **Exploring overlaps across UK datasets on digital inequalities**, with Ofcom, Nominet, Lloyds, BBC (co-authored briefing now available)

Where to get more information and support



Find out more on the MDLS website:

www.mdls.org.uk

For MDLS reports and maps:

www.mdls.org.uk/publications or scan the QR code

- The Minimum Digital Living Standard for Households with Children: Final report with executive summary
- Measuring the Minimum Digital Living Standard for Households with Children: Survey Report
- Mapping the Minimum Digital Living Standard for Households with Children: Mapbooks
- Defining the Minimum Digital Living Standard: Interim report – findings from deliberative groups
- Developing the Minimum Digital Living Standard for Wales – reports funded by Welsh Government (available in English and Welsh languages)



Ask the MDLS team to present at an event or for support on using the MDLS:

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emma.stone@goodthingsfoundation.org

If your organisation supports people who face digital barriers:

You can join the National Digital Inclusion Network run by Good Things Foundation. Ask about free resources including the National Databank, National Device Bank, and Learn My Way:

Visit: www.goodthingsfoundation.org/network/join

Email: hello@goodthingsfoundation.org





The Minimum Digital Living Standard

"If you want people to survive in this world, you need food, you need water, and that's your human rights. Now having connectivity that is usable, affordable, should be on there somewhere, because actually you can't survive in this world, the day and age that we're living in, without them"

Parent