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Risks and safety on the internet

The perspective of European children

Full findings and policy implications from the
EU Kids Online survey of 9-16 year olds and
their parents in 25 countries



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KEY FINDINGS

The *EU Kids Online* survey

This report presents the full findings from a **new and unique survey** designed and conducted according to rigorous standards by the *EU Kids Online* network. It was funded by the European Commissions' Safer Internet Programme in order to strengthen the evidence base for policies regarding online safety.

- **A random stratified sample of 25,142 children** aged 9-16 who use the internet, plus one of their parents, was interviewed during Spring/Summer 2010 in 25 European countries.
- **The survey investigated key online risks:** pornography, bullying, receiving sexual messages, contact with people not known face-to-face, offline meetings with online contacts, potentially harmful user-generated content and personal data misuse.
- In this report, **'children' refers to internet-using children aged 9-16 across Europe.** 'Using the internet' includes any devices by which children go online and any places in which they go online.

Uses and activities online

- **Use is now thoroughly embedded in children's daily lives:** 93% of 9-16 year old users go online at least weekly (60% go online everyday or almost every day).
- **Children are going online at ever younger ages** - the average age of first internet use is seven in Denmark and Sweden and eight in several Northern European countries. Across all countries, one third of 9-10 year olds who use the internet go online daily, this rising to 80% of 15-16 year olds.
- The most common location of internet use is at home (87%), followed by school (63%). But **internet access is diversifying** – 49% use it in their bedroom and 33% via a mobile phone or handheld device. Access via a handheld device exceeds one in five in Norway, the UK, Ireland and Sweden.
- **Children do a range of diverse and potentially beneficial things online:** 9-16 year olds use the internet for school work (85%), playing games (83%), watching video clips (76%) and instant

messaging (62%). Fewer post images (39%) or messages (31%) for others to share, use a webcam (31%), file-sharing sites (16%) or blog (11%).

- **59% of 9-16 year olds have a social networking profile** – including 26% aged 9-10, 49% aged 11-12, 73% aged 13-14 and 82% aged 15-16. Social networking is most popular in the Netherlands (80%), Lithuania (76%) and Denmark (75%), and least in Romania (46%), Turkey (49%) and Germany (51%).
- **Among social network users, 26% have public profiles** – more in Hungary (55%), Turkey (46%), and Romania (44%); 29% have more than 100 contacts, although many have fewer.
- Among social network users, 43% keep their profile private so that only their friends can see it. A further 28% report that their profile is partially private so that friends of friends and networks can see it. **Notably, 26% report that their profile is public so that anyone can see it.**

Digital skills

- It is likely that **more use facilitates digital literacy and safety skills.** One a third of 9-16 year olds (36%) say that the statement, "I know more about the internet than my parents," is 'very true' of them, one third (31%) say it is 'a bit true' and one third (33%) say it is 'not true' of them.
- **Younger children tend to lack skills and confidence.** However, most 11-16 year olds can block messages from those they do not wish to contact (64%) or find safety advice online (64%). Around half can change privacy settings on a social networking profile (56%) compare websites to judge their quality (56%) or block spam (51%).

Risk and harm

Risk does not necessarily result in harm, as reported by children. Children who use the internet were asked if they had encountered a range of online risks and, then, if they had been bothered by this, where 'bothered' was defined as something that *"made*



you feel uncomfortable, upset, or feel that you shouldn't have seen it." Findings vary by child (e.g. age, gender), country and risk type, so generalisations should be treated with caution.

- **12% of European 9-16 year olds say that they have been bothered or upset by something on the internet.** This includes 9% of 9-10 year olds. However, most children do not report being bothered or upset by going online.
- **Risks are not necessarily experienced by children as upsetting or harmful.** For example, **seeing sexual images and receiving sexual messages online** are encountered by one in eight children but they are generally not experienced as harmful except by a few of the children who are exposed to them.
- **By contrast, being bullied online** by receiving nasty or hurtful messages is relatively uncommon, experienced by one in twenty children, but it is the risk most likely to upset children.
- **Further, only 1 in 12 children have met an online contact offline, and also this risk rarely has a harmful consequence, according to children.**
- Boys, especially teenagers, are more exposed to sexual images online, while teenage girls are slightly more likely to receive nasty or hurtful messages online. However, **girls are generally more likely to be upset by the risks they experience.**
- The survey asked about a range of risks, as detailed in what follows. Looking across all these risks, 41% of European **9-16 year olds have encountered one or more of these risks.**
- **Risks increase with age:** 14% 9-10 year olds have encountered one or more of the risks asked about, rising to 33% 11-12 year olds, 49% 13-14 year olds and 63% 15-16 year olds.

Pornography

- **14% of 9-16 year olds have in the past 12 months seen images online that are "obviously sexual – for example, showing people naked or people having sex."**
- Of those who have seen sexual or pornographic images online, one in three were bothered by the experience and, of those, half (i.e. one sixth of those exposed to sexual images or around 2% of

all children) were either fairly or very upset by what they saw.

- **Looking across all media, 23% of children have seen sexual or pornographic content in the past 12 months – with the internet now as common a source of pornography as television, film and video.**
- Older teenagers are four times more likely than the youngest children to have seen pornography online or offline and the sexual images they have seen online are more explicit. But, **younger children are more bothered or upset by sexual images online than teenagers.**
- **53% of those who had been bothered by seeing sexual images online told someone about this the last time it happened** – 33% told a friend, 25% told a parent. However, 25% simply stopped using the internet for a while and few changed their filter or contact settings.

Bullying

- **In relation to online bullying, 6% of 9-16 year olds have been sent nasty or hurtful messages online, and 3% have sent such messages to others.** Over half of those who received bullying messages were fairly or very upset.
- Since 19% have been bullied either online or offline (compared with 6% online), and 12% have bullied someone else either online or offline (compared with 3% online), it seems **more bullying occurs offline than online.**
- Most children who had received nasty or hurtful messages online called on social support: a quarter had not told anyone. Six in ten also used online strategies – deleting hurtful messages or blocking the bully; this last strategy was seen by children as effective.

'Sexting'

- **15% of 11-16 year olds have received peer to peer "sexual messages or images ...[meaning] talk about having sex or images of people naked or having sex,"** and 3% say they have sent or posted such messages.
- Of those who have received such messages, nearly one quarter were been bothered by this. Further, of those who have been bothered, nearly half were fairly or very upset. So, overall, one eighth of those who received such messages, or

nearly 2% of all children, have been fairly or very upset by sexual messaging.

- **Among those who had been bothered by 'sexting', about four in ten blocked the person who sent the messages (40%) and/or deleted the unwanted sexual messages (38%).** In most cases, the child said that this action helped the situation. Such constructive coping responses could be encouraged among more children.

Meeting online contacts offline

- The **most common risky activity** reported by children online is communicating with new people not met face-to-face. **30% of European children aged 9-16 who use the internet have communicated in the past with someone they have not met face-to-face before, an activity that may be risky but may also be fun.**
- It is more rare for children to meet a new online contact offline. **9% of children have met an online contact offline in the past year. 1% of all children (or one in nine of those who went to a meeting) have been bothered by such a meeting.**
- Although 9-10 year olds are the least likely to have met an online contact offline, they are most likely to have been bothered by what happened (31% of those who had been to such a meeting).

Other risks

- The second most common risk is exposure to potentially harmful user-generated content. **21% of 11-16 year olds have been exposed to one or more types of potentially harmful user-generated content: hate (12%), pro-anorexia (10%), self-harm (7%), drug-taking (7%) or suicide (5%).**
- **9% of 11-16 year olds have had their personal data misused – abuse of the child's password (7%) or their personal information (4%), or they have been cheated of their money online (1%).**
- **30% of 11-16 year olds report one or more experiences linked to excessive internet use 'fairly' or 'very often'** (e.g. neglecting friends, schoolwork or sleep).

Differences across countries

- **Comparing across countries, encounters with one or more online risks include around six in ten children in Estonia, Lithuania, Norway, the Czech Republic and Sweden.** Lower incidence of risk is found in Portugal, Italy and Turkey.
- Children are more likely to say they have been bothered or upset by something on the internet in Denmark (28%), Estonia (25%), Norway and Sweden (23%) and Romania (21%); they are less likely to say this in Italy (6%), Portugal (7%) and Germany (8%).
- The more children in a country use the internet daily, the more those children have encountered one or more risks. However, **more use also brings more opportunities and, no doubt, more benefits.**
- The greatest range of activities online is also claimed by children in Lithuania, the Czech Republic Estonia, France and Sweden, while the least are undertaken in Ireland and then Turkey. In other words, internet use brings both risks and opportunities, and the line between them is not easy to draw.

Parental awareness

- **Among those children who have experienced one of these risks, parents often don't realise this.**
- 40% of parents whose child has seen sexual images online say that their child has not seen them; 56% of parents whose child has received nasty or hurtful messages online say that their child has not.
- 52% of parents whose child has received sexual messages say that their child has not; 61% of parents whose child has met offline with an online contact say that their child has not.
- Although the incidence of these risks affects a minority of children in each case, the level of parental underestimation is more substantial.

Parental mediation

- **Most parents talk to their children about what they do on the internet (70%) and stay nearby when the child is online (58%). But one in eight parents (13%) seem never to do any of the**

forms of mediation asked about, according to their children.

- Over half of parents also take over positive steps such as suggesting how to behave towards others online (56%) and talking about things that might bother the child (52%), and a third have helped their child when something arose in the past (36%).
- Parents also restrict children's disclosure of personal information (85%), uploading (63%) and downloading (57%).
- One in two parents monitors their child's internet use (after use), making this the least favoured strategy by comparison with positive support, safety guidance or making rules about internet use.
- **The use of technical safety tools is relatively low: just over a quarter of parents blocks or filters websites (28%) and/or tracks the websites visited by their child (24%).**
- Both children and parents consider parental mediation helpful, especially 9-12 year olds.
- Most parents (85%) are confident about their role, feeling that they can help their child if the latter encounters something that bothers them online. Parents are also confident in their child's ability to cope with things online that may bother them (79%), and 15% claim that they mediate differently because of something that had bothered the child in the past.
- **Two thirds of children (68%) think their parents know a lot or quite a bit about their children's internet use. However, 29% say they ignore their parents a little and 8% of children say they ignore their parents a lot.**
- Less than half (44%) of children think that parental mediation limits what they do online, 11% saying it limits their activities a lot. Children in some countries feel rather more restricted by parental mediation (e.g. in Turkey, Ireland and Bulgaria) than in others (e.g. Hungary, and the Netherlands). 15% would like their parents to do a little or a lot more and 12% would like their parents to do rather less.
- Many parents (73%) are confident that it is not very or at all likely that their child will encounter anything that bothers them in the next six months.

Other sources of safety advice

- **Around half of children think that their teachers have engaged with their internet use in most of the ways asked about, and 73% of children say their teachers have done at least one of the forms of active mediation asked about.**
- **Age differences are noteworthy: teachers' engagement with children's internet use is least among 9-10 year olds.**
- There is a fair degree of national variation in the role that teachers play, from 97% of teachers in Norway engaging with children's internet use to a low of 65% in Italy.
- Three quarters (73%) of children say their peers have helped or supported their internet use in at least one of the five ways asked about.
- Peers are much more likely to mediate in a practical way, helping each other to do or find something when there is a difficulty.
- **44% of children say they have received some guidance on safe internet use from their friends, and 35% say that they have also provided such advice to their friends.**
- **Comparing across sources of safety advice online, it seems that most advice is received from parents (63%), then teachers (58%), then peers (44%).**
- But for the older teenagers and for children from lower socio-economic status (SES) homes, advice from teachers overtakes that of parents.
- Other relatives (47%), interestingly, are generally as important as peers in providing advice to children on how to use the internet safely.
- Information received by children via the traditional mass media (20%) are less used, with online sources even less frequently used (12% have gained safety advice from websites).
- Parents get internet safety advice first and foremost from family and friends (48%), then traditional media (32%), the child's school (27%), internet service providers (22%) and websites (21%).
- **Only around 9% of parents say that they don't want further information on internet safety. Many parents want far more information on internet safety than they actually get from the child's school, from government or local authorities, from welfare organisations and**

charities but also, though to a lesser extent, from manufacturers and retailers.

Policy implications

The findings have implications for multiple stakeholders.

- The priority for awareness-raising for parents should be on alerting parents to the nature of the risks their children may encounter online while encouraging dialogue and greater understanding between parents and children in relation to young people's online activities.
- **Parents would prefer to get information** on internet safety from their child's school, so greater efforts should be undertaken by the education sector. But, since parental and children's use of industry tools (such as online safety information, filters, 'report abuse' buttons etc) is relatively low, greater public awareness, trust and ease of use should also be developed by industry.
- As use of the internet becomes more personalised, the role of parents and teachers becomes difficult. This places **greater responsibility on industry** to manage the nature of the risks children encounter, and to ensure they have the tools they need to prevent or cope with harm. It also burdens children more with the responsibility for their own safety, and thus internet safety messaging should seek to build confidence, resilience and **digital citizenship skills among children**.
- **Industry efforts** to support positive content as well as internet safety should be improved. Technical tools to support blocking, reporting and filtering should also be a cornerstone of industry child protection policy with a need to increase awareness of such mechanisms and to improve their accessibility and usability to aid better take up by parents and children.
- **Children** should also be encouraged to assume responsibility for their own safety as much as possible with a focus on empowerment, emphasising responsible behaviour and digital citizenship.
- Since many children do not report encountering the risks asked about, with even fewer having been bothered or upset by their online experiences, future safety policy should target resources and guidance where they are particularly needed – especially for **younger**

children who go online. Indeed, a new policy focus is vital for awareness-raising and support measures designed to suit the needs of much younger internet users, especially by primary schools.

- **Digital skills training** needs continued emphasis and updating in terms of training, safety features and applications operation to ensure that all children reach a minimum basic standard and to prevent digitally isolated and unskilled children. This should also seek to broaden the range of activities undertaken by children, since many make little use of creative opportunities online.
- Moreover, since less than half of 9-16 year olds are very satisfied with levels of online provision available to them, even fewer among younger children, there is a responsibility on all policy actors to ensure **greater availability of age-appropriate positive content** for children, especially in small language communities.

Note on methodology

- This report is **the work of the EU Kids Online network**, coordinated by the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), with research teams and stakeholder advisers in each of the 25 countries and an International Advisory Panel.
- Initial findings from this report were presented at the Safer Internet Forum on 21 October 2010. The present report presents full findings from the survey for all 25 countries.
- **Countries included in EU Kids Online are** Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Turkey and the UK. Unless countries are specified, findings are weighted averages across all countries.
- It is acknowledged that it is particularly difficult to measure private or upsetting aspects of a child's experience. The survey was conducted in children's homes, as a face-to-face interview. It included a self-completion section for sensitive questions to avoid being heard by parents, other family members or the interviewer.
- For **full details and availability of the project methodology**, materials, technical fieldwork report and research ethics, see www.eukidsonline.net.