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Risks and safety for children on the internet: the UK report: summary of key findings

Report

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Summary of key findings

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Risks and safety for children on the internet: the UK report

Full findings from the *EU Kids Online* survey
of UK 9-16 year olds and their parents

December 2010

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www.eukidsonline.net

This report presents the UK findings for the *EU Kids Online* project (see www.eukidsonline.net). Specifically, it includes selected findings, calculated and interpreted for the UK only, of the survey data and analysis reported in Livingstone, S., Haddon, L., Görzig, A., and Ólafsson, K. (2011). *Risks and safety on the internet: The perspective of European children. Full Findings.* LSE, London: EU Kids Online.

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Note: the present report has been revised since publication in Nov. 2010 of 'initial findings' from the UK survey. This report refers to findings for all 25 countries in the European survey, and incorporates minor corrections in UK data weighting.

Previous reports and publications from *EU Kids Online* include:

- Livingstone, S., Haddon, L., Görzig, A., and Ólafsson, K. (2011). R*isks and safety on the internet: The perspective of European children. Full Findings.* LSE, London: EU Kids Online.
- O'Neill, B, and McLaughlin, S. (2011). *Recommendations on Safety Initiatives.* LSE, London: EU Kids Online.
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www.eukidsonline.net

KEY FINDINGS

1.1   Context

This report presents initial findings from a UK survey of children and their parents designed to provide a unique insight into the balance of opportunities and risks experienced by UK children on the internet. A random stratified sample of 1032 9-16 year olds who use the internet, and one of their parents/carers, was interviewed during May/June 2010.

The UK survey forms part of a larger 25 country survey conducted by *EU Kids Online* and funded by the EC's Safer Internet Programme. The questionnaire was designed by the *EU Kids Online* network, coordinated by the London School of Economics and Political Science. Fieldwork was conducted by Ipsos MORI.

In what follows, UK findings are compared with those from other countries, as reported in Livingstone, S., Haddon, L., Görzig, A., and Ólafsson, K. (2011). *Risks and safety on the internet: The perspective of European children. Full findings.* LSE, London: EU Kids Online. See www.eukidsonline.net.

1.2   Usage

What do 9-16 year olds children in the UK say about how they access the internet?

- Compared to the European average, more UK children go online at school (91% vs. 63%), at home (95% vs. 87%) and when 'out and about' (21% vs. 9%).

- Half (52%) go online in their bedroom or other private room and more than half (57%) at a friend's house. As for Europe as a whole, girls and boys have similar levels of access to the internet in their own bedroom.

- Half of UK children go online via a mobile device - 26% report handheld access to the internet (e.g. iPod Touch, iPhone or Blackberry) and an additional 33% access the internet via their mobile phone. Equivalent

figures for the 25 countries in the European survey are lower (12% and 22%).

More access results in more use, and the internet is now taken for granted in many children's daily lives.

- 9-16 year olds children were eight years old on average when they first used the internet, putting UK children among the youngest in Europe when they first go online.

- 70% go online daily or almost daily, 26% use it once or twice a week, leaving just 4% who go online less often. In terms of frequency of use, higher figures are seen in Sweden, Bulgaria, Estonia, Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, Finland, the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovenia, and Lithuania.

- The average time spent online by UK 9-16 year olds is just over an hour and a half per day (102 minutes), higher than the European average (88 minutes).

But some children still lack key digital and safety skills, especially younger children.

- Bookmarking websites, finding information on how to use the internet safely and blocking messages are all skills that most UK children claim to have. But only a third claim to be able to change filter preferences.

- Still, among the younger children there are some significant gaps in their safety skills which policy initiatives should address. Around one third of 11-12 year olds cannot bookmark a site, and even more cannot block messages from people they don't want to hear from.

- Four in ten UK 9-16 year olds (37%) say the statement "I know more about the internet than my parents" is 'very true' of them, a quarter (29%) say it is 'a bit true' and one third (34%, though 65% of 9-10 year olds) say it is 'not true' of them.

Arguably, some children use the internet too much.

- UK children's experiences of excessive use are more common than the European average: 51% have spent less time with family and friends than they should because of time they spend on the internet

and 39% have tried unsuccessfully to spend less time on the internet.

1.3   Activities

What do UK 9-16 year old internet users do online?

- Top activities are using the internet for schoolwork (92%), playing games (83%), watching video clips (75%) and social networking (71%).

- Creating content is much less common than receiving it. For example, 71% have watched video clips online but only 45% have posted photos, videos or music to share with others. Fewer have spent time in a virtual world (19%) or blogged (12%). Still, UK children participate and create online more than children in many other countries.

Social networking sites (SNS) are very popular.

- 67% of children who use the internet in the UK have their own SNS profile, a little more than the European average of 59%.

- Only 28% of 9-10 year olds but 59% of 11-12 year olds have a profile, suggesting that it is the start of secondary school, rather than the minimum age set by popular providers, that triggers social networking.

- UK children report substantially more SNS contacts than in most of Europe, coming second only to Hungarian and Belgian children: 16% of UK SNS users have more than 300 contacts, 26% have between 100 and 300.

Some of children's online communication practices could be considered risky:

- Most SNS users have their profile set to private or partially private; but 11% in the UK (many of them boys) have made it public (lower than the 26% across Europe).

- 19% of 11-16 year olds (more boys than girls, more teens than younger children) say they communicate online with people who they met online and who have no connection with their offline social networks.

- Four in ten (39%) 9-16 year old internet users have looked for new friends on the internet, 32% have added contacts they don't know face-to-face, and 11% have sent an image of themselves to someone they have not met face to face.

- One reason for such apparently risky communications may be that half (55%) of 11-16 year old internet users say they find it easier to be themselves online. Also, 49% talk about different things online than offline, and a quarter (29%) talk about more private things online than when present with other people face to face.

1.4   Subjective harm

Before asking children about specific online risk experiences, we asked them about experiences online that had bothered them in some way, explaining that **by 'bothered' we meant,** *"made you feel uncomfortable, upset, or feel that you shouldn't have seen it."*

- Children are four times more likely to say that the internet bothers other children (48%) than they are to say something has bothered them personally in the past year. Still, 13% say they have been bothered or upset by something online in the past year – this figure is about the same as the European average.

- By implication, half of 9-16 year olds do not see the internet as problematic for children of their age. Younger children are least likely to be concerned. More strikingly, the vast majority have not experienced a problem themselves.

- Parents (though not children) seem a bit less likely to see the internet as problematic for boys than for girls.

- Even though 8% of 9-10 year olds say they've been bothered by something online, their parents are less likely to recognise this: only 6% of their parents say that something has bothered my child online.

- Among 11-12 year olds, almost one in seven report that the child has encountered something that bothered or upset them (13% of children and 10% of parents say this). Since this is when British children start secondary school, the problem may be increased internet use then, or a new peer group encouraging risk-taking, or related to the onset of adolescence.

1.5   Specific risks

The *EU Kids Online* survey explored children's experiences of a range of possible risks online. The nature of these experiences, which children are most affected, and how children respond are questions to be pursued in a future report.

Sexual images

- One quarter (24%) of UK 9-16 year olds say that they have seen sexual images in the past 12 months, whether online or offline. This is close to the European average of 23%.

- However, rather fewer - 11% - of UK children have encountered sexual images online. 8% of UK 11-16 year olds say they have seen online sexual images

including nudity, 6% (more teenagers than young children) have seen images of someone having sex, 6% have seen someone's genitals online and 2% say they have seen violent sexual images.

- Among children who have seen online sexual images, 41% of parents say their child has not seen this, while 30% recognise that they have and 29% say they don't know.

- As in other countries, 9-10 year olds are less likely to see sexual images online but more likely to be bothered or upset by the experience if they do see them.

- Overall, most children have not experienced sexual images online and, even of those who have, most say they were not bothered or upset by the experience.

Bullying

- In relation to online bullying, 21% of UK children (and 19% across Europe) say they have been bullied, but just 8% say this occurred on the internet. Still, this is more than for Europe overall (6%).

- Most common is nasty or hurtful messages sent to the child (7%), followed by messages being posted or passed on (5%) and other nasty things online (4%). Only 2% have been threatened online.

- 11% of children say they have bullied others, though only 2-3% say they have bullied others online in the past 12 months.

Sexual messages

- 12% of 11-16 year old internet users have received sexual messages, although 4% have sent them. In the UK, 'sexting' appears a little less common than across Europe.

- 7% of UK 11-16 year olds have been sent a sexual message, and 5% have seen a sexual message posted online. Only 3% have seen others perform sexual acts in a message and 2% had been asked to talk about sexual acts with someone online.

Meeting online contacts offline

- 29% of UK children have had contact online with someone they have not met face to face. This percentage is similar to the European average.

- 4% have gone to an offline meeting with someone first met online. This is slightly less than half the European average (which is 9% across all countries).

- Older teenagers (13-16 year olds) are much more likely than younger children to have online contact with someone they have not met face to face. They are also more likely to have gone on to meet them in person – though such instances are rare.

Other online risks

- 19% of UK 11-16 year olds have seen one or more type of potentially harmful user-generated content, rising to 32% of 14-16 year old girls. This UK finding is lower than across Europe, where the average is 21%.

- Most common are hate messages (13%), followed by anorexia/bulimia sites and sites talking about drug experiences (both 8%). The first two percentages are slightly below the European average. Few (2%) have visited a suicide site.

- The main misuse of personal data experienced by UK children is when someone has used their password or pretended to be them (10%). Some have had personal information used in a way they did not like (4%). These percentages are similar to the European average.

1.6 Parental mediation

While 70% of UK 9-16 year olds go online daily or almost daily, the same holds for just 59% of their parents – this breaks down as around 63% of parents of 9-12 year olds and 55% of parents of 13-16 year olds.

How do UK parents manage their children's internet use?

- Most notably, the survey shows that parents and children agree to a high degree in their accounts of parental mediation.

- Most UK parents talk to their children about what they do on the internet (74%), making this, as in Europe generally, the most popular way to actively mediate children's internet use.

- Parents do considerably more active mediation of younger children's use of the internet – including talking to them, staying nearby, encouraging them or sharing internet use. But one in ten parents (11%) never do any of these things.

- Explaining why websites are good or bad (73%), suggesting how to use the internet safely (71%). and helping when something is difficult to do or find (73%) are all common strategies of parental safety mediation - the UK is near the top of ranking of countries in terms of parents actively mediating their children's safety.

- 87% of UK children say that they are either not allowed to do some of a list of online activities (disclose personal information, upload, download, etc.) or that restrictions apply, and younger children face more restrictions.

- Monitoring strategies are adopted by over half (55%) of UK parents, making this fairly common and yet the least favoured strategy by comparison with positive support, safety guidance or making rules about internet use (as in Europe generally).

- 54% of parents say that they block or filter websites at home or and 46% say they use technical tools to track the websites visited by their children. These findings are far higher than in Europe generally, with the UK topping the country ranking for use of filters.

- Both children and parents consider parental mediation helpful to some degree. Over two thirds of children (74%) say it helps a lot or a little.

- 90% of parents are confident that they can help their child if something that bothers them online.

- However, 56% of children think that parental mediation limits what they do online, 13% saying it limits their activities a lot.

- Three quarters of UK children (74%) do not simply ignore parental mediation, this being above the European average (64%). However, 20% say they ignore their parents' mediation a little and 6% of children say they ignore their parents mediation a lot.

- 23% parents think it likely that their child will experience something that bothers them online in the next six months.

- 14% of children (and 21% of 9-10 year olds) would like their parents to take more of an interest in their internet use, while 45% of parents think that they should do more in relation to their child's internet use.

1.7   Other forms of mediation

In addition to parents, other sources, including teachers and friends, may support children's internet use and safety.

- 93% of children say their teachers have been involved in at least one of the forms of active mediation asked about. This is substantially higher than the European average of 73%.

- One in ten children who use the internet has received no guidance or advice from their teachers.

- Friends are likely to mediate in a practical way, helping each other to do or find something when there is a difficulty (60%). Fewer say that friends help when they are bothered by something (26%), but this may reflect the fact that few are bothered. When children are bothered by something online, more turn to a parent (42%) than to a teacher (37%); friends are third in line at 26%.

- While 33% of children say they have received some guidance on safe internet use from their friends, 33% say that they have also provided such advice to their friends. However, most internet safety advice is received from teachers (86%), then parents (71%), then peers (33%).

- Other relatives (42%) are also important in providing advice to children on how to use the internet safely.

- UK parents receive internet safety advice first and foremost from family and friends (41%), then internet service providers (32%), the child's school (28%), websites (22%) and traditional media (18%). In the UK, traditional media appear much less important than in Europe generally (32%).

- One in ten parents (10%) say that they don't want further information on internet safety, especially parents of 15-16 year olds. But the majority would like more.

1.8   Conclusions

It may be hazarded that the very considerable efforts put into raising awareness and improving safety online for UK children in recent years are bearing fruit. UK children experience rather fewer online risks than might be expected given their high degree of access and use. Moreover, their parents are relatively more aware of their experiences and they do considerably more to mediate their children's internet safety than the European average.

Future efforts should focus especially on younger children as they gain internet access, and on the diversification of platforms (access in bedrooms, via mobile phones and handheld devices). The array of possible risks online continues to change, with emerging risks including potentially harmful user-generated content such as anorexia, self-harm or suicide sites (for example, one in five teenage girls has visited a pro-anorexia or bulimia website, yet little is known of such practices or their consequences as yet).

In planning for risk *management*, it must be borne in mind that risk *reduction* is not always an optimal strategy – children encounter a fair number of risks that, at least as they see it, are not problematic, upsetting or harmful. Although addressing levels of risk remains important, it is the case that children learn to cope by encountering some degree of risk and, it seems, many do cope successfully – at least if one takes seriously children's accounts of whether online risk results in being upset or harmed. The European study (of which this UK report is part) explores how children cope with online risk, revealing that while a minority are upset by online risks, many benefit from the

advice and tools available to them to cope with such upsetting circumstances.

Also important, the findings show that risks and opportunity often go hand in hand – more use tends to bring more of both. Thus efforts to reduce harm should take care not overly to restrict opportunities for children since they benefit from the internet. Since nearly half of UK children say that their parents' efforts at mediation have the effect of restricting their online activities, the trade-off is clear, if difficult for parents to manage.