



UK CHILDREN GO ONLINE

Listening to young people's experiences

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Executive Summary & Recommendations

Project overview

UK Children Go Online. This new research project, part of the ESRC's E-Society Programme, focuses on the nature of children's internet use. The report presents qualitative research findings, drawing on fourteen focus groups with children. The next step will be to survey internet-related attitudes and practices among 9-19 year olds across the UK.

Aims. The report addresses two areas of opportunity:

Learning - education, informal learning and literacy,

Communication - social networks, participation and identity, and two areas of risk:

Dangers - of undesirable forms of content or contact and

Inequalities - exclusion and the digital divide.

Key findings on learning

Children as the internet experts. Although many households contain one or more computer-literate parents, children consider themselves more expert in using the internet. Indeed, both girls and boys gain significant, perhaps even unprecedented, social status and domestic power through the value that adults place on this expertise. Although parents may be 'catching up', young people's willingness to experiment may make this a lasting reversal of the generation gap.

The internet as a flexible medium. Children and young people regard the internet as a flexible medium which allows them to find information for school, communicate with friends and relatives using email, instant messaging and chat rooms, play games, download music and visit fan sites.

Learning by doing. In addition to new technical skills, young people's expertise may also include a change in learning styles and knowledge – to 'learning by doing' rather than rule-bound learning.

Downloading and hacking as alternative skills. Teens especially were keen to discuss alternative forms of expertise. In addition to, or even more than, educational skills they place a high value on music file-sharing, hacking and communication skills as central to their peer culture.

Limitations on literacy. Despite young people's enthusiasm for the internet, 'internet literacy' is still developing. Young people admit to aspects of internet use which they find problematic, including searching and information overload. Awareness of the motives behind websites and a critical attitude towards their credibility and trustworthiness appear little developed.

"My dad hasn't even got a clue. Can't even work the mouse ... so I have to go on the internet for him." (Nina, 17, from Manchester)

"It's better to do trial and error because you can learn from the mistakes, and you can find new places, for different sorts of things." (Kim, 15, from Essex)

"Every time I try to look for something, I can never find it. It keeps coming up with things that are completely irrelevant and a load of old rubbish really." (Heather, 17, from Essex)

Key findings on communication

Constant contact with friends. Children's motivations for going online centre on new opportunities for communication and identity play. While the conversational content is often mundane, being readily in touch with their friends is important to them.

Online communication fosters offline links. Online communication is rarely an escape from real life. The internet appears to foster, rather than undermine, existing social contacts, for example with friends from school, connecting children into local, rather than global, networks.

Avoiding contact with strangers. The internet also facilitates some broadening of everyday networks, sustaining connections with friends from abroad or distant relatives. However, most young people see little point in talking to strangers on the internet, regarding unknown online contacts as 'dodgy'.

Shifting from chat to instant messaging. Although some younger teens enjoy 'messaging around' in chat rooms or pretending to be someone else, many are leaving chat rooms in favour of instant messaging (and SMS) with their local circle of friends.

A wide range of communication choices. While adults tend to judge online communication against an ideal of face-to-face conversation, young people evaluate a wide range of options – face-to-face, email, instant message, chat rooms, phone, SMS – according to their communicative needs. Their criteria include immediacy, message complexity, mobility, cost, privacy and embarrassment.

Little interest in political participation and online content creation. Young people appear uninterested in the possibility of political participation via the internet, being cynical about the likelihood that politicians would listen to them. Although they relish participating in a globalised and commercialised youth culture online, they are less interested in creating their own websites.

"Even if you've just seen them at school like, it'll be like you're texting them or talking to them on the phone or on MSN." (Kim, 15, Essex)

"If you're talking to someone you haven't met, how do you know if what they're telling you is the truth? You don't really mean some things you say, like, it is a bit fake." (Mark, 17, from Essex)

"Chat rooms, you really don't know who you're talking to. Whereas instant messaging – you do." (Cameron, 13, from Derbyshire)

"You can email your MP, but is he going to listen?" (Heather, 17, from Essex)

"I get in touch with celebrities once in a while, and they send an email back." (Padma, 15, from London)

Key findings on online dangers

'Weirdos, spam and porn' as downsides. Children associate the internet with paedophiles in chat rooms, spam mail and advertising, online pornography and viruses. Insofar as use of the internet poses a threat to children and young people, their relatively trusting, uncritical approach to the internet is a matter for concern.

Varying experiences of pornography. Many children and young people claim to have seen pornography online. For some this is definitely unwelcome, and here gender is important. Teenage boys, far more than girls, express interest in seeing online pornography, though many – especially older boys and girls – claim to be indifferent. Teens say they encounter pornography more easily and more often on the internet than via other sources. They have varying views on whether access to pornographic online content should be restricted.

Raised awareness of chat room dangers. Chat rooms appear to be losing popularity in favour of instant messaging, reflecting the success of media awareness campaigns warning children of the risks. Younger children have been especially impressed by media stories, though older teens may regard the risks online as less than those they encounter offline in their neighbourhood.

Some children still taking risks. Perhaps the 'comparative safety' of the internet leads some teens to take risks. Some are motivated to acquire social status through making new contacts online. Some avoid telling their parents of the risks. Some admit to forgetting safety advice when in a chat room.

Parents are monitoring and restricting internet use. Children report that, responding to a mix of media stories and personal experiences, parents are restricting or monitoring their internet use, employing a variety of regulatory practices. Young people are particularly frustrated by overly restrictive or inefficient filtering, both at home and school.

Children value their privacy. Domestic regulation of the internet can undermine trust between parents and children. Children spoke strongly of their value for privacy, objecting to being monitored or checked up on – likening this to having one's pockets searched or one's personal space invaded. In response, they attempt to evade or outwit their parents, and they outline a range of tactics for doing this.

"The internet is just like life as I see it, but just easier. So if these 13 or 14 year olds want to find stuff (pornography), they're going to find it in real life or on the internet." (Lorie, 17 from Essex)

"There's obviously the scare of paedophiles and people like that on chat rooms... it's on the news, and there are ad campaigns against it." (Alan, 13, from Essex)

"Talking to your parents about the internet is bad for you. They might try and think about taking the internet off your computer." (Amir, 15, from London)

"My mum's always watching me when I'm in a chat room to check there's no trouble." (Rosie, 13, from Derbyshire)

"Because you want your independence, really, you don't want your mum looking over your shoulder checking what you're doing all the time." (Steve, 17, from Manchester)

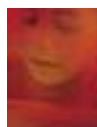
Key findings on inequality

If the internet disappeared tomorrow. Enthusiasm for the internet, though considerable, remains less than for other activities – going out, meeting or phoning friends, watching television. Seen as a great convenience, young people remain confident they could do all they need or wish without the internet if necessary.

Non-users feel excluded. The few children who lack home access to the internet claim to miss out on communicating with friends and feel left out of conversations about popular websites. However, they try to develop strategies to compensate.

"If we didn't have the internet, we'd get everything we have on the internet somewhere else." (Marie, 16, from Essex)

"They're missing out on downloading stuff and using chat rooms ... Some people can't afford it, which is just a sad truth." (Steve, 17, from Manchester)



Five Recommendations

On the basis of this report we offer five key recommendations to policy makers, internet service providers, teachers, parents and children:

Developing critical evaluation skills. Children and young people's 'internet literacy' requires further support and development. This must look beyond technical and searching skills to encompass a critical awareness of the quality, purpose and reliability of websites. Being able to make an informed evaluation of online sites and services is crucial if children are both to benefit from online opportunities and to avoid the dangers. Hence, while parents, teachers and others should continue to value children's expertise, it should be recognised that they also need continued guidance in use of the internet.

Parental trust in children. Simply pressing for more parental monitoring, restriction and control could encourage children's evasion rather than their cooperation with attempts at internet regulation in the home. While often naïve about threats to their privacy from external sources, children are fiercely protective of their privacy in relation to their parents. Parents need more information, confidence and guidance so that they feel empowered to discuss the risks with their children, especially as they grow older. An explicit negotiation of the balance between children's safety and children's privacy is important to the trust relationship between parents and children.

Improving levels of internet safety awareness. Many children have direct experience of pornography online, and many know of stories of risky encounters in chat rooms. As in other safety campaigns or other areas of public information, it seems easier to get the message across than to ensure safe practices under all circumstances. It is encouraging to note the widespread awareness of chat room dangers, and this must be sustained through continued campaigns. However, under particular circumstances, it seems that young people continue to engage in risky behaviour, necessitating more careful, targeted strategies for safety awareness.

Maximising opportunities for participation and creativity. Young people's cynicism or lack of interest in political participation using online resources poses a challenge to policy makers especially. These might usefully take as their starting point the nature and channels of participation which young people enjoy – creating links with music, fashion, animals, the environment, etc. It is particularly disappointing how few young people feel encouraged or inspired to create their own internet content. There is a considerable challenge, not least to internet service providers, to provide young people with accessible and stimulating possibilities for content creation.

Overcoming the digital divide. It should not be assumed that all children have free access to the internet, despite the minimal conditions of access becoming more widespread. Too little is known as yet of the social, educational and other consequences of exclusion, but it is clear that internet access remains heavily stratified and that, especially for popular and social uses of the internet, some children are being left out. If internet use is restricted to educational uses in schools, libraries etc, then children lacking home access may still feel excluded from their peer culture.