What are your kids up to online? New report on Internet risks for youth

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What are your teenagers up to online? Are they being creative or corrupted?

A new survey of European children's use of the Interne t has attempted to assess the risks young people face on the web. It paints a remarkable picture that suggests youth will never be the same again.

How about this 12 year old Czech boy discovering the joys of online multi-player games?

"In online games where you can get some bonus points, when a child meets someone unknown in such game and that person offers him or her buying those points if the child send him some naked photos".

Ungrammatical, I know, but you (and the Czech boy) get the message. And it's not nice is it?

But this is just an imaginary digital world isn't it? Hmm…How about the testimony of this Swedish teenage girl:

Happy Digital Families?

> *"I have had nightmares after writing mean things online about a friend. Feeling bad after that. Have friends that got dirty mails."*

As the Daily Mail might say, the Internet can be a sewer of filth channelling obscenity and abuse direct into our kids' minds.

In fact, this huge piece of research led mainly by my colleagues at the Media and Communications Department at the London School of Economics paints a much more balanced picture that that. However, it pulls no punches in asserting that this is a major challenge for policy-makers as well as parents.

[This will be just one of the issues that we discuss in a new report on families and the media to be launched at the LSE on November 17th.]

The EU Kids Online project's latest research report is based on a continent-wide survey of 23,420 children aged 9-16. It asked them about various online risks such as 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.

As well as the grim stuff, it also gives us some vital data on general trends of Internet use by this age group that is forging the future of online consumption. One thing is clear. In the history of children's use of media, this is new territory:

> *"The rapidity with which children and young people are gaining access to online, convergent, mobile and networked media is unprecedented in the history of technological innovation."*

Firstly, children are going online at ever younger ages. Just seven years old in Sweden and across all countries, one third of 9-10 year olds who use the internet go online daily, this rising to 77% of 15-16 year olds.

They now do it everywhere. 48% use it in their bedroom and 31% via a mobile phone or handheld device. Access through a handheld device exceeds one in five in the UK.

And they do a little of it pretty much all the time. 92% of 9-16 year old users go online at least weekly, 57% go online everyday. About 30% of older youths even report relatively mild signs that they overdo it and neglect friends or sleep.

So perhaps it is no surprise that the Internet is now the prime platform for risk. Take pornography. Remember dirty mags? Pretty much a thing of the past. 21% of children have seen sexual images in one way or another, and 14% have seen them on the internet. So as the report says, 'the internet has become, just, the most common way children see sexual images'.

Now you may respond to all this in various ways. But whatever your reaction, bear in mind that most parents underestimate to quite a significant degree the amount of risk that their children encounter online. This might just be a fact of parenthood. We can't ever believe that our lovely, well-brought up children would be in contact with this stuff. We're wrong. The report's figures are stark:

> *"41% of parents whose child has seen sexual images online say that their child has not seen this; 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."*

Parents do not know what their children are doing.

Of course, we don't want to exaggerate the damage being done or the amount of extreme material that children see. The survey said that 15% of children have seen sexual imagery in the last 12 months – but only about a third said they were bothered by it. It tends to be the older teenagers who encounter most of it.

Take so-called cyber-bullying, so beloved of journalists. In fact, there is still far more bullying reported offline than there is online.

And here is the good news. The report was not designed to quantify the wonderful things that children can do online. It does not measure the joy and learning gained online. But it does set out some figures for the diverse and potentially beneficial things done online:

> *"They use the internet for school work (84%), playing games (74%), watching video clips (83%) and instant messaging (61%). Fewer post images (38%) or messages (31%) for others to share, use a webcam (29%), file-sharing sites (17%) or blog (10%)"*

They are also networkers:

> *57% of 9-16 year olds have a social networking profile – including 24% aged 9-10, 48% aged 11-12, 72% aged 13-14 and 81% aged 15-16.*

But just because they do it, doesn't mean that they are super-skilled. Polis has already attempted to de-bunk the idea of the digital natives as somehow genetically programmed to cope with online activities and the report repeats this warning:

> *"many children still lack resources to use the internet sufficiently to explore its opportunities or develop vital digital literacy skills'*

In terms of the digital literacy and safety skills that children are gaining across Europe, the ''glass half full'' approach would emphasise that the majority of 11-16 year olds can manage most of the specific skills we asked about. Moreover, one third are very confident, and a further third are a bit confident that they are the generation that knows a lot about using the internet, especially compared with parents.

However, the ''glass half empty'' conclusion is that one third say it is not true for them that they know more than their parents about using the internet. Further, of the eight skills we asked them about, on average they can only do three of them, and more than four in ten does not know how to block messages, bookmark sites, find safety information, change privacy settings or determine whether websites are reliable.

Policy Implications? It's like riding a bike:

> *Among those children who ride a bicycle, a small percentage will have an accident. The risk of harm is calculable, a function of the likelihood of an accident and its severity. Protective factors reduce the risk (either reducing the likelihood or severity of an accident); these may be environmental factors (e.g. provision of cycle paths, careful drivers, a park nearby) or individual factors (the child has received road safety training, or has good coordination). Risk factors increase the likelihood of harm and/or its severity; these too may be environmental factors (ill-regulated roads, careless drivers, long distances to travel) or individual factors (lack of road sense or insufficient parental supervision).*

Children and families are not all the same. So how do we regulate this very dynamic space?

This will be just one of the issues that we discuss in a new report on families and the media to be launched at the LSE on November 17th. Email us at polis@lse.ac.uk for more details.