By popular demand: the complexities of children's online safety

If you are on social media, there is little chance that you missed it: yesterday was Safer Internet Day and the online space buzzed with discussions of internet risks, child protection and how to make the digital world safer for children. Now that the heat of the day has passed, we look at some of the most popular blogs on Parenting for Digital Future and what their authors suggest about online harms, safeguarding, wellbeing and resilience.

*Here are some selected excerpts:**

- **The dark side of social media: interviews with exploited teens in East Asia**: in this blog, Monica *Bulger and* Patrick Burton *talk about their research at a Bangkok assistance centre* for children in need, many of whom live on the street, many of whom are sexually exploited, commercially or otherwise*. This is the final in a* series of field dispatch reports *conducted in East Asia for UNICEF's East Asia and Pacific Regional Office in the spring of 2019. Their research shows that t*eens experience various forms of abuse and risks that often translate into measurable harms, across several social media applications. Teens are approached on social media, dating apps or contacted via chat rooms in games. They are promised financial rewards for sexual services usually performed via live stream. Some social media providers are better at removing such content when reported, but there is no law enforcement follow up which makes protection difficult. Technical fixes run the risk of over-simplifying this very complex problem but can reduce reach and amplification of abuse. Laws, policies, and programmes must take into account children's vulnerabilities, circumstances and digital competencies in order to protect them better *from online child sexual exploitation.*

Young people online: Encounters with inappropriate content: Rose Bray discusses the NSPCC and O2's Net Aware research indicating that young people are coming across worrying levels of inappropriate content in the online spaces they are using. The young people in the consultation are calling on industry to do more to protect them as four out of five told the researchers that they feel social media companies aren't doing enough to protect them from content such as pornography, self-harm, bullying and hatred. Self-regulation has clearly failed to work and the time has come for regulation. A coherent set of minimum standards, enforced by an independent regulatory body, are essential to ensure that young people are more consistently and robustly safeguarded online. These standards should cover the following areas: 1) accounts that are specifically designed for under 18s with strong privacy settings, robust community standards and tagging of adult content. 2) searching for inappropriate content and flagging accounts involved in suspicious activity; 3) clear reporting mechanisms and understandable information.

- **For better or worse: how does social media affect young adults' well-being?**: Vicky Rideout *discusses the findings from her survey of US* 14- to 22-year-olds *on social media and mental health. In the study,* 15% of the 1,337 *teens and young adults* said that using social media when they are feeling depressed, stressed or anxious makes them feel even worse than they did before. But there is another, larger, group of 27% who say that they feel better. And this is a group too often left out of the public conversation. There is no one-size-fits-all solution when it comes to social media and depression among young people. Those who feel worse have a variety of personal stories describing *why* social media affects them negatively – some say that using social media contributes to them feeling left out or "less than" others, others say that time they waste on social media is the main factor that makes them feel worse. Amongst those who feel better, some find that humour helps distract them and shift their mood. Others consciously curate their feeds to expose themselves to inspirational content. Telling young people who are depressed to stay off the internet and social media may not always be wise. While that may be useful advice for some, for others it may be cutting them off from a critical lifeline, a connection to advice, information, inspiration and support.
- **Growing up shared: negotiating the risks and opportunities of 'sharenting'**: Stacey Steinberg *discusses her research on* children's privacy in the age of social media. She identifies three categories of concern that parents and policy makers must be aware of when considering how adults share online about children. The first category deals with tangible harms – specifically the risks of data collection, digital kidnapping, and identity theft. The second category is much broader and focuses on children's rights generally. Children have an interest in maintaining control of their digital footprint. When adults choose to share information about them without their consent, they inhibit the child from being able to come of age able to define themselves on their

Date originally posted: 2022-02-09

Permalink: https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/parenting4digitalfuture/2022/02/09/childrens-online-safety/

Blog homepage: https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/parenting4digitalfuture/

own terms online. Lastly, parents and policy makers must consider the effect their sharing has on a child's understanding of terms like consent, privacy, and digital citizenship. How do we want our children to become competent in online sharing once they have their own social media feeds? We must model appropriate behaviour if we expect our children to engage responsibly online themselves.

- **A framework for digital resilience: supporting children through an enabling environment:** in this blog, Cliff Manning discusses the development of the Digital Resilience Framework and how children and young people can be supported to become resilient users of the internet. Digital resilience is developed through four connected elements: understanding when you are at risk, knowing what to do to seek help, learning from experiences, and having appropriate support to recover. Developing digital resilience is not a linear process, all of the elements are equally important and can apply, to different degrees, at any time. Whilst resilience may contribute to a child's agency and self-efficacy it is not linked to an individual's effort nor is it cast in stone. Digital resilience is dynamic and often context-specific. A child may identify the risks in one online space and know what to do if they are concerned but on another platform, or at another time, they may not. Developing children's digital skills and pro-active online engagement, as well as supportive and enabling parenting, have a more positive impact on resilience than strategies that only restrict or monitor internet use and limit children's digital skills.

Within this diversity of topics, there are several points of possible agreement. Children's vulnerability and protective factors are rooted in their particular circumstances and capacities, digital or otherwise. These need to be taken into consideration when designing safeguarding policies and measures informed by children's own views. The digital environment is one amongst many factors that influence children's outcomes and its role is neither negative nor positive – it's how children engage with it and how much they are supported to do this safely that matters. Finally, it is not children's responsibility to ensure their own safety in an increasingly complex online world. This requires measures from governments, industry, educators, child practitioners, and parents and a joint effort to ensure the promotion of children's rights in a digital world.

Other popular P4DF blogs on this topic:

Friends Like Me: The screen lives of children and teens

The need for pornography education in New Zealand's schools, and beyond

ClassDojo poses data protection concerns for parents

Teen sexting in the media: try not to panic

The online safety education challenge for schools

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* Author texts published with small alterations.

First published at www.parenting.digital, this post represents the views of the authors and not the position of the Parenting for a Digital Future blog, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.

Featured image: photo by Photo by zhang kaiyv on Pexels

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