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EU kids online

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EU Kids Online and EU Kids Online II

EU Kids Online

Funded by the European Commission's Safer Internet Programme, EU Kids Online (2006-9) is a thematic network that aimed to identify, compare and draw conclusions from existing and ongoing research on children and online technologies conducted in Europe. Having constructed a publicly accessible and searchable database of nearly 400 studies conducted across Europe, it became clear to EU Kids Online that research is unevenly distributed across Europe, with most in Germany, the UK, Denmark and least in Cyprus, Bulgaria, Poland, Iceland, Slovenia and Ireland. Although most countries strategically shape the research agenda through collaboration among universities, research councils, government ministries and, sometimes, industry, in countries where little research funding exists, the EC has significantly shaped the research agenda. In countries where internet use is high, media coverage tends to focus the research agenda on risks and safety awareness.

Findings – online use and risk

Children's use of the internet continues to grow. Striking recent rises are evident among younger children, in countries which have recently entered the EU, and among parents, reversing the previous trend for teenagers especially to outstrip adults in internet use. Long-standing gender inequalities may be disappearing, though socio-economic inequalities persist in most countries. Across Europe, despite some cross-national variation, available findings suggest that for online teenagers, the rank ordering of risks experienced is fairly similar. Giving out personal information is the most common risky behaviour, followed by encountering pornography online, then by seeing violent or hateful content. Being bullied online comes fourth, followed by receiving unwanted sexual comments. Meeting an online contact offline appears the least common though arguably the most dangerous risk.

Even though higher status parents are more likely than those of lower status to provide their children with access to the internet, it seems that the children from lower status homes are more exposed to risk online. There are also gender differences in risk, with boys more likely to encounter (or create) conduct risks and with girls more affected by content and contact risks. Countries were classified by degree of children's internet use and degree of risk online. This suggests a positive correlation between use and risk: Northern European countries tend to be "high use, high risk"; Southern European countries tend to be "low use, low risk"; and Eastern European countries tend to be "new use, new risk".

Policy recommendations – maximising opportunities

E-inclusion policies should target countries where children's internet use is relatively low (Italy, Greece, Cyprus), along with certain population segments (less well-off households, parents who are not online) if the remaining 25% of EU children are to get online. Balancing empowerment and protection is crucial, since increasing online access and use tends to increase online risks; conversely, strategies to decrease risks can restrict children's online opportunities, possibly undermining children's rights or restricting their learning to cope with a degree of risk. Balancing these competing goals requires a mix of regulation, media literacy and improved interface design. Positive online provision is also important: there are growing indications that such provision, if

valued by children, directly benefits their development and reduces online risks by encouraging valuable and valued activities.

Greater internet use is associated with higher levels of education, so educational achievement may be expected to increase the extent and sophistication of internet use. Further, gaps in ICT provision and insufficient/ outdated provision of ICT in schools should be addressed, and media education should be recognised and resourced as a core element of school curricula and infrastructure.

Policy recommendations – minimising risks

There are good grounds to strengthen regulatory frameworks across Europe, especially in some countries, since substantial proportions of children are encountering content, contact and conduct risks, and since many children and parents lack the tools and skills by which they can prevent or manage such exposure. Self-regulatory provision in improving children's safety online is to be welcomed and supported, although it is not always transparent or independently evaluated. Children can only be supported in managing the online environment if this is substantially regulated - by law enforcement, interface and website design, search processes, content and service providers, online safety resources, etc – just as they can only be taught to cross a road on which drivers and driving are carefully regulated.

Priorities for future awareness-raising should concentrate on countries identified by research as high risk (Estonia, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Slovenia, the UK); on countries which have rapidly and recently adopted the internet, where access appears to exceed skills and cultural adjustment (Bulgaria, Estonia, Greece, Poland, Portugal); and on countries where children's use exceeds parents' use (Hungary, Malta, Poland, Romania). Awareness-raising priorities should focus on younger children; on strategies to encourage coping after exposure to risk; on addressing girls and boys differently; and on targeting less privileged families, schools and neighbourhoods. Awareness-raising should encompass new risks as these emerge, especially on mobile platforms and via peer-to-peer content and services.

Policy must move beyond the division between child victims and adult perpetrators. Some children perpetrate online risks, whether from malice, playfulness or mere accident; those who tend to experience online risks may generate further risks; those who create risks may also be victims; and those who are vulnerable online may lack adequate social support offline. Although no-one doubts that parents are responsible for their children's safety, evidence suggests that they should not be relied upon as many are unaware or unable to mediate their children's online activities. Rules and restrictions do not fit well with the ethos of modern parenting, especially in some countries, and it is unclear that parental strategies are effective in reducing children's exposure to risk or increasing their resilience to cope.

Given the growing impetus behind media literacy initiatives, it is timely to evaluate their effectiveness in increasing children's critical knowledge of the online environment. The changing demands of a complex technological, commercial and, increasingly, user-generated environment sets limits on children's media literacy. Hence the importance of co-and self-regulation to support children's media literacy.

Research recommendations

There are some significant gaps in the evidence base. Research priorities include:

- younger children, especially in relation to risk and coping, though continually updated research on teenagers is also important;

- emerging contents (especially 'web 2.0') and services (especially if accessed via mobile, gaming or other platforms);

- understanding children's developing skills of navigation and search, content interpretation and critical evaluation;

- new and challenging risks, such as self-harm, suicide, pro-anorexia, drugs, hate/racism, gambling, addiction, illegal downloading, and commercial risks (sponsorship, embedded or viral marketing, use of personal data, GPS tracking);

- how children (and parents) do and should respond to online risk;

- how to identify particularly vulnerable or 'at risk' children within the general population;

- evaluations of the effectiveness of technical solutions, parental mediation, media literacy, other awareness and safety measures, both in terms of the ease of implementation and more importantly in terms of their impact on risk reduction; this may vary for different groups of children in different cultural contexts.

To advance this agenda, and since methods of researching children, the online environment, and countries in comparative perspective are all demanding, EU Kids Online produced two reports on methodology - a literature review and a best practice research guide, plus additional online resources to guide researchers. All are available at www.eukidsonline.net, along with project reports and further publications.

EU Kids Online II:

Enhancing knowledge regarding European children's use, risk and safety online

EU Kids Online II is a new project funded by the EC Safer Internet Programme, designed to examine children's and parents' experiences and practices regarding use, risk and safety online. This is the second project undertaken by the EU Kids Online network, comprising some 70 experts in social uses of the internet and new media, media education and digital literacy, childhood and family studies, the psychology of adolescence and identity, legal and regulatory perspectives, and research methods.

Between 2009 and 2011, EU Kids Online II will conduct original empirical research across member states with national samples of children aged 9-16 years old and their parents. The aim is to produce a rigorous, cross-nationally comparative quantitative evidence base regarding internet use across Europe. Directed by Professor Sonia Livingstone of the London School of Economics and Political Science, the project team includes a multinational management group, an international advisory panel, and research teams in over 20 participating countries across Europe.

Why is this research needed?

EU Kids Online I (2006-9) examined available findings on cultural, contextual and risk issues in children's use of online technologies across 21 countries. It located and evaluated findings from 400+ studies, identifying key findings and pinpointing gaps in the evidence base. Its reports examine data availability, comparative findings, best research practice, research contexts and policy recommendations.

Online risks high on public, research and policy agendas include exposure to inappropriate content (e.g. pornographic, self-harm and violent content, racist/hate material), unwelcome contact (e.g. grooming, sexual harassment, bullying, abuse of personal information and privacy) and, attracting growing attention, inappropriate conduct by children themselves (e.g. bullying, abuse of privacy).

But exactly how common these risks are, how much risks result in genuine harm, how children react, whether some children are particularly vulnerable, how parents can or should act – all these questions and more await cross-nationally comparative and reliable research for their answers. Furthermore, it is important to avoid moral panics or exaggerated anxieties, particularly as these may result in efforts to constrain children's freedoms or limit their opportunities online.

Adopting an approach which is child-centred, comparative, critical and contextual, EU Kids Online II aims to design, conduct and analyse a major quantitative survey of children's experiences of online risk. The survey will encompass questions about children's internet use, digital literacy, coping responses, perceptions and safety practices. These findings will be systematically compared to the perceptions and practices of their parents.

Specific objectives are as follows:

➢ To design a thorough and robust survey instrument appropriate for identifying the nature of children's online access, use, risk, coping and safety awareness.

➢ To design a thorough and robust survey instrument appropriate for identifying the nature of parental experiences, practices and concerns regarding their children's internet use.

➢ To administer the survey in a reliable and ethically-sensitive manner to national samples of internet users aged 9-16, and their parents, in member states.

➢ To analyse the results systematically so as to identify both core findings and more complex patterns among findings on a national and comparative basis.

➢ To disseminate the findings in a timely manner to a wide range of relevant stakeholders nationally, across Europe, and internationally.

➢ To identify and disseminate key recommendations relevant to the development of safety awareness initiatives in Europe.

➢ To identify any remaining knowledge gaps and methodological lessons learned, to inform future projects regarding the promotion of safer use of the internet and new online technologies.

Expected results

➢ Core findings regarding children's and parents' experiences of online technologies, focused on comparisons of children's and parents' perceptions of and practices regarding online risk and safety.

➢ Patterns of risk and safety online to be identified following top-down hypothesis testing and bottom-up exploration of relationships among different variables, conducted on a cross-national basis.

➢ Evidence-based policy and research recommendations.

Timetable

Autumn 2009   Project planning, survey design, sampling

Spring 2010   Fieldwork

Summer 2010   Core data analysis

Autumn 2010   Report on core findings

Spring 2011   Contextual and comparative analysis

Summer 2011   Final report and recommendations

Further information

For all project reports and outputs, for network contacts and for further information, see www.eukidsonline.net.

Reports from EU Kids online include the following:

Staksrud, E., Livingstone, S. and Haddon, L. (2007). *What Do We Know About Children's Use of Online Technologies? A Report on Data Availability and Research Gaps in Europe* (2nd edition, 2009). Separate national reports also available on the website.

Lobe, B., Livingstone, L and Haddon, L. (2007). *Researching Children's Experiences Online across Countries: Issues and Problems in Methodology*.

Hasebrink, U., Livingstone, S. and Haddon, L. (2008). *Comparing Children's Online Opportunities and Risks across Europe: Cross-national Comparisons for EU Kids Online* (2nd edition, 2009). Separate national reports available on the website.

Lobe, B., Livingstone, S., Ólafsson, K., Simões, J. (2008). *Best Practice Research Guide: How to Research Children and Online Technologies in Comparative Perspective*. Available as a pdf and online FAQs. Also on the website are a range of good practice resources.

Stald, G. and Haddon, L. (2008). *Cross-Cultural Contexts of Research: Factors Influencing the Study of Children and the Internet in Europe*. National reports available on the website.

de Haan, J. & Livingstone, S. (2009). *EU Kids Online: Policy and Research Recommendations*.

Livingstone, S. & Haddon, L. (2009). *EU Kids Online: Final Report*.

The network has also published a book: Livingstone, S., & Haddon, L. (Eds.) (2009). *Kids Online: Opportunities and Risks for Children*. Bristol: The Policy Press.