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Report

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How can parents support children's internet safety?

Andrea Duerager and Sonia Livingstone

Summary

Given the Safer Internet Day 2012 theme of *Connecting Generations*, we ask whether, instead of imposing restrictions, parents can support their child's internet safety by sharing a positive experience of internet use with them.

An analysis of parental mediation in the *EU Kids Online* survey of 25,142 9-16 year olds in 25 countries shows that restrictive mediation reduces online risks, but it also reduces their online opportunities and skills.

The new analysis in this report shows that when parents actively mediate their child's internet use, this too is associated with lower risk and, most important, lower harm. However, parental active mediation of use is linked to more (not fewer) online activities and skills.

By active mediation of use, we mean: parents talk to their child about the internet, stay nearby or sit with them while they go online, encourage them to explore the internet, and share online activities with them. These activities, our findings show, tend to reduce children's exposure to online risks without reducing online opportunities, and they also reduce young children's (9-12 years) reports of being upset when they encounter online risks.

As for other mediation strategies, the evidence suggests that parents' active mediation of safety (e.g. giving safety or online behaviour advice), and their monitoring of the child's internet use, are generally used after a child has experienced something upsetting online, to prevent further problems.

Interestingly, parental technical mediation such as using a filter is not shown to reduce online risk encounters among children.

The challenge

Many stakeholders are working together to support children's internet safety, including governments, teachers, industry providers and services, child welfare agencies, parents and children themselves.

Given the Safer Internet Day 2012 theme of *Connecting Generations*, we ask whether, instead of imposing restrictions, parents can support their children's internet safety by sharing a positive experience of internet use with their children.

- Going online is now taken for granted in everyday life. European children average 88 minutes a day online, ranging from one hour for 9-10 year olds to two hours for 15-16 year olds.
- Nearly half of European children go online in their bedroom, and one third go online on a mobile phone or handheld device. Given the rise of privatised and mobile access, it is difficult for parents to closely regulate their children's safety.
- Yet, with children going online younger and younger, and with younger children reporting being more upset than teenagers when they do encounter harm, parents have a key role to play.
- The *EU Kids Online* survey shows that if parents restrict their children's internet use, children encounter fewer risks such as pornography, cyberbullying, contact with unknown others.
- However, parental restrictions work by limiting children's internet use in general. Thus they also reduce children's online opportunities such as learning, communication, participation and fun. Further, not all parents wish to play a restrictive role and would welcome an alternative approach.
- This report analyses the *EU Kids Online* survey of 25,142 9-16 year olds in 25 countries to compare parental strategies and discover if any strategy can reduce online risks without sacrificing opportunities.

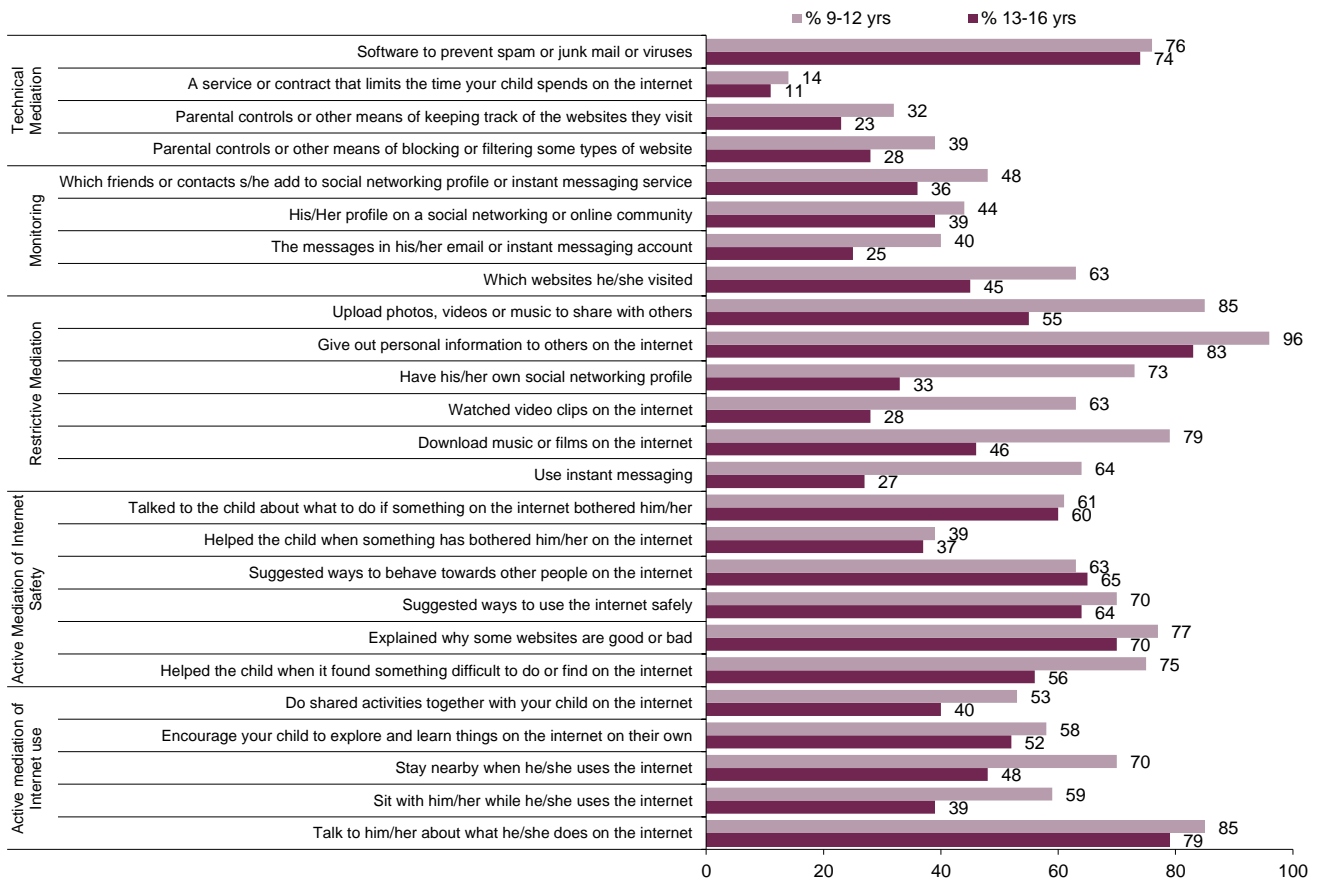
What do parents do when children go online?

The survey asked parents (and their children) about lots of different things they might do (see Table 1).

- 89% impose rules about whether their child can give out personal information online; 82% talk to their children – especially their daughters - about what they do on the internet; and 59% stay nearby when their child is online.
- Monitoring what the child does online later is less popular, since it may imply less trust. While three quarters use software to prevent spam/viruses, less than a third uses a filter for safety reasons.
- Around one in ten parents does few or none of the forms of mediation we asked about.
- Parents reduce their mediation – especially restrictions - as children get older. But they are likely to advise on safety for children of any age.

- Parents from higher SES homes do more active and safety mediation though not more restrictions. Those who use the internet more often, or who are more confident using it, do more of all forms of mediation except restrictions.
- Restrictive mediation is more used by parents with lower SES, lower education, less internet use and less digital confidence. It seems they feel less sure about actively mediating their children’s internet use.
- Only 15% of parents say they have changed their approach to internet safety because of something that upset their child online.
- One quarter think it is ‘fairly’ (23%) or ‘very’ (5%) likely their child will experience problems online in the next six months; half think they should take more interest in their child’s online activities.

Figure 1: Parental mediation strategies



Active mediation: Which of the following things, if any do you sometimes do with your child? *Active mediation of internet safety:* Have you ever done any of these things with your child? *Restrictive mediation:* [Is] your child allowed to do this all of the time, only with permission/supervision or never allowed (Note: The latter two options are combined to calculate those for whom restrictions apply.) *Monitoring:* Do you sometimes check any of the following things afterwards? *Technical mediation:* Do you make use of any of the following?

Base: One of the parents of each child who uses the internet.

Relating parental mediation to online risk

Are these mediation strategies linked to fewer encounters with online risk among children? Since the *EU Kids Online* survey is cross-sectional in design, i.e. parents and children completed the survey at one point in time, we cannot investigate cause and effect but we can examine the associations among what parents do and what children say about online risk and harm.

The *EU Kids Online* survey asked about seven different online risks:

- **46% of 9-16 year old internet users in Europe had experienced at least one risk online, rising from 17% 9-10 year olds to 69% 15-16 year olds.**

New analysis of the data reveals that:

- Children's exposure to online risks decreases the more parents use **restrictive mediation**.
- Children's exposure to online risks also tends to be less the more parents **actively mediate their children's use**.
- **Parental active mediation of safety** has no significant association with online risks for children aged 11-12 but it is associated with more risks for 9-10 and 13-16 year olds.
- **Parental monitoring** is linked to more online risks among 9-14 year olds (for 15-16 year olds the finding is similar but not statistically significant).
- **Technical mediation** shows no effect on reducing risks online (at any age).

Unexpectedly, parents' active mediation of safety and monitoring is linked to more not less risk. We suggest, therefore, that parents may do these as a *consequence* of their child having experienced risks – this would explain the positive association with online risk. Possibly, the experience of online risks raises the parents' awareness of online risks and so they deploy more strategies for safety and control. Both strategies appear to represent prevention strategies for further risks, but their effectiveness in preventing further risks cannot be established without measures of parenting taken both before and after risk encounters.

Importantly, while restrictive mediation is clearly associated with lower risk, there is also evidence that parental active mediation of internet use - i.e. parents talking to their child about the internet, staying nearby or sitting with them while they go online, encouraging them to explore the internet, and sharing online activities with them – can reduce online risks, notably without reducing their opportunities.

Reducing risk, reducing harm

While reducing risk has been high on the policy agenda, the *EU Kids Online* network argues that it is even more important to reduce the harm that children results from online risks – rather than simply trying to reduce risk itself.

After all, exposure to risk (e.g. encountering sexual content or getting in touch with a new contact) is linked with only a (generally low) probability of harm, and it is also positively linked with online usage, opportunities and digital skills. Moreover, exposure to risk may even result in increased coping and resilience and, therefore, result in reduced not increased harm.

Do the five measures of parental mediation predict online harm? We measured harm by asking children if they have experienced something on the internet that has bothered them in some way in the past 12 months.

New analysis shows that:

- **Parental restrictive mediation** leads to a significantly smaller probability of being bothered or upset online (at any age).
- **Active mediation of use** tends to decrease the experience of harm between 9 and 12 years, though there is no effect for 13 to 16 year olds.
- **Active mediation of safety** significantly increases being bothered or upset from online risks among 9-10 year olds and 15-16 year olds (with a similar tendency between these ages which is not statistically significant).
- **Monitoring** is not significantly linked to feeling bothered or upset at 9-10 or 15-16 but is associated with increased harm between 11-14.
- **Technical mediation** has no significant impact between 9 and 14, and is associated with more harm for 15-16 year olds.

It seems that restrictive mediation and active mediation of use are the strategies for prevention, while active mediation of safety and monitoring are most likely to follow from (rather than cause) negative experiences.

In other words, for harm as for risk, when children experience something negative online, their parents' respond by setting safety and monitoring strategies to prevent further negative experiences.

The myths and problems of parental mediation

The *EU Kids Online* survey findings help fill out the picture on what parents do, and how children respond.

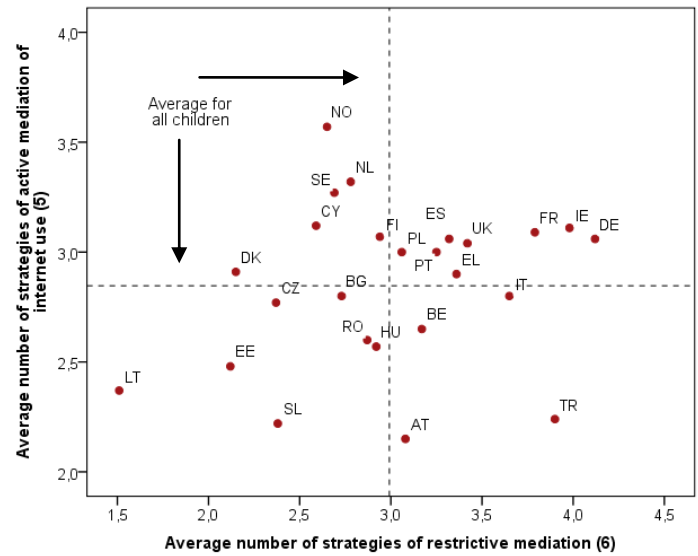
- Four fifths of parents (especially parents of younger children) are confident that they can help their child deal with anything online that bothers them, and they are also fairly confident in their child's ability to cope.
- Whereas active mediation, monitoring and technical mediation is positively associated with online activities and competencies at all stages of age, restrictive mediation is linked to lower activities and skills.
- Parents who practise more restrictive regulation have children who encounter fewer risks and also less harm – but also fewer online opportunities (and, because these children do fewer online activities, they also have fewer digital skills).
- Parents who practise more active safety mediation or monitoring have children who encounter more risks (especially younger children) and more harm (especially teenagers). Most probably, safety mediation is a parental response to, rather than a cause of, problematic online experiences (note that the children of these parents tend to do more online activities and have more digital skills).
- **When we asked the same questions of the children, they reported similar levels of parental activity, although they underestimate parents' use of monitoring and filtering.**
- They are generally positive about their parents' actions – over two thirds say it is helpful (27% 'very', 43% 'a bit'). Notably, teenagers tend to agree with younger children about this.
- Contrary to the view that parents know little of what their children do online, two thirds of children say their parents know a lot (32%) or quite a lot (36%) about what they do online.
- However, nearly half think what their parents do limits their online activities (11% 'a lot', 33% 'a little'); 9-10 year olds feel the most restricted.
- As often suspected, a third of children say they sometimes ignore what their parents say about using the internet (7% 'a lot', 29% 'a little').
- Some would like their parents to take 'a lot' (5%) or 'a little' (10%) more interest in what they do online, especially among the 9-12 year olds; most would not, though.
- Parents appear to have got the message that it is worth engaging with their child's internet use, and they employ a wide range of strategies, depending partly on the age of the child. **But there are some parents who do not do very much, even for young children, and there are some children who would like their parents to take more interest.** It is a policy priority now to reach these parents with awareness raising messages and resources.
- **Cynicism that what parents do is not valued, or that children will always evade parental guidance, is ungrounded.** The evidence reveals a more positive picture in which children welcome parental interest and activities, and parents express confidence in their children's abilities. It is important to support this positive approach as the internet becomes more complex and more embedded in everyday life.
- Problematically, the approach of parental restrictions carries a significant cost in terms of children's online opportunities and skills, even though it may be appropriate if children are vulnerable to harm. However, as this report has shown, **parental efforts can empower children online by enhancing their opportunities and skills while also going some way to reducing risk and harm from online risk.**

Country differences in parental mediation

How do parents vary in their approach depending on their country and culture? On an individual level, the more parents actively mediate their children's internet use, the more restrictions they also set. But a different picture arises on country level (see Figure 2):

- Northern European countries such as Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland and the Netherlands practice above average active mediation of use but below average restrictive mediation.
- Eastern European countries such as Lithuania, Estonia or Romania are characterised by below average active and restrictive mediation.
- Especially in Turkey but also in Austria, Italy and Belgium, parents do more restrictive mediation and less active mediation than the European average.
- High active and high restrictive mediation is characteristic of some Southern European countries (such as Portugal, Spain and Greece) and is also found in the biggest European countries - France, Germany and the UK.

Figure 2: Parents' restrictive mediation practices by parents' active mediation of internet use, by country



Note: The country level correlation between active mediation of internet use and restrictive mediation is statistically not significant, Pearson's $r = .201$; $p = .335$.

Base: One parent of all children who use the internet.

Further reports

- Livingstone, S., Haddon, L., Görzig, A., and Ólafsson (2011) *EU Kids Online Final Report*.
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 - Garmandia, M., Casado, M., Garitaonandia, C., Martinez, G. *Parental mediation and children's exposure to risks on the internet. Effectiveness of the different approaches*.
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The *EU Kids Online* network has been funded by the EC Safer Internet Programme in three successive phases of work from 2006-14 to enhance knowledge of children's and parents' experiences and practices regarding risky and safer use of the internet and new online technologies.

As a major part of its activities, *EU Kids Online* conducted a face-to-face, in home survey during 2010 of 25,000 9-16 year old internet users and their parents in 25 countries, using a stratified random sample and self-completion methods for sensitive questions.

Now including researchers and stakeholders from 33 countries in Europe and beyond, the network continues to analyse and update the evidence base to inform policy.

For reports, findings and technical survey information, see www.eukidsonline.net