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EU kids online: what bothers or upsets children on the internet

Report

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EU Kids Online: What bothers or upsets children on the internet?

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> People sending you stuff like "you're cute, you're stunning" and they've never seen you before. (Girl aged 10)
> Sexual pictures or videos. Hurtful messages or emails. Videos by people beaten up or harmed. (Boy aged 12)

When kids are seeing things like this on the internet, parents will surely wonder what's going on. Strangers couldn't see send messages to kids twenty years ago. And when someone was beaten up, terrible though that was, no one made a film of it for anyone to see.

Today children and young people are going online in large numbers, on both computers and mobile phones or other handheld devices. New services – such as social networking sites or user-generated content, and new hardware – such as webcams, all seem to facilitate risky experiences.

> On Facebook, others can be nasty. Comments on YouTube can be hateful. (Boy aged 15)
> Naked pictures. Print screens of naked people on cam. (Girl aged 15)

What do parents need to know? In other articles in this magazine, experts offer a range of useful advice and tips for parents to help and guide their children. In this piece, I take a closer look at what children say is really bothering them online.

Since 2006, our EU Kids Online network – made up of around 70 psychologists, sociologists, internet specialists and child welfare experts across Europe - has been researching the experiences children have on the internet. During the spring and summer of 2010, we interviewed nearly 25,000 children who use the internet – 1,000 children aged 9 to 16 years old in each of 25 European countries.

We talked to them face to face, in their own homes, with a private part of the interview for sensitive questions. There isn't space to report children's answers to all

our questions here, so I'll focus on one set of questions, from the private part of the interview conducted in the UK.

To avoid biasing the answers we got by using anxiety-provoking terms like 'danger', 'pornography', 'peodophile' or 'stranger', we simply asked about experiences that had bothered them in some way. By 'bothered', we said we meant things that "made you feel uncomfortable, upset, or feel that you shouldn't have seen it".

We asked, first, "do you think there are things on the internet that people about your age will be bothered by in any way?" If they said yes, we asked them to write down, "what things on the internet would bother people about your age?" and put their answer in a sealed envelope.

In the UK, here are some of the things they said:

> Bully on email. Making a profile that strangers use. (Girl aged 11)
> Racist advertisements are sometimes shown, which personally I think a lot of people would feel disgusted by... (Boy aged 16)
> People pretending to be other people. Not knowing who they are. Seeing people being hurt. (Girl aged 9)
> Abusive sites. Abusive to humans and animals - should be found and blocked. (Boy aged 14)

Maybe children have heard of these things in the media, or maybe they've heard their parents worrying about them. But they might have experienced them personally. So then we asked:

(i)   "in the PAST 12 MONTHS, have you seen or experienced something on the internet that has bothered you in some way? For example, made you feel uncomfortable, upset, or feel that you shouldn't have seen it."

(ii)   "do you think there are things on the internet that people about your age will be bothered by in any way?"

We also asked one of their parents, "as far as you are aware, in the past year, has your child seen or experienced something on the internet that has bothered them in some way?"

Answers for British children and parents are shown in the table below:
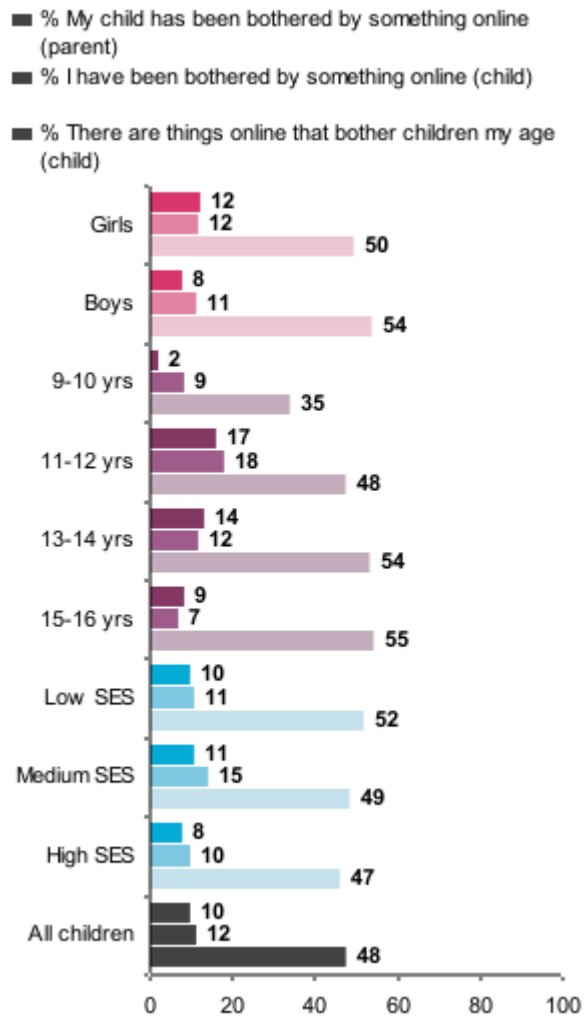
Clearly, many children don't see the internet as completely safe environment. Nearly half of British 9-16 year olds children think that the internet bothers people their own age.

Intriguingly, they are four times more likely to say that the internet bothers other children (48%) than they are to say something has bothered them personally in the past year (12%). It seems they worry for each other. Perhaps, too, it's easier to say there are bad things out there than to say 'it's happened to me?'

On the other hand, half of these 9-16 year olds do not see the internet as problematic for children their age. Younger children are least likely to be concerned. More strikingly, the vast majority has not experienced a problem themselves.

Also worth noting:

- Parents seem a bit less likely to see the internet as problematic for their sons than for their daughters, but their sons do not agree.

- Even though 9% of 9-10 year olds say they've been bothered by something online, their parents are unlikely to recognise this. Only 2% of parents say yes, something has bothered my child online.

- Among 11-12 year olds, both children and parents report more problems. Since this is when British children start secondary school, the problem may be more internet access at secondary school? Or a new peer group encouraging risk-taking? Or the onset of adolescence?

I'd urge all parents should be aware that, even though many children enjoy using the internet, one in eight experiences things that bothers or upsets them. This rises to nearly one in five among those starting secondary school.

Since parents tend to underestimate this, particularly for their sons and their younger children, it's worth parents talking about the internet more to their children. It's also worth finding some activities to do with them online. And don't just buy them a computer for the start of secondary school without thinking about how to guide children in what they do with it.

In our full report (online at www.eukidsonline.net), we compare these findings across Europe. Across the 25 European countries where we did the same survey, 55% of children think there are things online that bother children their age – a higher percentage than in the UK.

The number of children who report having experienced a problem personally is, as in the UK, 12% on average. Interestingly 26% of children in Denmark, 25% in Estonia, and 21% in Romania, Sweden and the Netherlands say that they have been bothered by something on the internet. On the other hand, the same is said by only 6% of Italian children, 7% of Portuguese, and 5% in France and Germany. So things might be worse but they could be better.

Keeping the risks in perspective is important. Although half the children think there are things on the internet that will bother children about their own age, when we asked about the positive side of the internet, many were upbeat.

- Across Europe, 84% think it true that there are lots of things on the internet that are good for children of my age (38% "very true" and 46% "a bit true").

- In the UK, children are even more positive, at 90% overall (47% "very true" and 43% "a bit true").

On balance, children see the internet positively, but clearly they are aware of both the opportunities and the risks. Others in this magazine have advice on how parents and teachers can encourage the opportunities and either reduce or guide children through the risks.