

Digital parenting in Ireland

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Ireland lags behind in children's engagement with the internet, and also in parents' awareness of how to keep them safe. Earlier this week, we [posted](#) about online hate in light of [Safer Internet Day](#), now [Brian O'Neill](#) reflects on how parents need more support in protecting their children, as well as encouragement to become more engaged. Brian is the Director of Research, Enterprise and Innovation Services for the three partner institutions of the Dublin Institute of Technology, and is part of the [Irish team](#) of the [EU Kids Online](#) project.

Findings from [EU Kids Online](#) about young people's digital activities in Ireland highlighted some interesting anomalies. Despite high levels of connectivity, daily use of the internet by 9- to 16-year-olds in Ireland was found to be well below the European average, with the amount of time spent online 50% below that of the UK.

Online activities among young people were also fewer in number and consisted of the more basic and passive activities on the '[ladder of opportunities](#)'. This ladder is a hypothesized sequence of activities through which children progress, beginning with information seeking, to interactive communication and gaming, to more creative and participative uses and activities.

Interestingly, Irish young people also appeared to be more risk averse than most European countries: just 39% of children on average experienced risk, placing [Ireland](#) very much on the lower end of the spectrum for experience of risk. At the same time, Irish parents were found to be among the *most* restrictive in Europe in setting rules to restrict the child's use in terms of time or activities online.

A 2008 [Eurobarometer](#) survey revealed that the top concerns for Irish parents were sexual content, grooming and online bullying. Despite this, of those children who reported to EU Kids Online that they had been bullied, over two-thirds of their parents were unaware that this had happened. While nearly half of Irish parents said they use filters or parental controls, fewer do



shared activities with their children, sit with their (younger) children while using the internet, or help when something has bothered their children online.

Parents' relatively low level of involvement in supporting their children's digital literacy means that as online access becomes more pervasive, children and young people may be less prepared and insufficiently skilled to deal with the challenges they may encounter online. There is therefore an urgent need for targeted awareness-raising and education programmes for parents themselves to become more trusting, more digitally aware and confident in guiding their children's internet use.

Parents' lack of digital involvement also stands in stark contrast to Ireland's emergence as a global technology hub, home to some of the world's leading internet and technology companies. The technology sector is responsible for 40% of Ireland's national exports, worth **€72 billion per annum**. It is hard to see how there can be such low levels of engagement and trust, as evidenced by a recent **Eurobarometer poll**, where Ireland (with the UK), topped the list of countries expressing concerns about control over personal data shared online.

Internet safety versus digital engagement

Internet safety in Ireland has generally tended towards reinforcement of protection over participation. Early steps taken by the Irish government included the creation of the Internet Advisory Board, later called the **Office for Internet Safety**, to promote awareness about online safety, and the setting up of one of the first European **hotlines** to report illegal content. For a period, **INHOPE**, the international network of internet hotlines, had its headquarters in Dublin.

More recently, in response to concerns about online harassment, trolling and cyberbullying, a number of **legislative proposals** have been developed to create a new offence of harmful or malicious electronic communication, with harsh penalties for offenders.

By contrast, a government forum on **Internet Content Governance** in 2014, that I chaired, recommended a more collaborative approach urging stakeholders to work with the **Safer Internet Centre** as well as the safety teams in companies such as Facebook, Twitter, Google and Ask.fm, to provide better support for awareness-raising and education for parents and for all those involved in supporting young people's development.

The government's **national digital strategy**, launched in 2013, likewise seeks to create a more digitally enabled society – **Ireland's Digital Champion**, Lord David Puttnam, has been a staunch advocate for schools to 'do more with digital'. Illustrating the scale of the challenge, however, **Net Children Go Mobile** found daily internet use in schools to be particularly low, with just 7% of young people saying they go online in school, despite decades of investment to ensure high levels of broadband connectivity within schools.

Supporting digital parenting

A **recent blog post** by Tim Verbist, Director of the **Evans Foundation media program**, argued that parents have a responsibility to support their children's media literacy, but should be supported to do so. It is clear that where supports are provided, parents eagerly adopt them, but there is also an urgent need to ensure the quality and trustworthiness of any information made available.

Ireland's **National Parents Council** provides a vital support service, including a **helpline**, to assist parents in developing communication skills to open a dialogue with their children about their internet lives. This service forms part of the Safer Internet Ireland project, supported under the **European Commission Better Internet for Kids** strategy and it is a member of the **Insafe network** of European Safer Internet Centres.

Yet the competing messages from numerous other providers of internet safety advice, many of whom target schools and parent groups with consultancy services, create endless **confusion** for

parents. Leadership in this context is vital, and for that reason, the Internet Content Governance advocated that a public authority with appropriate governmental support (as in the case for media regulation), and multi-stakeholder involvement alone could assume this responsibility.

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