

## Children with special educational needs – internet safety concerns

### Aims

This piece of small-scale qualitative research with seven girls aged 13 – 16 aimed to (i) gain an understanding of the ways in which a cohort of children with Special Educational Needs (SEN), attending special schools in Surrey and Gloucester, use new and emerging technologies; (ii) establish their understanding of online risks and the steps taken to manage these; (iii) discover from adults (parents, carers and teachers) closely involved with these children what they understand about internet safety; and (iv) make recommendations about information and resources that would help keep these children safe online and in their use of related technologies.

### Key Findings

#### Focus group of children with SEN

- Children in the focus group demonstrated knowledge of online risks and a general awareness of the need to keep safe from these dangers. However, at least some children in the focus group lacked the ability to put this knowledge into practice.
- Children in the focus group were all clearly aware that you should not share personal information with people you have never met, yet at least one focus group participant who was aware of this safety rule had not activated privacy controls on her Facebook profile.
- Some participants had been taught internet safety rules, though some did not fully understand these rules or did not recognise some of the terminology used, for example 'social networking' and 'privacy settings'.

#### Focus groups with teachers of children with SEN

(Responses are grouped by theme below)

- *Difficulty with social interaction*
  - The children are too trusting because they have a lack of social skills
  - They may believe everything that they are told
  - They have poor social skills and interpretations of 'inappropriateness' can be worse online when there are fewer boundaries or visual cues, and not so immediate consequences or repercussions
  - They are desperate for friendship, which can make them vulnerable to accepting friends on Facebook and other social networking sites, as this can make it appear that they are popular
  - They may be unable to detect appropriate behaviour from other Internet users
- *Difficulty with social communication*
  - Children with SEN take conversations very literally
  - They see games as more 'real' than their mainstream peers; they struggle to see things as 'fantasy,' and lack the ability to be imaginative

- *Restricted, repetitive, and stereotyped behaviour, interests and activities*
  - They become obsessed with the internet or with particular people they meet, and may be considered to be 'stalking' someone
  - They are often obsessive and compulsive, and may be viewed as 'addicted'. Some may have big 'melt downs' if they can't go on the Internet.

### Online survey of parents of children with SEN

- 54 people completed the online survey. The respondents were 22.6% male and 77.4% female, 0 and 90.5% (49) of respondents had one child with SEN.
- Parents reported various concerns over online risks with regard to the use of social networking websites, including accessing violent material (70.2% *somewhat* or *very worried*), adult pornography (72.3%), online bullying (61.7%) and online grooming (66%).
- 63.8% of respondents reported that they have discussed Internet Safety with their child, and 85.1% said that they had implemented internet safety rules at home. 69% reported using filtering software and 31% monitoring software.

### Policy Context

Children with SEN may be particularly vulnerable to online risks. Internet safety programmes must be sensitive to the needs of children with SEN and their parents/carers and teachers.

### Methodology

This is a small scale, mixed-methods study. A focus group was held with seven female students aged 13 – 16 to obtain the views of young people with various SEN. Three focus groups were conducted with teachers at three distinct schools for children and young people with SEN. An online survey of parents/carers of children with SEN was also administered.

### Background

Research has demonstrated that the internet may be particularly beneficial for children with special educational needs. SEN comprise learning disabilities, emotional disorders, speech or language impairments, hearing or visual impairments, impaired cognitive functioning, autism and developmental delay. It is possible that children with SEN are particularly vulnerable to online risks.

**Source** <http://lucyfaithfull.org/>

**Research Team** Hannah Del-Manso, Alexandra Bailey, Teresa Hughes, Donald Findlater and Jacky Findlater

**Contact information** Teresa Hughes, [thughes@lucyfaithfull.org.uk](mailto:thughes@lucyfaithfull.org.uk)

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