

## Children's Data and Privacy Online: Growing Up in a Digital Age An Evidence Review

### Aims

With growing concerns over children's privacy and the commercial uses of their data, it is vital that children's understandings of the digital environment, their digital skills and their capacity to consent are taken into account in designing services, regulation and policy. Using systematic evidence mapping, the project sought to review the existing knowledge on children's data and privacy online, identify research gaps and outline areas of potential policy and practice development.

### Key Findings

- The key privacy challenge (and paradox) currently posed by the internet is the simultaneous interconnectedness of voluntary sharing of personal information online, important for children's agency, and the attendant threats to their privacy, also important for their safety.
- Individual privacy decisions and practices are influenced by the social environment. Children negotiate sharing or withholding of personal information in a context in which networked communication and sharing practices shape their decisions and create the need to balance privacy with the need for participation, self expression and belonging.
- Institutionalised aspects of privacy, where data control is delegated – voluntarily or not – to external agencies, is becoming the norm rather than the exception in the digital age. Yet there are gaps in our knowledge of how children experience institutional privacy, raising questions about informed consent and children's rights.
- Tactics used by marketers to collect personal information from children have aroused data privacy and security concerns particularly relating to children's ability to understand and consent, and the need for parental approval and supervision. Yet the empirical evidence related to children's experiences, awareness and competence regarding privacy online lags behind.
- Privacy is vital for child development – key privacy-related media literacy skills are closely associated with a range of child developmental areas.
- Not all children are equally able to navigate the digital environment safely, taking advantage of the existing opportunities while avoiding or mitigating privacy risks. Differences among children (developmental, socio-economic, skill-related, gender- or vulnerability-based) might influence their engagement with privacy online.
- Children are perceived as more vulnerable than adults to privacy online threats due to their lack of digital skills or awareness of privacy risks.
- But risk aversion restricts children's play, development and agency, and constrains their exploration of physical, social and virtual worlds.
- While good support can make an important difference to children's privacy online, restrictive parenting has a suppressive effect, reducing privacy and other risks but also impeding the benefits of internet use. Enabling mediation, on the other hand, is more empowering.
- Media literacy resources and training for parents, educators and child support workers should be considered as the evidence suggests important gaps in adults' knowledge of risks and protective strategies regarding children's data and privacy online.

- The evidence also suggests that design standards and regulatory frameworks are needed which account for children's overall privacy needs across age groups, and pay particular attention and consideration to the knowledge, abilities, skills and vulnerabilities of younger users.

### Policy Context

In a digital age in which many everyday actions generate data the relation between privacy and data online is becoming highly complex. This in turn sets a significant media literacy challenge for children (and their parents and teachers) as they try to understand and engage critically with the digital environment. Children's online activities are the focus of a multitude of monitoring and data-generating processes, yet the possible implications of this 'datafication of children' has only recently caught the attention of governments, researchers and privacy advocates. Attempts to recognise children's right to privacy on its own terms are relatively new and have been brought to the fore by the adoption of the European General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR, 2018), as well as by recent high-profile privacy issues and infringements. However, throughout the consultations and deliberations during the long build-up to the GDPR, children's views were barely included, and research with or about children was little commissioned or considered.

### Methodology

We conducted a systematic mapping of the evidence (Grant & Booth, 2009; Gough et al., 2012; EPPI Centre, 2018), utilising a comprehensive and methodical search strategy to include a broad range of sources including policy recommendations, case studies and advocacy guides. Three groups of search terms were combined to identify research about children, privacy and the digital environment. We identified three disciplines relevant to the scope of the review – social and cultural studies, legal and regulatory studies, and technological/computer sciences, with databases and search terms (children, privacy, digital) chosen to match these three areas. We limited the resulting sources to empirical research studies with children, and summaries of these studies can be found in the report supplement.

### Source

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<http://www.lse.ac.uk/media-and-communications/assets/documents/research/projects/childrens-privacy-online/Evidence-review-final.pdf>

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<http://www.lse.ac.uk/media-and-communications/research/research-projects/childprivacyonline>

<http://www.lse.ac.uk/media-and-communications/assets/documents/research/projects/childrens-privacy-online/Evidence-review-final-Report-supplement.pdf>

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