

EU Kids Go Online in Their Own Words – What Bothers Children Online?

Aims

This strand of the EU Kids Online III research aimed to explore children's perceptions of online risks in their own words in a systematic and comparable way.

Key Findings

In an open-ended part of the EU Kids online survey, we asked children, ***“What things on the internet would bother people about your age?”*** To maintain confidentiality, each child wrote his or her answer on a piece of paper and put it in a self-sealed envelope so neither interviewer nor parent (if present) could see how the child answered. Also important, the open-ended question was asked *before any questions were asked about risk*. Thus children gave their unprompted views.

The overall picture: Pornographic and violent content top the list of concerns

Of the 9,636 9-16 year olds who identified risks, 54% identified one risk, 31% identified two risks, and 15% identified three or more risks. This report focuses on findings for the main or first-mentioned risk, to reflect children's prioritisation.

- Content risks dominate children's concerns: 58% of those who identified online risks mentioned pornographic, violent or other content risks first.
- Conduct- or contact-related risks, along with other risks (e.g. viruses), were mentioned first by 42% of those who mentioned risks.
- Pornographic content tops the ranking of risks named by children in relation to the internet (22%).
- Violent and aggressive content is the second most common concern identified by children (18%).

While much policy attention has been given to pornography, it is noteworthy that many children are also concerned about violent or aggressive or gory content online, with their comments emphasising shock or upset on seeing cruelty, killings, abuse of animals and even the news.

Children identify a diversity of risks

The most often named risks are pornography and violent content: together these comprise 40%* of the risks first mentioned by children. But well over half of children's concerns focus on other risks, and it is notable that children took this chance to describe them.

- Less than 1% mention some of the risks much in the headlines (e.g. self-harm content or the danger of sharing personal information), though a few are concerned about reputational damage or other violations of privacy.
- Few mention commercial content, spending too much time online, other people accessing personal data or gambling.
- 'Stranger danger' is usually mentioned only vaguely (as forms of inappropriate contact), despite the anxiety over this in the media.
- Many of their concerns do echo those publicised in the mass media, it may be that the very effort to raise awareness of online risks can worry children.

Perceived risks vary by gender, age and country

- Nine year olds are least likely to mention any risks that bother children their own age (24%), rising to 45% of 16 year olds. Overall, children's mention of risks rises markedly from nine to 12 years old.
- From the early teenage years, girls are more likely than boys to identify risks online that concern their age group.
- Among those who mentioned risks, boys are more concerned about violent content (including violence, aggression and gory content) than girls (21% vs. 16%).
- Girls are more concerned than boys about contact-related (17% vs. 10%) and conduct-related (20% vs. 18%) risks.*
- Pornographic content is of less concern to children from 'higher use, some risk' countries (17% only, versus 22% to 24% for other country groupings).*
- More children in 'lower use, lower risk' countries (24%, versus 14-18%) say that violent content bothers them online.*

Policy Implications

Listening to children's accounts of online risk as expressed in their own words leads us to suggest the following:

- Priority given by children to concerns over violent content should be heard and addressed by parents, teachers and policy makers.
- Wider use of end-user filtering or parental control tools could address some of children's concerns.
- Parents should feel empowered to take time to explain, comfort and give age-appropriate rules about conduct to their children online as for traditional media.

Methodology

In this large-scale quantitative study, a survey was administered face-to-face at home to a random stratified sample of 25,142 children aged 9-16 who use the internet, plus one of their parents, during Spring/Summer 2010 in 25 European countries.

Background

The UK survey was conducted as part of a larger 25 country survey conducted by the *EU Kids Online* network and funded by the EC's Safer Internet Programme.

*% in this text refer to those children who mentioned a risk.

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