Parents still underestimate internet risks

Press release

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Parents considerably underestimate the risks their children are experiencing online, according to new research from the London School of Economics and Political Science published today (Wednesday 21 July).

The survey *UK Children Go Online* presents findings from a national, in-home, face to face survey of 1,511 young people aged 9-19 and a written questionnaire to 906 of their parents. Funded by an Economic and Social Research Council grant under the e-Society Programme, it found that among 9-19 year olds who go online at least once a week:

- 57 per cent have come into contact with pornography online (compared with 16 per cent of parents who say their children have seen porn online)

- 46 per cent claim to have given out personal information (5 per cent of parents realise this)

- A third have received unwanted sexual or nasty comments (though only about 1 in 20 parents appear aware of this)

Sonia Livingstone, Professor of Social Psychology at LSE, said: 'Parents need to be more aware of the risks their children are facing – especially as 8 per cent of young users who go online at least once a week say they have met face to face with someone they first met on the internet, 40 per cent say they have pretended about some aspect of themselves online, and 10 per cent say they seek out online porn on purpose.

'However, simply restricting children's internet access would deny them many of the benefits. Children are using the internet for a growing diversity of activities. Around 90 per cent use the internet for homework, 72 per cent for email and 70 per cent for games. Further, 55 per cent of 12-19 year old daily and weekly users have visited political or civic sites, and 25 per cent have sought personal advice online.'

She warned, however, that benefits are not equally shared, indicating a new digital divide in quality of use (as well as quality of access). Some children are not yet getting the most from the internet:

- half of weekly and daily users visited fewer than 5 sites in the previous week

- 30 per cent of pupils have received no guidance from school on using the internet

- those who go online less experience fewer risks but also fewer benefits

'It is for others to make policy recommendations, but the survey does highlight the need to raise awareness through information campaigns to parents as well as children, and for parents and schools to talk more with children about their online experiences while also respecting children's internet privacy', Professor Livingstone said.

John Carr, Internet Adviser to the children's charity NCH who also acts as an adviser to the *UK Children Go Online* survey, said: 'This is a milestone study. Its size, its scope and its authorship give it a unique authority. It confirms some things that we already knew or suspected, and it provides many rich details which greatly expand our knowledge of children's use of the internet. The gap between what children are actually doing and what their parents think they are doing is a lot larger than many people would have imagined. It is a gap we must try to close.'

Stephen Carrick-Davies, CEO of the children's and internet charity Childnet International, a co-funder of the survey, said: 'This is the largest body of academic research on children's use of technology ever to happen in the UK. It is an enormous achievement to get children to reveal their thoughts, fears and preferences honestly, in a way that it has only been possible to do anecdotally before. The report demonstrates the urgent need for more internet literacy within education since too many young people do not apply critical thinking skills to online content. It also shows that while awareness of risks is now high among parents, there still remains a lot of confusion about what to do about the risks. Parents need more practical advice and guidance in getting the most out of the internet.'

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Notes for Editors:

- The research was funded by an Economic and Social Research Council grant under the 'e-Society' Programme, with co-funding from AOL, Childnet International, Citizens Online, the Broadcasting Standards Commission (BSC) and the Independent Television Commission (ITC). The responsibilities of the BSC and the ITC have been assumed by Ofcom, the independent regulator and competition authority for the UK's communications industries, with responsibilities across television, radio, telecommunications and wireless communications services.

- e-Society is the largest ever academic research programme to look at the impact of digital technologies on our society and institutions. For more information, see www.london.edu/e-society.

- Children's access to the internet has grown rapidly – nearly all have access now, but social class still divides children in terms of location and quality of access. Among UK 9-19 year olds:

  74 per cent have access to the internet at home
  98 per cent have access somewhere
  24 per cent have broadband at home
  19 per cent have the internet in their bedroom
  24 per cent rely on school as main source of internet access

- For further details on the *UK Children Go Online* survey and results, or to request an executive summary or full survey report (PDF), contact Dr. Magdalena Bober (m.bober@lse.ac.uk or 020 7955 6005). The report and summary will be available online from Wednesday 21 July at www.children-go-on-online.net.

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