Children on the internet – more opportunities, still some risk

e-society programme - preliminary findings
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New research published to coincide with the launch of the ESRC e-society programme, conducted by the London School of Economics and Political Science, today shows key new findings on children's use of the internet.

While the safety message is getting through to young people, governments, internet providers and parents could still be doing more to make the internet safer for children.

Author of the *UK Children Go Online* report is Professor Sonia Livingstone of the Department of Media and Communications at LSE. She and research officer Magdalena Bober talked to 14 focus groups of nine to 19 year olds about how they used the internet and their opinions on its safety and value. They found that:

- Children are becoming the internet experts in families but still mainly using the internet as a means to communicate with friends and relatives, and for music and games.

- Messages about the risks of chat rooms and talking to strangers have got through – many young people cited a *Coronation Street* storyline as a memorable example of the potential dangers of chat rooms and paedophiles.

- Many children and young people claim to have seen online pornography, and they think it is more readily available on the internet than from other sources.

- While parents are monitoring internet use more, children often object to being checked up on. They want their privacy and find ways to get around parental restrictions.

- There are significant unmet opportunities for parents, schools, service providers and the government to teach young people how to use the internet more creatively. Young people are currently uninterested in political participation online and in creating their own web pages. They are often confused by information overload and not aware of the motives behind commercial websites.

Professor Livingstone offers five recommendations to policy makers, internet service providers, teachers, parents and children:

- develop children's critical evaluation skills
- encourage more parental trust in children
- improve levels of internet safety awareness
- maximise opportunities for participation and creativity
- overcome the digital divide by ensuring children without access at home don't feel excluded

She says: 'The safety message has definitely got through to young people, and many are leaving chat rooms in favour of instant messaging with their friends. However, we found young people were still relatively trusting and uncritical about online material. While the industry, government, schools and parents should continue to highlight risks, there are also some exciting opportunities being missed for engaging with young people online. Parents themselves could develop their skills more to keep up with their children.'

Professor Leonard Waverman of London Business School, programme director of the ESRC e-society programme, says: 'The aim of this programme is to enhance society's understanding of all aspects of the digital economy and culture. Professor Livingstone's preliminary findings are showing up valuable insight into this most tricky area of the internet, namely the safety of children and the role of parents in their use of the internet.'

John Fisher, CEO of the internet access charity Citizens Online - one of the co-funders of the report – says: 'Much has been said in the media recently by adults about the impact of the internet on children. For the first time, this important piece of research reveals the thoughts and feelings of young people themselves. It is vitally important we listen to them as we shape the future of our new digital society.'

Stephen Carrick-Davies, CEO of Childnet International - another co-funder of the report – says: 'Whilst it is very encouraging to see that young people are more aware of the online dangers, it is crucial that we re-double our efforts to ensure that young people are better supported in using the internet more creatively in designing authentic youth-focussed online environments. Helping them to move on from just being the technical internet expert in the home to using this most amazing of global mediums to its full creative and positive potential is the next challenge.'

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A copy of the report can be downloaded from the project website:

www.children-go-online.net

Notes follow:

Notes for Editors

1. *UK Children Go Online* is one of fifteen major research programmes being launched by ESRC – the Economic and Social Research Council's e-society programme.

2. The ESRC e-society programme is a £6 million research grant running until 2007 with the best academic minds tuned to assessing and analysing key social science issues concerning the digital world.

3. *UK Children Go Online* was co-funded by AOL, the Broadcasting Standards Commission, Childnet-International, Citizens Online and the Independent Television Commission.

4. The report is the first in a series of three publications on children, young people and the internet. A national survey led by Professor Livingstone aims to report more widely in Spring 2004 on the access, use, attitudes and practices of nine to 19 year olds on the internet.

5. The focus groups were held across England in Derbyshire, Essex, Hertfordshire, London, and Manchester.

6. This research follows Professor Livingstone's work in 2000 on the TV habits of the UK's children compared to their European peer group. From that study, she and Moira Bovill co-authored *Children and their Changing Media Environment* (Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2001).

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