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UK Children Go Online

Final report of key project findings

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For the full report, and other publications, see

www.children-go-online.net



Executive summary

UK Children Go Online (UKCGO) aims to offer a rigorous and timely investigation of 9-19 year olds' use of the internet. The project balances an assessment of online risks and opportunities in order to contribute to developing academic debates and policy frameworks for children and young people's internet use.

This report presents the main project findings and recommendations. These are based on a national UK survey conducted face to face with 1,511 children and young people aged 9-19, together with a survey administered to 906 of their parents, and a series of focus group interviews and observations focusing on children's use of the internet. The findings and recommendations are summarised below.

Access to the internet

- **Home access is growing:** 75% of 9-19 year olds have accessed the internet from a computer at home.
- **School access is near universal:** 92% have accessed the internet at school.
- **Homes with children lead in gaining internet access:** 36% have more than one computer at home, and 24% live in a household with broadband access.
- **Access platforms are diversifying:** 71% have a computer, 38% a mobile phone, 17% a digital television and 8% a games console, all with internet access.
- **Socio-economic differences are sizeable:** 88% of middle class but only 61% of working class children have accessed the internet at home.
- **Many computers in private rooms:** 19% have internet access in their bedroom.

The nature of internet use

- **Most are daily or weekly users:** 9-19 year olds are mainly divided between daily users (41%) and weekly users (43%).
- **Most online for less than an hour:** 19% spend about ten minutes per day online and 48% between half an hour and one hour.
- **Most use it for searching and homework:** 90% of 9-19 year olds who go online daily or weekly use the internet to do work for school or college and 94% use it to get information for other things.
- **Some use it for less-approved activities:** Among 12-19 year olds who go online daily or weekly, 21% admit to having copied something from the internet for a school project and handed it in as their own.

Inequalities and the digital divide

- **A continuum in quality of use:** 16% of 9-19 year olds make low levels or even no use of the internet.

- **Enablers of internet use:** Middle class teenagers, those with home access and those who have spent more years online tend to use the internet more often, spend more time online per day and, consequently, have greater online skills.
- **Lack of interest is only part of the story:** 47% of occasional and non-users say that they lack access, 25% are not interested, 15% say they don't know how to use the internet, and 14% lack the time to use it.
- **Parents' experience of the internet matters:** Daily and weekly users have parents who also use the internet more often and are more expert.
- **The internet is not yet used to its full potential:** Many children and young people are not yet taking up the full potential of the internet, for example visiting a narrow range of sites or not interacting with sites.
- **In/exclusion depends on quality of use:** A new divide is opening up between those for whom the internet is an increasingly rich, diverse, engaging and stimulating resource and those for whom it remains a narrow, unengaging, if occasionally useful, resource of rather less significance.

Education, learning and literacy

- **Many have not received lessons:** 30% of pupils aged 9-19 report having received no lessons at all on using the internet.
- **Skills gap between parents and children:** Only 16% of weekly and daily user parents consider themselves advanced compared with 32% of children.
- **Children lack key skills in evaluating online content:** 38% of pupils aged 9-19 trust most of the information on the internet, and only 33% of 9-19 year olds daily and weekly users have been taught how to judge the reliability of online information.

Communication

- **The mobile phone is the preferred method of communication:** Whether for passing time, making arrangements, getting advice, gossiping or flirting, the phone and text messaging are preferred over emailing or instant messaging.
- **Most online communication is with local friends:** Being in constant contact with friends is highly valued, and there is little interest contacting strangers, though some have contacted people that they have not met face to face, this being mainly among the 21% who visit chat rooms.
- **Talking online is less satisfying:** 53% of email, IM and chat users think that talking to people on the internet is less satisfying than talking to them in real life.
- **Some seek advice online:** 25% of 12-19 year old daily and weekly users say they go online to get advice.

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Participation

- **Producing as well as receiving content:** 44% 9-19 year old weekly users have completed a quiz online, 25% have sent an email or text message to a website, 22% have voted for something online, and 17% have sent pictures or stories to a website.
- **Some are interested in civic issues:** 54% of 12-19 year olds who use the internet at least weekly have sought out sites concerned with political or civic issues.
- **Age, gender and social grade make a difference:** Girls, older and middle class teens visit a broader range of civic and political sites.

The risks of undesirable content

- **More than half have seen pornography online:** 57% of 9-19 year old daily and weekly users have come into contact with online porn.
- **Most porn is viewed unintentionally:** 38% have seen a pornographic pop-up advert while doing something else, 36% have accidentally found themselves on a porn site when looking for something else, and 25% have received pornographic junk mail.
- **More porn on the internet than in other media:** Moreover, 53% of parents consider (and children agree) that the internet is more likely to expose children to pornography than are television, video or magazines.
- **Mixed responses to online porn:** When young people encounter pornography on the internet, 54% claim not to be bothered by it, but a significant minority (14%) do not like it.
- **Too young to have seen it:** 45% of 18-19 year old internet users who have seen any pornography (on or offline) think they were too young to have seen it when they first did.
- **Other areas of concern:** 22% of 9-19 year old daily and weekly users have accidentally ended up on a site with violent or gruesome pictures and 9% on a site that is hostile or hateful to a group of people.
- **The most risky medium?** Both parents and children regard the internet as riskier than other media in terms of a range of content and contact risks.

The risks of online communication

- **Parents underestimate children's negative experiences:** One third of 9-19 year old daily and weekly users have received unwanted sexual (31%) or nasty comments (33%) online or by text message, though only 7% of parents are aware that their child has received sexual comments and only 4% that their child has been bullied online.

- **Children divulge personal information online:** 46% say that they have given out personal information to someone that they met online.
- **Children engage in identity play:** 40% say that they have pretended about themselves online.
- **Some have attended face to face meetings:** 30% have made an online acquaintance, and 8% say they have met face to face with someone whom they first met online.

Regulating the internet at home

- **Parents seek to manage their children's internet use:** Most parents whose child has home access to the internet claim that they directly share in and/or support their child on the internet, though their children are less likely to say that this occurs.
- **Parents face some difficult challenges:** 18% of parents say they don't know how to help their child use the internet safely.
- **Confusion about filtering:** In homes with internet access, 35% of children say that filtering software has been installed on their computer while 46% of parents claim this.
- **Children don't want restrictions:** 69% of 9-17 year old daily and weekly users say they mind their parents restricting or monitoring their internet use.
- **Children protect their privacy from parents:** 63% of 12-19 year old home internet users have taken some action to hide their online activities from their parents.
- **Mind the gap:** There are considerable gaps in understanding between parents and children (in internet expertise, in awareness of risks and in acknowledgement of domestic regulation implemented) which impede an effective regulation of children's internet use within the home.

Balancing opportunities and risks

- **More skilled young people do not avoid the risks:** Not only do the most skilled young people fail to avoid online risks, but their risky encounters increase with increased use – though these young people are more likely to be able to deal with the risks.
- **Opportunities and risks go hand in hand:** There is a strong, positive association between opportunities and risks – the more children and young people experience the one, the more they also experience the other, and vice versa.
- **Internet literacy is crucial:** Increasing internet skills is vital since it seems that children and young people's level of online skills has a direct influence on the breadth of online opportunities and risks they experience.

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A parental wish list

- **Stricter regulation:** 85% of parents want to see tougher laws on online pornography, with 59% wanting stricter regulation of online services.
- **More education:** 75% want to see more and better teaching and guidance in schools while 67% want more and better information and advice for parents.
- **Better content:** 64% want more sites developed specifically for children.
- **Improved technology:** 66% want improved filtering software, 54% improved parental controls and 51% improved monitoring software.

A last word from young people

Qualitative interviews with children help to identify a number of ways in which they wish their internet use enhanced – by better quality content addressing their interests, by truly interactive sites that offer responses to their contributions, by more guidance on content creation, improved protection from unwanted content and attention paid to their privacy needs, including from their parents.

Summary of future research priorities

We offer a series of key priorities for future research in the area of children and young people's uses of new technologies:

- Keep up with technological and market developments in relation to access
- Track shifting and diversifying contexts of use
- Conduct an audit of online content aimed at children and young people
- Critically examine causes and consequences of exclusion
- Examine (and explore measurement of) future developments of online literacy
- Examine the nature and quality of new social networks in online communication
- Investigate best practice for participatory websites for children and young people
- Explore how to facilitate online creativity
- Carefully examine the extent and nature of actual harms associated with online risks
- Investigate how to best target safety messages at different audiences
- Assess the external threats to children's online privacy
- Explore strategies and effectiveness of parental regulation
- Continue tracking the balance of opportunities and risks

Summary of policy recommendations

It is hoped that the present findings provide a clear and careful picture of the nature and extent of online risks especially, as well as an account of the concerted attempts that parents and children are making to reduce or address these risks.

In our view, the risks do not merit a moral panic, and nor do they warrant seriously restricting children's internet use because this would be to deny them the many benefits of the internet. Indeed, there are real costs to lacking internet access or sufficient skills to use it.

However, the risks are nonetheless widespread, they are experienced by many children as worrying or problematic, and they do warrant serious attention and intervention by government, educators, industry and parents.

We offer a series of key recommendations to policy makers, internet service providers, teachers, parents and children:

- Recognise the complexity of 'access' when designing information and advice campaigns
- Direct children and young people towards valuable content
- Address the changing conditions of digital exclusion
- Improve levels of internet literacy
- Develop critical evaluation skills
- Develop online advice resources with the help of young people
- Facilitate the shift from just receiving to also creating content
- Rethink online participation from 'having your say' to 'being listened to'
- Continue efforts to prevent exposure to undesirable content
- Maintain internet safety awareness
- Encourage parental sharing in children's internet use
- Respect children's online privacy in the home
- Take care not to reduce young people's online opportunities
- Target guidance and regulation more carefully at different groups of children
- Design websites which encourage internet literacy
- Develop more and better child and youth portals