

'Net baffled' parents may reduce children's job and education prospects

Press release

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The lack of internet skills and experience among many UK parents is potentially harming their children's education and job prospects and could be placing them on the wrong side of a growing digital divide, says new research by academics at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

According to the research, many parents lack the skills to guide and support their children's internet use, yet it also demonstrated that internet-literate parents have internet-literate children.

Sonia Livingstone, Professor of Social Psychology based in LSE's Media and Communications Department, said: 'Now that many young people rely on the internet for information, homework help and careers guidance, the more it matters that some of them are getting left behind. Not knowing how to best use the internet may have a negative impact on their education and employment opportunities.'

The report notes that a group it terms 'disengaged youth' are the least likely to engage with the net, least likely to have access at home and are less expert internet users. These young people find themselves 'on the wrong side' of the digital divide and are at risk of missing out on the many opportunities the internet has to offer.

These are some of the key findings of a major two year research project investigating 9-19 year olds' internet use, *UK Children Go Online* (UKCGO), carried out by Professor Sonia Livingstone and Dr Magdalena Bober of LSE. They analysed results 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. The research was funded by an Economic and Social Research Council grant under the e-Society Programme.

They found that children who are daily and weekly users have parents who also use the internet more often and are more expert. These tend to be middle-class teenagers, and those with home access. Greater online skills are associated with the take up of a wide range of online opportunities for children and young people, and a divide is growing not just of access but also centred on the quality of use. For some, the internet is a rich, stimulating resource, for others, a narrow, unengaging medium.

One way to help is ensure that literacy initiatives are also targeted at parents. Fearful parents may take too rigorous an approach to restricting online access completely and thereby leave their children less aware of online risks, such as chat room dangers, when they do use the internet.

The report notes that one way parents can improve their awareness of the online risks faced by their children is by increasing supportive activities, such as going online together. This needs to be balanced with respect for their children's privacy, an approach that, according to the report, improves trust and ensures safety issues are more likely to be discussed in future.

The report also calls for action by the government and industry. Professor Livingstone said: 'Of the parents we surveyed, 18 per cent, nearly a fifth, said they don't know how to help their children use the internet safely. Many recognised their own responsibility - 67 per cent wanted more and better advice for parents, but 75 per cent also wanted more and better teaching guidance in schools. A total of 85 per cent of parents wanted to see tougher regulation of pornography.'

The report compared UK findings with other countries:

- UK parents seem more restrictive than parents across the EU, where according to a recent Eurobarometer survey half of parents don't allow their children to give out personal information (in the UKCGO survey, this figure was 86 per cent of parents) and one third of parents ban chat rooms (this was two thirds of parents in the UKCGO survey).
- However, UK parents are less restrictive than those in the US. According to a recent Pew Internet and American Life survey, 62 per cent of parents said they check up on their children's internet use afterwards, but only 41 per cent of parents in the UKCGO survey did.

Karen Thomson, CEO of AOL UK, one of the sponsors of this report, said: 'The Internet, particularly as we move to broadband, is a massive potential driver of social change. It is important for a healthy society that no group is left behind, so we need to make sure that learning opportunities for adults and children are not ignored in the rush to deliver new technology benefits.'

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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), the Independent Television Commission (ITC) and Ofcom. 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, to request a PDF or hard copy of the report (*UK Children go Online: Final report of key project findings*) or previous project reports, contact Dr Magdalena Bober (m.bober@lse.ac.uk or 020 7955 6005) or see www.children-go-online.net.

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