

Opportunities and risks go hand in hand on the internet

Press release

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Children and young people who make the best use of the internet also encounter more risks online. This is one of the main findings from a two-year research study by the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE).

The *UK Children Go Online* (UKCGO) project involved a series of focus group discussions and then a national survey of 1,511 9-19 year olds around the UK, together with their parents, in order to examine young people's internet use in detail. The research is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council under the e-Society Programme.

The report compares more skilled internet users with beginners. Professor Sonia Livingstone and co-author Dr Magdalena Bober found that:

- Children and young people who are more skilled at using the internet take up more online opportunities than beginners – such as using the internet for learning, communicating with friends or seeking advice.
- It is the skilled youngsters, more than the beginners, who are likely to encounter online risks – such as bullying, online porn or privacy risks.
- Increasing online opportunities also increases the risks.
- Those who manage to avoid the risks seem to do so by making only a narrow and unadventurous use of the internet.

Sonia Livingstone, Professor of Social Psychology at the LSE, said: 'This points up the dilemma that parents and other regulators face. Restricting children and young people's internet use reduces the risks but also carries a cost because it reduces their opportunities online.

'It is of concern that even the most skilled young people are not avoiding online risks. If we want to make sure that in five years time young people aren't at greater risk online, more effort is needed to make the internet safer for them.'

The research raises the question what parents can do to ensure their children are making the best use of the internet. Professor Livingstone said: 'Parents who employ supportive practices, rather than simply restricting internet use, increase their children's online skills and, as a result, increase their opportunities. This includes asking the child what they are doing online, keeping an eye on the screen, helping

them online, staying in the same room and going online together. However, this may not reduce online risks.'

Schools also have a role to play. Co-author of the report, Magdalena Bober, said: 'Many pupils have already received some lessons on how to use the internet. However, nearly one in three have not. Schools should provide more specific guidance on internet safety, searching and reliability of websites, especially to the younger children (9-11 years) and the oldest (18-19 years), who are less likely to have received such lessons.'

The research also found that:

- Beginners lack searching and critical skills and so are more distrustful of online content than skilled users.
- However, skilled users don't show blind trust. Rather, they are better at searching and more able to find reliable websites, for example by checking information across several sites.
- Overall, only one in three 9-19 year old internet users have been taught how to decide if the information they find online is reliable and can be trusted.

Stephen Carrick-Davies, CEO of Childnet International, one of the report sponsors, said: 'This research reminds us that supporting and protecting children online is a complex business, and there are no simple "one size fits all" solutions. If we want to expand children's online opportunities, we have to recognise that even the most advanced and confident young user will still be open to risks and dangers online. Developing critical net-literacy skills in young people is therefore crucial, and this has to involve parents helping children and having meaningful interaction about the internet. It is also vital that teachers really understand how children are interacting on the internet outside of the classroom, where it is generally filtered, protected and supervised. This is where more work and support is needed if we are to ensure that children are truly life-literate as well as net-literate.'

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Notes for Editors:

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.

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.

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.

To download the report free, go to www.children-go-online.net.

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