

Safe Web Space for Children

Research Summary

With virtually all young people now using the internet, it has become ever more important to find effective ways of protecting them from harmful online content and contact.

Professor Sonia Livingstone's research identified significant gaps in understanding between parents and children. Most parents ban their children from giving out personal information, yet half have, nonetheless, disclosed their details.

New questions arise as different media converge – eg television, internet and mobile phones – triggering new uses and challenging parental authority.

Priorities include research on critical and consumer literacy, children's privacy protection and raising safety awareness amongst children, parents and teachers.



The first Know IT All For Schools CD-Rom was distributed to all secondary schools in the UK in 2005. Backed by a volunteer programme in which volunteers from Microsoft and the police presented the material to pupils in over 200 schools.

The findings have been used by public bodies in the UK such as education authorities and law enforcement agencies, ranging from Humberside Police Force to headteachers in Kent. For example, Leicester City Council will include the study on a DVD containing anti-bullying guidance to teachers related to cyberbullying.

Virtual Global Taskforce, an alliance of police forces from around the world working to prevent online child abuse, also drew on the research in its public safety materials.

The research informed Ofcom's evaluation of mobile operators' compliance with their code of practice. Professor Livingstone also reviewed Vodafone's guide for parents to using its technology. She stresses that codes of conduct have to be very robust as children are adept at evading regulation and parents won't necessarily monitor their internet use.

Impact

Professor Livingstone's leading research about children's use of the internet has revealed to what extent they are exposed to harmful material, and has had a substantial impact on the design of safeguards to protect them from this.

The project has provided the basis for many industry self-regulation initiatives, and for advice given to parents and teachers.

Based on her work, Childnet International, the leading charity in this area, developed educational material with the support of Microsoft.

Professor Livingstone's findings have been used by the Home Secretary's Task Force for Child Protection on the internet to review self-regulation procedures, and were included in its guidelines for the providers of social networking for children in 2008.

She continues to influence government policy through her membership of the executive board of the UK's Council for Child Internet Safety, which has replaced the now disbanded taskforce and where she chairs the Expert Research Panel.

In addition, she helps set the agenda at safety awareness raising bodies such as InSafe, as well as advising the British Educational Communications and Technology Agency's internet safety team on the design of software. Professor Livingstone currently directs the research network, EU Kids Online II, for the EU's Safer Internet Programme. Modelled on the ESRC-funded study, the project runs until 2011 and conducts a multinational survey of children's online uses, risks and parental mediation across Europe. Her previous project, EU Kids Online I, informed self-regulatory guidelines agreed by social networking sites including MySpace, Facebook and Bebo.

In the United States, the Federal Communications Commission is now beginning work on a children's web safety project and has consulted Professor Livingstone on the topic. Her research was previously requested by the Family Online Safety Institute, an industry collaboration which includes AOL, Google and Yahoo! as well as telecoms and technology companies. The Australian and New Zealand Communication Association, and organisations in Canada, Singapore, Malaysia and Hong Kong also watch her work.

Key Findings

- 98 per cent of young people aged nine to 19 have used the internet at school or at home.
- More than half have seen pornography online.
- A third of regular internet users have received unwanted sexual or nasty comments, but only a small fraction of parents are aware of this.
- Children often have difficulties with searching and critical evaluation of online content. A sizeable number have received little guidance on how to use the internet effectively and safely.
- Children use the internet to stay in constant contact with their friends and show little interest in contacting strangers.
- 63 per cent of 12-19 year old home users hiding their internet activities from their parents.
- There is a series of challenges for parents in managing their children's internet use such as the greater web expertise of young people, confusion over filtering, and the difficulty of implementing clear rules.
- Future research needs to hear from children directly, across the social spectrum. Specific groups like disabled or very young children and ethnic minorities require dedicated research projects.

Further Information

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UK Children Go Online

www.children-go-online.net

Sonia Livingstone

Professor of Social Psychology and head of the Department of Media and Communications at the London School of Economics

Email: S.Livingstone@lse.ac.uk

Tel: 020 7955 7710

EU Kids Online website: www.eukidsonline.net

Economic and Social Research Council

Polaris House, North Star Avenue, Swindon SN2 1UJ

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Impact@esrc.ac.uk

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