Children need more help to block online threats says European internet study

Internet companies should provide more ways for children to block, filter or report alarming online content and contacts, recommends a new study for the European Commission.

The report suggests that both children and parents are reassured when given tools to take action against online dangers such as bullying, sexual content and intrusive strangers. Yet they often don’t use the options available (including online safety advice or the so-called ‘panic buttons’ operated by social networking sites) and the industry could do more to promote their use.

More than 25,000 children from across Europe (and one of their parents) were interviewed for the study, EU Kids Online, based at the London School of Economics and Political Science and funded by the Commission’s Safer Internet Programme.

The study revealed that while 70 per cent of parents talk to their children about what they do on the internet and more than half offer practical advice and support, relatively few use technical tools to help. Only 28 per cent choose to block or filter websites and 24 per cent track the websites visited by their child.

In fact, the survey shows, most children are not bothered or upset by what they encounter online – only 12 per cent say they have been. And while children said bullying was relatively uncommon with just one in 20 saying it had happened to them, children who had been bullied online were the most likely to say this upset them.

Across all media, 23 per cent of children have seen sexual or pornographic images in the past year with the internet now as common a source as TV, film and video. While this is much more likely for older teenagers, younger children are more bothered or upset by seeing sexual images. And children are going online at ever younger ages – at an average age of seven in Denmark and Sweden and eight in many other Northern European countries.

Sonia Livingstone, professor of media and communication at LSE and project director of EU Kids Online, said: ‘Parents and the online industry have taken some good first steps to make the internet a safer place for children but they could both do much more.

‘Our research shows that children welcome their parents’ involvement with the risks of being online but that there are too few technical tools to help with blocking contacts, filtering unwanted content or reporting problems when they happen. Where these tools exist, we suspect there is little awareness of them
and how to use them. We recommend that the industry builds more of these tools, does more to inform both parents and children about them, and makes them more user-friendly."

The report also suggests targeting resource and guidance for safety at the ever younger children who now go online, as well as developing more positive content aimed specifically at children. However, the authors also emphasise that children should be encouraged to take responsibility for their own safety online as much as possible and that young people left behind in picking up digital skills should be offered extra training and support to broaden their opportunities.

Researchers surveyed children’s online experience in 25 European countries and the report presents the full findings and the team’s policy recommendations. Initial findings from the report were presented to the Safer Internet Forum in October 2010.

For more details, and a full copy of the report see www.eukidsonline.net

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Notes to editors

1. The EU Kids Online project aims to enhance knowledge of European children’s and parents’ experiences and practices regarding risky and safer use of the internet and new online technologies, and thereby to inform the promotion of a safer online environment for children.

2. Countries included in EU Kids Online are: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Turkey and the UK.