Younger children still need to develop key online skills finds Europe-wide study

Teenagers are fast gaining the skills they need for the digital era. But, as ever younger children are now using the internet, a new report finds that many younger children lack basic internet skills.

A survey of children in 25 European countries showed that less than half of 11-13 year olds are able to perform relatively simple tasks like bookmarking a web page or blocking unwanted messages.

The research, published today by EU Kids Online based at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), found that children from homes of higher socio-economic status say they have more digital skills than those from poorer homes, and that teenage boys claim more skills than girls.

The survey found that, on average, children undertake fewer than half of 17 activities asked about, with notably low take-up of creative and participatory skills such as posting messages (31%), creating characters (18%) or blogging (only 11%).

When it came to the eight online skills, ranging from blocking junk mail and changing privacy settings to bookmarking websites and finding safety information, younger children showed a significant lack, with 11-12-year-olds able to perform just 2.8 of them, rising to 4.3 for 13-14-year-olds and 5.2 for 15-16 year olds.

Children from Finland claim to be the most skilful online, followed by Slovenia and the Netherlands, while those in Lithuania claim the greatest range of activities. Ireland stands out as the country where children do the fewest activities online, though Turkey is low on both measures. Children in the UK, along with Poland, Denmark and Portugal are about average for both skills and activities.

Professor Sonia Livingstone of LSE, who heads the EU Kids Online project, said:

“It’s worrying that younger children lack these skills and it’s a challenge for parents and teachers to help them learn what they need to know. Interestingly, it seems that teaching children safety skills may also improve other digital skills, while teaching instrumental or informational skills may also improve children’s safety skills. So, encouraging children to be safe online need not limit their online activities, quite the opposite. However, more efforts are needed from educators and stakeholders if children are to gain key skills which may help them stay safe online and get the best educational use from the internet.”
The European Commission, which funds EU Kids Online as part of the Safer Internet Programme, promotes digital skills as part of the Digital Agenda for Europe launched by Vice President Neelie Kroes. One of the objectives of the Digital Agenda is to enhance digital literacy, skills and inclusion to allow all citizens, including children, to participate fully in society.

Insafe, the European network of Safer Internet centres coordinated by European Schoolnet and also funded by the EC is actively promoting positive online citizenship and raising awareness of safety issues.

For full details of Digital Literacy and Safety Skills from EU Kids Online, see http://www2.lse.ac.uk/media@lse/research/EUKidsOnline/EUKidsI%20(2009-11)/EUKidsOnlineIIReports/DigitalSkillsShortReport.pdf

For more about the multi-stakeholder platform for digital skills being launched in Brussels, see http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/events/cf/dae1009/item-display.cfm?id=5254

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