Private and mobile internet use by children requires a new approach to safety

With the European Commission’s Safer Internet Forum to be held this week, EU Kids Online today published the final recommendations for stakeholders based on its research into children’s use of the internet across Europe.

With evidence that children are going online at ever younger ages and that their use is increasingly mobile, easily escaping adult supervision, new responses from policy makers are vital. This report aims to give policy makers up to date advice on how to educate and protect children against online risks such as bullying, pornography and making contacts with inappropriate people.

Professor Sonia Livingstone from the London School of Economics, who headed the project, said: “Unbalanced headlines and confusion have contributed to the climate of anxiety that surrounds public discourse on children’s use of new technology. Panic and fear often drown out evidence. The emerging picture from the EU Kids Online evidence should guide schools, parents, government, civil society, industry, and children themselves in working together to balance the risks and opportunities presented by new technology. Our research establishes the evidence-based priorities for this renewed effort.”

EU Kids Online has categorised the UK as a ‘high use, some risk’ country, an improvement on previous findings which identified it as ‘high use, high risk’. It seems that the above efforts are bearing fruit, with risk estimates for UK children both lower than in several other European countries and also fairly low in absolute terms. This should not be grounds for complacency, however, for it shows the level of policy input required to reduce risk exposure among children. The EU Kids Online findings also reveal where new risks are emerging – notably, the UK is among the highest for estimates of excessive internet use, so new efforts are required.

UK children are more likely than many to go online via a mobile or handheld device, putting them in the vanguard of new risks associated with personal internet access and, equally, making protective oversight by their parents more difficult. The UK is also noteworthy for the very high proportion of children who access the internet at school, making primary and secondary schools particularly appropriate for the delivery of digital literacy and safety skills. On their social networking sites, most UK children report having their privacy settings set to ‘private’, but UK children have more online contacts than most, including some that are not known to them face to face.

Half of UK children use computers at home with some filtering software installed, more than in any other country surveyed. Since this has been a focus of safety promotions, it represents a success for such initiatives, though still half of children do not have such filtering software installed. However, some moderate exposure to risk may be necessary if children are not to have opportunities overly constrained and if they are to learn to cope and become resilient.

More Information: Below are some of the key recommendations. The full report can be downloaded from www.eukidsonline.net. Chapter 5 presents cross national comparisons and recommendations for specific countries.

Ends

For more information about the EU Kids Online study, contact Sonia Livingstone, s.livingstone@lse.ac.uk
Notes to editors
Between 2009 and 2011, EU Kids Online II conducted original empirical research across 25 European countries with nationally representative samples of approximately 1000 children aged 9-16 years old and their parents. This resulted in a rigorous, cross-nationally comparative quantitative evidence base regarding internet use across Europe. Directed by Professor Sonia Livingstone of the London School of Economics and Political Science, the project team includes an expert management group, international advisory panel and multidisciplinary research teams in 25 European countries.

Key recommendations
1. Children have the right to protection and safety online but they must also take responsibility for keeping safe and respecting the rights of others on the internet.
2. It is important that policy makers continue to emphasise children’s online opportunities.
3. A new focus is needed on internet safety for younger users.
4. Safety messages should be adapted to new modes of access.
5. Educational support and digital literacy is needed for those who do not progress very far up the ‘ladder of opportunities’.
6. Positive online content for children should be made a policy priority.
7. Digital safety skills are needed to build resilience online.
8. Social networking service providers need to ensure that maximum protection is provided for the accounts of minors.
9. Awareness-raising in relation to online risks should be balanced and proportionate, and targeted at those most at risk of harm.
10. Parental awareness of risks and safety online needs to be enhanced.
11. Responses to young people’s exposure to online sexual content needs to be proportionate and should focus on those most likely to be distressed or harmed by such exposure.
12. Sensitive responses to bullying are required with equal attention to online and offline occurrence.
13. Parents need to be more aware of the practice of offline meetings with contacts first made online.
14. Policy makers need to be alert to new risks that affect children and young people, especially arising from peer-to-peer contact.
15. Awareness-raising should highlight effective coping strategies in safety messages, emphasizing social supports such as talking to parents, friends and teachers, as well as the use of online tools.
16. Practical mediation skills for parents should be a part of the overall effort to build awareness among parents of risks and safety online.
17. Parental control software needs to take the needs, knowledge and interests of parents into account in order to improve uptake and develop more effective technical solutions.
18. Levels of teacher mediation are high but could be higher, as a large minority of children are not reached by teacher guidance. Since schools have the resources to reach all children, they should take the biggest share of the task of reaching the ‘hard to reach’.
19. Industry sources should be proactive in fostering internet safety awareness and promote safety education in a prominent and accessible manner.
20. Cross-national recommendations: more broadband penetration in a country is linked to greater online risks but not more online opportunities, suggesting that better access brings more risks than are adequately dealt with by policymakers. In countries where children receive more education, or have more computers in the classroom, digital skills are higher, so education has a positive role to play in supporting digital skills, literacies and citizenship, and should be supported across all countries.