Young teens find it easier to “be themselves” online than offline

Nearly half of European 11-16 year olds agree that they find it easier to be themselves on the internet than when they are with people face-to-face, and one in eight young people (12%) strongly agree that they find it easier to be themselves online. Significantly, those who strongly agree are more likely to find relationships with their peers difficult and they are more likely to take risks online.

This is the conclusion of a new report from the EU Kids Online project based at the London School of Economics and Political Science published on ‘Safer Internet Day 2011’. The project has surveyed 25,000 children and parents across 25 European countries to gain an insight into the behaviour and experiences of young people online.

The young people who said it was very true that they found it easier to be themselves online were also more likely to have difficulties with real-life friendships, so the internet probably provides a means of escape or compensation. These same young people also reported taking more risks online, such as sending personal information to people they have not met face-to-face or pretending to be someone different.

Commenting on the findings Professor Sonia Livingstone, who leads the EU Kids Online project, said:

“Children spend time on the internet for a number of reasons. For many, it offers the chance to express themselves and develop friendships. But opportunities and risks often go hand in hand – what is fun for some children can be risky for others.

“Our survey shows most young people who use the internet have good relationships with friends ‘offline’ and take few risks when using the internet. But it seems that children who have difficulties with friendships at school or elsewhere tend to put themselves at greater risk when online. It is therefore especially important that parents and families talk to these children about the risks of online chatting and sending personal information.”

Another finding in the survey is that nearly half of young people surveyed (45%) talk about different things on the internet than when speaking to people face-to-face and one third (32%) talk about private things online that they do not discuss face-to-face. This suggests that for teenagers, communicating on the internet is often less embarrassing than face to face.

EU Kids Online argues that it is part of adolescence to experiment with identity, so those who say “a bit true” to feeling more themselves online may be enjoying the benefits of online communication – for example, it can be less embarrassing to discuss some things online than with people face-to-face. But for children who say it is ‘very true’ that they find it easier to be themselves online than offline, or for those who have difficulties with their peers online, it is really important to discuss with them how and why they communicate online to ensure safer practices.
Notes:
The report, *Risky communication online* by Sonia Livingstone and Kjartan Ólafsson, can be downloaded from [www.eukidsonline.net](http://www.eukidsonline.net).
For more information please contact pressoffice@lse.ac.uk or call 0207 955 7060.

**EU Kids Online II** is funded by the EC Safer Internet Programme from 2009-11 to enhance knowledge of children’s and parents’ experiences and practices regarding risky and safer use of the internet and new online technologies. [www.eukidsonline.net](http://www.eukidsonline.net)

**Safer Internet Day** is organised by Insafe each year to promote safer and more responsible use of online technology and mobile phones, especially amongst children and young people across the world. The theme of Safer Internet Day 2011 is “it’s more than a game, it’s your life!” [http://www.saferinternet.org/web/guest/safer-internet-day](http://www.saferinternet.org/web/guest/safer-internet-day)