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# The meaning of online problematic situations for children: The UK report

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- Tsaliki, L., Chronaki, D. and Ólafsson, K. (2014). *Experiences with sexual content: What we know from the research so far*. <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/60143/>
- Stald, G., Green, L., Barbovski, M., Haddon, L., Mascheroni, G., Ságvári, B., Scifo, B. and Tsaliki, L. (2014). *Online on the mobile: Internet use on smartphones*. <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/59960/>
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# 1. KEY FINDINGS

Six focus groups and 13 individual interviews with children aged 9 to 16 years old were conducted by the authors in the UK during 2013, to gain a deeper understanding of children's perceptions of and responses to problematic situations they encountered online.

This was part of a larger study in nine European countries, where a total of 378 children were interviewed (see Smahel and Wright, 2014), to follow up on the statistical findings of the 2010 EU Kids Online survey (see Livingstone et al, 2011).

Below we bring out the key points raised by UK 9-16 year olds in individual and group interviews:

## **Sexual content**

- Children have learned to call such content 'inappropriate', following warnings from their parents.
- The youngest children were likely to consider this 'disgusting' and even if they didn't worry about it for themselves, they (both boys and girls) expressed a concern that younger siblings should be protected from this.
- Even the youngest children understood that such content often existed to sell products, though they found its appeal puzzling.
- They said such content most often appeared on their screen via (unwelcome) 'pop-ups'.
- At the same time, children were aware of similar images in the press or elsewhere in their daily environment, and so wondered why online sexual images generated such strong warnings from parents.

## **'Sexting'**

- Although few children had experienced this directly, most had a story to tell from their peer group about how sending sexual message had resulted in unexpected and problematic consequences.
- Children also talked about the reasons why such messages might be taken, sent or posted – to win approval, to embarrass others, as part of flirtation or teasing.

## **'Bad language'**

- As with pornography, children question why this is the focus of parental anxiety about the internet when swearing is commonly heard offline.
- Unlike with pornography or sexting, children tended to see swearing as a problem for parents but not for themselves.

## **Cyberbullying and other forms of online aggression**

- Children report being made angry by aggression online, and they are troubled that such aggression can come from other children as well as from adults.
- They are intrigued that aggression seems more easily expressed and spread online because the immediate situational cues available in face-to-face communication are generally lacking online.
- As with sexting, although most children have not experienced online aggression personally, they know of it occurring among their circle of peers, and they are particularly concerned by the speed and ease with which

incidents can escalate in terms of reach and severity.

### **Strangers**

- Children have learned that parents are fearful of any notion of meeting strangers online.
- At the same time, a number of them have been in touch online with someone they have not met offline – for boys, this tends to occur through games, and it gives rise to the need to consider risk in the context of the gaming space in particular and the kinds of conversation that take place there.

### **Drama and rumour**

- Many online interactions irritate or concern children even though they may not be classified as risks in adults' terms.
- These centre on communications that inappropriately distort or share what has been said, and children are often engaged in having to repair interactions offline because of what has taken place – perhaps inadvertently – online.

### **Excessive use**

- Most children did not consider the amount of time they spent online to be problematic.
- However, some recognised that there were costs in terms of time for other valued activities and, more subtly, costs in terms of how you might be judged by others.

### **Commercial content**

- Children are often frustrated and irritated by commercial material on the internet.
- They complain that pop-ups are truly annoying, that adverts waste their time and

that they can be associated with misleading claims or unwelcome downloads.

### **Preventative measures**

- The relatively greater efforts towards eSafety training in UK schools could be discerned from children's risk awareness and their often articulate strategies for preventing harm.
- Indeed, children were positive about telling us of their various approaches to ensuring their online safety.

### **Coping**

- As regards encountering unwanted websites or pop-ups, most of those over the age of 11 dealt with them by technical means - often, deleting the pop-ups or simply moving on.
- While they were learning from eSafety teaching, the focus there was often on rare but severe problems, with little offered about the frequent irritations and worrying doubts that children experienced online far more often.
- If younger children (aged 9-10) received a communication that they were not sure about or decided was negative, they usually told a parent.

### **Parental mediation**

- From interviews with children, it appeared that many parents too have been reached by eSafety messages.
- Still, they have a range of concerns which could be seen as extensions of long-standing worries about screen- related activities.
- Parents clearly vary in their approach – for instance in whether their under 13 year old was allowed to use Facebook.

- Parents also clearly varied in how closely they monitored their children's activities online, with children often happy with a degree of light monitoring if not too intrusive.
- Children reported that parents gave a good deal of practical advice about such things as hacking, fake competitions online and related misleading pop-ups.
- Some parents also warned their children about their own potential behaviour online (i.e. conduct risks) – e.g. that they should not say negative things online.
- Not all parents were able to articulate their nature of their concerns about the internet to their children, resulting in some confusion on the part of their children: children like to know what the rules are and why they exist; without such understanding, they tend to doubt or evade the rules.
- Younger children like to feel watched over and looked after, while older children would like their parents to trust them and so to respect the independence and privacy.
- Having gained their parents' trust, children could be reluctant to jeopardise it by reporting online difficulties to them.
- Older children also come to see trust working both ways – they would not check up on their parents so why would their parents check up on them?
- Children wish their interactions with peers to be distinct from those with parents – not out of secrecy necessarily but because of the value of engaging in different social spheres differently.
- Some children, however, actively evade their parents' supervision to avoid 'trouble' and

do what they want to online while avoiding conflict with parents.

## Conclusions

- Although it appears that children are indeed listening to adult advice, they often find themselves struggling to make sense of it. The touchstone against which they judge the advice they receive is whether or not it illuminates their own experience.
- While they are often actively thinking about and discussing online risks, they may still not always act wisely in risky situation, as adults see it, because for children it can be difficult to match the advice given and the online situation they face. Online situations are often ambiguous or confusing. Clear rights and wrongs are difficult to determine. The trickiest risks are posed not by strangers but by peers, complicating children's lives.
- The report's findings provide some support for the hope that, if adults would intervene and guide children when they first go online (i.e. when they are young), their advice will be more accepted than if first offered to teenagers. One might then hope that children will learn to act wisely at ever younger ages, responding to the establishment of a positive dynamic between child and adult that will stand them in good stead as they become teenagers deserving of greater privacy and independence.



## 2. INTRODUCTION

### 2.1 Context

The rapidity with which children and young people are gaining access to online, convergent, mobile and networked media is unprecedented in the history of technological innovation. Parents, teachers and children are acquiring, learning how to use and finding a purpose for the internet within their daily lives. Stakeholders – governments, schools, industry, child welfare organisations and families – seek to maximise online opportunities while minimising the risk of harm associated with internet use.

Diverse and ambitious efforts are underway in many countries to promote digital technologies in schools, e-governance initiatives, digital participation and digital literacy. As many families are discovering, the benefits are considerable. New opportunities for learning, participation, creativity and communication are being explored by children, parents, schools, and public and private sector organisations.

### 2.2 The EU Kids Online network

In this context 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 (see Annex).

The EU Kids Online I project (2006-2009) reviewed existing European data in this field. The pan-European survey of EU Kids Online II (2009-11) offered further insights into how often and what types of harm children experienced in relation to the following online risks: cyberbullying, exposure to sexual materials, sexting (sexual

communication), meeting online strangers, personal data problems, seeing dangerous websites, and excessive internet use (Livingstone et al, 2011; see Livingstone et al, 2010 specifically for the UK findings). Some of the same questions were asked in the Net Children Go Mobile survey in 2013 providing comparative data over time for the UK (Livingstone et al, 2014).

The follow up EU Kids Online III (2011-14) project examined further qualitative and quantitative dimensions of children's online risks and opportunities, now encompassing researchers across 33 countries.

### 2.3 The European qualitative research

This included a substantial qualitative study of children's perspectives, asking about risks but also other experiences online that children may perceive as problematic. As in the survey, the nine country qualitative study also investigated the preventative measures that children took to avoid risks, how they coped with these risks and thoughts about and reactions to different forms of parental, teacher and peer mediation.

The pan-European results are reported in Smahel and Wright (2014). The fieldwork was carried out from February to September 2013 in Belgium, the Czech Republic, Greece, Italy, Malta, Portugal, Romania, Spain, and the United Kingdom.

In all nine countries, we interviewed children aged 9-16 who used the internet (in any way, and on any technology or platform) at least weekly (N = 378). Schools or youth centers were used to recruit children for 56 focus groups and 114 interviews.

## 2.4 The UK study

The present report looks specifically at the experiences of the UK children who took part in that wider European project. Interviews and focus groups were used to collect children's data.

The interview schedule for the research was tested in all participating countries. In the UK pilot interviews were conducted in January 2013 with primary and secondary school boys (aged 9-10 and 11-13 respectively). The European pilots indicated that the interview schedule was generally sound although some alterations were made to it in the light of the pilot feedback.

In the UK the main interviews took place between March and September 2013 in four schools – two primary and two secondary. This consisted of interviews with two boys and two girls from each age group (9-10, 11-13, 14-16), and one boys' and one girls' focus group from each of the three age bands, each group consisting of five people. There was one extra interview with a boy aged 9-10.

This made a total of 13 interviews and six focus groups - 43 children aged 9-16 years old altogether. The interviews, conducted by the authors, were fully transcribed and analysed for the present report.

Since the UK research was part of a wider European project it followed the same procedures as in the other participating countries. Each point discussed in the interview was summarised in a comment box, and all the comments from the interview were imported into an Excel file. Here they received a secondary level of coding so that for each point made by a child it was clear whether and what ICTs were involved, whether and what risks were

involved, who was being discussed, whether the theme was about activities, communication, mediation of some kind, etc. The coding meant that it was possible to search the Excel sheets by various criteria, whether looking into specific risks, preventative measures, coping strategies or parental mediation.

Parallel to this, main points for translation that related to previous project-wide discussions of the whole area were marked and collated. In the other countries these observations by children were translated into English to make them accessible to all the other researchers when collectively writing the pan-European report. In the UK, they were simply collated in the original English. When conducting the analysis, these points for translation often became the basis for the main quotations in this report, either because they summarised certain issues (more succinctly than some of the other children), captured ambivalences or demonstrated a theme well.

The points for translation were used in conjunction with searches of the Excel sheet. The latter aimed to capture overall tendencies within the sample, the range of experiences and diverse examples of the same theme. When children are cited but not directly quoted, the material often comes from this second strand of analysis involving an overview of the interview material on any particular topic.

The whole procedure had the effect that some children are quoted more, often reflecting the fact that they are either more articulate, more reflective or have more of certain kinds of experience. However, the overall content and conclusions of this report fully reflect the range and diversity of opinions and experiences expressed by all children interviewed in the project.



## 3. CHILDREN'S PERCEPTIONS OF PROBLEMATIC SITUATIONS

### 3.1 Sexual content

In our national UK survey, EU Kids Online found that UK children were nearly as likely than the European average to have seen sexual images in general, but that they were less likely to have encountered them online (for whatever reason) (Livingstone et al, 2010). By the time of the UK survey for Net Children Go Mobile in 2014, incidence of seeing sexual images had reduced to 17% online or offline (Livingstone et al, 2014). What did children have to say about the possibility and reality of such experiences?

In the qualitative study, **most of the UK children interviewed, especially the younger ones, had learned to use the term 'inappropriate' to describe the content that their parents had told them they were not supposed to view online.** Sometimes this could mean violent content, mainly for games, and it could also mean bad language, but most commonly it referred to sexual images. **Some of the youngest, the 9- to 10-year-olds, also characterised some of this material as 'disgusting'** (Smahel and Wright, 2014; Livingstone et al, 2013).

To put this into perspective, from the survey data only 3% of children in the UK had both seen sexual images online and been bothered by this (Livingstone et al, 2010). This was reflected in many of the qualitative interviews, the strongest reaction to sexual material coming from one of the focus groups with younger boys (9-10):

Joseph: *There are some really disgusting adverts like the ladies in bikinis. It's so annoying. It's really inappropriate.*

Interviewer: *So, what type of things?*

Joseph: *Well, it's like...on YouTube...on [?] it's just a giant picture of ladies' boobs [Joseph puts his hand to his forehead, the other boys all laugh] ...and next you see men staring at it...eyeballs like that [gestures to show eyes coming out of the head] ...That's disgusting... [he buries his head in his arms, the others laugh] Switch off the laptop! That's just out of order! And that happened to my cousin once...and he called me...and I said 'Why did you call me for such a thing like that, that's disgusting'.*

(boy, 9-10)

For some of the children, it was clear that they personally might not be particularly worried by encountering 'inappropriate' content, whatever their parents said, but they nevertheless thought that it was 'inappropriate' for younger siblings and relatives such as cousins who might be adversely affected by the content. Some 14- to 16-year-olds might say this referring to relatives who could be 9-10, but 9- to 10-year-olds might say the very same thing about siblings even younger than them.

It was clear that **even young children understood the nature of sexual content. In fact, sometimes they expressed quite a sophisticated appreciation.** For example, Lewis understood the principle that sexual images in adverts are used to sell products, but was mystified why they were used to sell this particular product.

Lewis: *Sometimes they have adverts of these ladies around poles...you know those ladies who... [mimics rubbing up a pole in pole dancing] ...like fashion models...advertising a pint of milk! And I was thinking [opens his eyes very wide] ...basically what they did...all these ladies coming down the catwalk show [mimics*

them moving his thighs and with his hand behind his head] ...and then suddenly one came along with a pint of milk [holds his two hands out in front, mimicking carrying the milk] And I was thinking 'Is that all! They're advertising milk!'... [moves his shoulders up and down as if walking down the catwalk] ...'You milk' [imitates pouting and kissing the milk, others laugh]

(boy, 9-10)

Slightly older children are often even more reflective and articulate about inappropriate content. Melanie talked about her encounter with sexual content starting when she was visiting a gaming site. **Many children mentioned online gaming sites where the material 'popped up'.** In fact, the EU Kids Online survey showed that pop-ups in general were the most common way of encountering such material – with 46% of children who saw online sexual images saying it happened in this way (Livingstone et al, 2010), and accidentally encountering such material was frequently noted in the European qualitative report (Smahel and Wright, 2014).

On the one hand, Melanie, like Joseph, initially referred to the material as 'disgusting', but then went on to ask why online sexual content should exist, not in terms of it being bad, but in terms of questioning why this would be interesting. This looks less like a view handed down from adults, but more a position she was trying to work out for herself.

Melanie: *I went on this gaming site and it came up...like... 'Click here to see free [um] porn'. And I didn't want to click it...but then... it looked disgusting! Like, we've all got the same bodies, sort of. Maybe different skin colours, yeah...but that don't mean nothing. 'Cos, like...what's the point of putting, literally, a body on the internet for other people with the same body to watch it?*

(girl, 11-13)

For some of the boys, the particular area where they raised questions about the nature of sexual images was in relation to games, given the importance of gaming in boys' culture. So their comments would drift between the games offline for consoles and those played online. For example, one typical comment was **to question whether something should be counted as, for example, a nude image** since you would have to be looking very closely to see anything, and most of the time boys would be more engaged in game-play. Or, as Zyan noted:

Zyan: *When it comes to nudity on that game, basically you can't even see them naked. They will be pixelated and you can't see any of their body parts. I don't know why they say there's nudity even though the body parts are pixelated. It doesn't make any difference, it's like they're still wearing clothes.*

(boy, 11-13)

The other area of questioning was to argue that **children can see forms of nudity in daily life in other media, like topless girls in newspapers**, and that was 'real life', as Shiv (boy, aged 11-13) put it. **So what was all the fuss about as regards much less ostentatious nudity in games?** As Shiv put it, *'it doesn't really make sense, to be honest'.*

As regards the rationale for their own reactions to sexual images, Candice, below, talked about encountering sexual videos on YouTube, and why at this stage in her life she would consciously prefer to remain 'relatively' innocent of these things, even if she had some formal knowledge of sexual matters:

Candice: *It could get you thinking about all these things.*

Interviewer: *Could you clarify?*

Candice: *Things that you don't really want to know, because I'm 12. I wouldn't want to know about inappropriate things.*

Interviewer: Yes. What do you think is inappropriate? This is a chance to give your view, rather than your parents' view, for example.

Candice: *If there was a particular video about sex, for example, then I'd find that inappropriate, because I'm at the age, where I know what sex is, but if I want to find information, I'd probably ask my mum for starters. I don't know what these people are going to say, they could put the wrong ideas in my head.*

[Later, she continued...]

Candice: *Boys, especially my age, they seem to be very into videos that are not really for their age, but they come from particular websites. The things they watch are a man and a woman having sex, or a woman stripping. That's what the boys watch around my age. But I wouldn't really watch that, because it's not very interesting, it's not for my age. I don't want to grow up really fast, I like being 12. I wouldn't watch it because my mum wouldn't like it either.*

Interviewer: *How do you know the boys are watching this type of stuff?*

Candice: *Because they talk about it nearly all the time.*

Interviewer: *And they're quite willing to talk about it, when the girls are around them as well?*

Candice: *They don't care.*

Interviewer: *I thought this might be boys-only conversation.*

Candice: *No. Sometimes, you can't help what you hear. Maybe you heard this person saying it to another boy or maybe they're talking loudly. Most of them will say this, when we're having a break. Most of them have videos on their phones that they have downloaded. Last year, there was a group of boys looking at one person's phone and I*

*didn't know what they were looking at. One of the boys told me, it was actually a woman stripping.*

(girl, 12)

Candice's observations about her male peers fits with the EU Kids Online Survey data that UK boys were more likely than girls to have encountered sexual images online (14% vs. 8%; Livingstone et al, 2010). However, not all boys were so engaged in watching sexual content, and in the interviews, **even older boys could take a moral view on why pornography should have age restrictions, and what effects it might have, in terms of influencing their perspectives of sexuality.**

David: *I think pornography's the one big thing because I mean our age we can see violence and kind of films which come up to a 15 maybe and, but then pornography I mean, well, hopefully none of us at school will have sex before a good age so we shouldn't really, no one should really be seeing pornography yet. But then there probably are those odd one or two people who are watching it and while getting kind of ideas or something in their heads which will then kind of ruin the rest of their lives.*

Jack: *They shouldn't really be watching it because they just get ideas because if you're 18 you wouldn't get such ideas as you would as if you're 13.*

Interviewer: *You think it's too easily available, the pornography, or is it okay? Maybe it should be available, maybe that's also part of life?*

Roland: *Okay, sometimes because it, when, like, when you're, like, 18 or something you've never done it before, then it could, I guess, make you more aware, but at this age it's just not right because everyone's too young.*

(boys, 14-16)

In fact, **sometimes the objection is that sexual content can be a distraction, taking time away from doing more worthwhile things:**

*Logan: I think there should be an age limit on it, because it could distract you from your work. Like, you wouldn't get the right level if you'd want to...it could affect you when you're doing GCSEs. So I'd definitely say you'd need to put an age limit on it, because it could distract you from a lot of things.*

(boy, 14-16)

The survey had asked whether sexual material 'bothered' the children. The answers from Candice and from the older boys suggest that **some young people might not go as far as to suggest it actually upset them** (and so they would not be reflected in EU Kids Online findings specifically on self-reported harm). **But nevertheless, they had a viewpoint on this material and might choose to avoid it.**

In sum, while some, especially younger, children might be bothered by sexual content, others were clearly not – although they thought it might be an issue for children younger than them. Some of their reflections showed that even younger children can have a sophisticated understanding of why sexual content exists online, they can raise questions about why it should exist, or they question why there should be so much adult concern about sexuality online considering the sexual content they encounter elsewhere.

### 3.2 Making and posting sexual content

The EU Kids Online survey had examined the practices of 'sending' and 'receiving' sexual images and messages in order to throw light on contemporary discussions about the 'sexting' practices of young people. The survey data showed that few children and young people in the UK have received sexual messages or images (12%), and this figure was slightly lower than the European average

and even lower in the Net Children Go Mobile follow up survey (Livingstone et al, 2014).

But most of the qualitative interviews generated some spontaneous examples of sexting practices among the peer group, if not necessarily by the young person being interviewed. This included **often lively discussions of what happens when images start off being sent to a particular person but are then posted online for a wider audience to see or otherwise distributed person-to-person.**

In the UK some of the 14- to 16-year-olds in particular knew of examples of this from their own schools, or from their friends, including the type of situation sometimes cited in media reporting of sexting, where a boy had solicited a sexual image of a girlfriend and subsequently passed it on to male friends. But it is clear that **practices relating to sending and receiving sexual content are a little more varied.** For example, Elsie (girl, 14-16) had received pictures from a boy posing in his underwear (which she judged to be narcissistic) while a friend had received a more revealing picture from another boy. Huzaifah's (boy, 11-13) friend and cousin had both received unsolicited topless pictures from girls.

As regards images posted online, the European qualitative study had noted that some girls posted provocative photos of themselves in order to receive 'likes' on social networking sites (SNSs) (Smahel and Wright, 2014). In keeping with this, a **group of girls aged 11-13 commented on the way some of their peers posted pictures of themselves with 'make-up and few clothes' to win 'Friends'.** Christine (girl, 14-16) also introduced a critical note about her peers when observing that the pictures some girls posted of themselves (e.g. in bikinis) were a little too revealing.

However, the example below shows another route to the posting of such images. Past research on mobile phones had shown how young people

sometimes take pictures of their peers, often of their faces with unusual expressions (otherwise known as ‘mugshots’) and post them in order to tease or embarrass them (Haddon and Vincent, 2009). Here we see that **posting sexual images can be an extension of this practice of embarrassing peers**, when in this case the perpetrator is actually a girlfriend rather than the boyfriend discussed in some of the sexting cases.

Melanie: *Once I stayed round my friend's house and like...I was...taking my top off* [gestures to show what she means, imitates pulling it over her head] *...in the bathroom to change into my pyjamas...and she come in and she took a picture of me like this* [others laugh as Melanie poses] *...and she posted it all over BBM...and I thought, like 'You really did that'.* [Laughs]

Linda: *Couldn't you just lock the bathroom door?*

Melanie: *No.*

Interviewer: *So was that embarrassing?*

Melanie: *It was, yeah...it was...and there was a massive black line like that up the centre* [indicates a vertical line through her body] *...do you know why... 'cos we'd had like a fight...a pen fight.*

Interviewer: *So when you were on the receiving end of this, did you ask for this picture to be taken down?*

Jane: *You don't just say* [in a polite voice] *'Can you take that picture down?'* [Others laugh] *Well, I wouldn't, but she might.*

Melanie: *All I said, yeah...you know, like when they looked at the picture, yeah...and I had a Blackberry at the time and everyone was saying, 'Oh Melanie, I saw that picture'. And I said like ... 'Yeah, I know. You like my body'.*

(girls, 11-13)

Apart from Melanie's ability to cope with the dissemination of the topless image by laughing it off, it is interesting to note that Jane's comment is typical of these discussions of managing embarrassing pictures – **part of the tease is to resist the request to take image down when the 'victim' asks them to do so.**

Lastly, Mary cites the case of a male peer, revealing her judgement that those who create such content should have known better. Again, this is framed in terms of there being an embarrassing picture and this leading to teasing:

Mary: *There was an incident about a year ago, in which someone sent a rather revealing photograph of themselves to someone else. It was really, like, this poor guy had to endure teasing for ages about it. It was all over the place.*

Interviewer: *Oh, it was a boy, sent a picture to...*

Mary: *That's happened a couple of times to people, and it's just really bad, because they should know, by now, what's going to happen...*

Interviewer: *Which is...?*

Mary: *Which is...it's going to get shared and stuff. And what's quite lucky with this case is that everyone was quite sensible and didn't post it on Facebook, which is what they might have done. I wasn't really interested too much in it, but it is a very silly thing to do.*

(girl, 14-16)

In this case, it looks as if the image was circulated more mobile to mobile, rather than being posted online.

**To sum up, reflecting the survey data we found that children's personal experience of sexting was limited, but their awareness of the practice and other people's experiences was more widespread. Sexting came in various forms with unsolicited**



**pictures from boys and girls, as well as posting revealing pictures to win approval – although some of the girls were critical when their female peers did this.** In one case a victim reported the perpetrator was actually another girl, but in this and other cases, perhaps the more interesting point is that the sexual images were framed in terms of **the wider practice of taking, posting or forwarding pictures as a tease or to embarrass.**

### 3.3 'Bad language' in content

Another form of inappropriate online content identified by the UK interviewees was the use of bad language or swearing – and this was certainly content to which many parents objected, according to their children. This section differentiates this from swearing in interpersonal communication online, to be discussed in the next section. The younger children were more critical of such content:

*Lewis: I don't think they should allow people to do really rude images or films...when I looked up the 'Flag of Spain' on Google Image...next thing I saw was a baby with a speech bubble coming out saying just '[mouths 'Fuck' without saying it] off'...you know...that was really rude and I thought 'Why are they showing that for the Flag of Spain?'*

(boy, 9-10)

The word 'rude' was also used to refer to this content, and so did not always mean sexual. As with Lewis, Shami questioned why this happened:

*Shami: And also if you click on something, you think it's perfectly fine, but then it's...very rude.*

Interviewer: *Rude in what sense, like...?*

*Shami: Like...a picture come on the screen with...not necessarily bad pictures but...bad words. Swear words. I don't know why they*

*do that but they just do... Which is strange. Because they don't need to.*

(girl, 9-10)

The **older children were more likely to question whether it was possible to avoid such language given that it was present in the offline world**, and hence, as in the case of games and sexual images, they questioned the logic of parents trying to protect them from this just in the online world:

*David: I mean...there's kind of all these people telling my parents kind of: 'Oh, yes, you should make sure that your kids don't know any swearwords or anything until they're at an appropriate age'. But I mean I can remember...*

*Jack: It's hard to protect it from me because they go to school and the other kids there already know the stuff.*

*Mathew: And also it's not like other people; there's, like, on the walls, like, spray painting and stuff.*

*David: Yes, the first time I ever came across the 'F' word we kind of, and there was this bridge and kind of I was just looking underneath it and someone had sprayed kind of the 'F' word along the wall and then that's how I came across it.*

*Jack: And just, like, staying out one night, one night really late, you just see so much stuff.*

(boys, 14-16)

In fact, some, like Damien (boy, 14-16), observed that even when he could watch versions of films on YouTube with the swearing beeped out, he preferred to watch the 'normal' version, where it was retained.

**It is generally clear from the children's accounts that bad language in online content is an issue for parents, perhaps more so for parents of younger children. While some, especially younger, children**



simply shy away from such content, we saw examples of how these same children can comment critically on this content. On the whole, the older children were more likely to see such language as an inevitable part of offline life, and hence sometimes had doubts about parental attempts to single out bad language online as a problem.

### 3.4 Aggressive communication, harassment and cyberbullying

While the EU Kids Online Survey concentrated on cyberbullying as a key risk, following the literature on this topic, the EU Kids Online European qualitative report broadened its focus to cover a range of negative forms of online interaction, including various forms of aggression (Černíková and Smahel, 2014). The rationale for this was that children would talk about these experiences of aggression, which were important to them, but they did not necessarily think about the experiences as constituting 'cyberbullying'.

For example, Mohammed was among a number of children who **objected to others swearing at him and, like his European counterparts, he felt angry about this rather than upset**. Again, as with some of the other boys interviewed, he experienced this specifically while gaming:

Interviewer: *Could you give me an example of something that came up that made you feel uncomfortable?*

Mohammed: *Like...I think it was from this kid on this game that I was playing... [...] he was using bad language to me and towards my friends.*

Interviewer: *So how did he manage to, like, talk to you and talk to your friends? Were you all on the same game at the same time?*

Mohammed: *Yes. You go to, like, these places and there's people everywhere and, like, you just meet friends. We were at this fishing*

*place and he started talking to us about that, so I reported him and we got him banned straightaway.*

Interviewer: *So he was on this chat thing you can do when you're on games? Okay. Was it a surprise, or have you had things like that in the past?*

Mohammed: *Yes, it was a surprise to me because nobody had spoken to me like that. I wasn't upset. I was just like angry because he was being rude and I hadn't done anything to him.*

(boy, 9-10)

But also, as in the European report, in the UK it is not just strangers who could be aggressive. **Children can also be generally nasty and mean to each other (and in the examples below, threatening as well).**

Jane: *Or they'll say 'if you don't BC someone I will haunt you'...and then they'll say 'They'll be someone at the end of your bed and he will come and chop your head off'.*

Linda: *It's like on X-Factor [TV competition] ...Jill wrote a BC...like if you don't vote for XXXX then this little girl's gonna come to your bed and kill you...or something like that.*

Jane: *Or 'You'll have bad luck'.*

Melanie: *And the 'You won't get a boyfriend' or something like that...how stupid!*

(girls, 11-13)

As the girls group below explained, **sometimes they felt this aggressive behaviour occurred more online than offline precisely because it was not face-to-face**.

Interviewer: *Do you think people say more things that are bad about each other because it's easier to do on Facebook?*

All: *Yeah*

Josie: *Because you don't see the person's face, you don't see the person's reaction, so you just...and you're only typing...*

Fahima: *When you would see them in school anywhere...when it comes face-to-face, you would feel scared and you would try to avoid the person the whole day, and you would be like...you would be hanging round your friends, but inside you're looking to see if the person's there. Because you never know...that the person can come after you and be like, 'You did this, so now watch what I'm going to do!' Because it's easy...it's not face-to-face, it's like me and Rawan again. We're rude to each other so much on Facebook, but then when it comes to face-to-face we have nothing to say. Maybe Rawan will have nothing to say to me or I'll have nothing to say to Rawan, because it's a bit scary to see what will happen and the reaction.*

(girls, 11-13)

The EU Kids Online Survey showed that only 8% of UK children who go online had received nasty or hurtful messages online, slightly above the European average (Livingstone et al, 2010). But as with the other risk areas, once the children were asked in the qualitative research to comment on cases of which they knew, quite a few could give examples, including those they identified as a form of cyberbullying.

**Sometimes incidents that were perhaps more thoughtless than intentionally meant to harm got out of hand in the online world.** For example, several interviewees noted how comments made online were sometimes taken the wrong way: *'They don't think that they're saying anything mean but the other person finds it offensive'* (Pamela, girl, 14-16). Others observed how something that started out as teasing – either in terms of a comment made or a picture posted – could easily *'escalate from being a joke to being quite abusive'* (Nathaniel, boy, 11-13).

The European qualitative report also considered one particular case of online aggressive behaviour – **breaking into people's accounts and pretending to be them, making nasty comments about other people, or sending nasty messages to friends of the victim while pretending to be them.**

In the EU Kids Online Survey this was covered in the section on the misuse of personal data, where 10% of children had experienced someone breaking into their profile and pretending to be them. A few of those interviewed in the UK had experienced this themselves, or else knew people who had. This was indeed **particularly awkward to deal with, as the victim had to try to repair the social damage by assuring friends that the message was not from them.**

Overall, online aggression, wider and more common than cyberbullying, was experienced by a range of the children interviewed, and could come from peers as well as strangers. Several of those interviewed agreed with a theme from the cyberbullying literature that there might be more aggression online because of fewer inhibitions when social clues present in face-to-face action are removed. But it is equally clear that some incidents that do not start out as intentionally aggressive, and indeed may come from the teasing practices identified earlier, may escalate, reflecting previous research observations about the power of the internet to amplify social dramas (boyd, 2010).

### 3.5 Strangers

Meeting strangers online is certainly something parents worry about and advise against. Reflecting this many of the children, especially the younger ones, were very wary of this risk. For instance, there were many examples across all age groups of children declining an invitation to be a 'Friend' from someone unknown. Hence **few children interviewed in this research had had 'negative' experiences of strangers precisely because they**

**had refused attempts at contact.** There were no cases in this sample of someone going to meet an online contact. The main example of some negative outcome, noted earlier and mostly experienced by boys, was encountering someone in games who used bad language.

However, since the EU Kids Online Survey had shown that 29% of children in the UK, similar to the European average, had made contact with someone online that they had not met face-to-face (Livingstone et al, 2010), the question arises as to why there is this degree of contact in the face of parental and teacher advice not to talk to strangers. There are some clues from the interviews with children.

**One pattern more common with but not unique to boys is meeting people through games, usually chatting to them via a headset while playing.** The aural aspect is important because it means the voice of the other person can be heard and a judgement made as to whether they sound like another child. Sometimes the discussion is more focused on commenting on the game:

Fahima: [You're] *Just saying, 'Oh, yes, yes 'Go to this hideout. You can shoot them from there. There's a person there. Quickly, go there'. But it never gets to a bit where you are talking about, 'Oh, how old you are, what school do you go to?'*

(girl, 11-13)

Others take the contact further. For example, Mohammed (boy, 11-13) was one of a number of boys who had met someone when playing; eventually they added each other as 'Friends'. Apart from talking about the game they had chatted about such things as what they had done the day before, what they had watched on TV and what they thought about various sports. They had kept in touch for some time and swapped email

addresses, but then Mohammed had lost his 'Friend's' details and they had lost contact.

**In the early days of the internet one of the attractions sometimes cited for going online was to meet new people, and this is, to some extent, the same appeal for children,** as Irene (below) explained in relation to the people she meets in a chatrooms:

Interviewer: *Have you made friends in the chatrooms who have been friends for some time now that you keep in contact with, or is it just you met them that day and afterwards you give them up?*

Irene: *Well, most of them are like that. And some of them I have... I know that might be dangerous, because my mum's warned me about it. But sometimes these people that have a lot in common with me. But I don't give all my personal details.*

(girl, 9-10)

Meanwhile, Roland gave an example of talking to people from other countries, although like Irene, he was aware of the risks and was careful:

Roland: *...they'll think that there's going to be like paedophiles and stuff on it. But it's actually quite nice people because it's sort of a lot of people your own age so you just talk to them because they, like, they want to hear your accent because you're from England and they're from, like, America so...yes.*

(boy, 14-16)

**To summarise, among the UK children interviewed there was little contact with strangers, in large part because of the awareness of risk and refusal to accept contacts online from people unknown. The notable exception, more so for boys, was contact made while gaming, and this often involved an aural element rather than text. The children were still careful, some more than others,**

but for the most part the often fleeting encounters were innocuous.

### 3.6 Rumour, social drama and unnecessary communication

There are a whole set of practices related to the internet that would not usually be termed 'risks' but which, to varying degrees, irritated the children, or else they found the experiences to be problematic. For example, one of the points made about the internet is that **while social drama always exists among young people (as well as adults), it can be amplified when online** (boyd, 2010). We saw this process of escalation in the discussion of aggressive behaviour and cyberbullying, but arguably it occurs in other forms as well, for example, **through the spread of rumour**. In Rawan's case, the information was true, but she would have preferred it if it had not spread to the extent that it did:

Rawan: *I liked this boy...and then I went and told my closest friend, and then like...they kept on passing it on and on and on, until it spread around the whole school...and the boy found out.*

Interviewer: *So what was the information that was spread around the school?*

Rawan: *That I like the boy. It was kind of personal.*

Interviewer: *Right. And was there any consequence of this when the boy found out?*

Rawan: *Hmm. Let me see.* [She puts her finger to lips and looks thoughtful]

[Others laugh]

Rawan: *We didn't talk for a while, and that was weird because...but now, like, we're really good friends.*

(girls, 11-13)

Here we see that **even rumours that are true have consequences, if only in terms of embarrassment**.

In this second example below, the rumour was false, but it had major negative consequences that had to be sorted out. It started when Josie's friend, though not one of her really close friends, had just dyed her hair green:

Josie: *I was online with one of the other girls, and I was like: 'Have you seen her hair?' And the girl was like, 'Yeah, I don't really like the colour'. I was like, 'Oh. It suited her a bit, but she went too far this time'. And then I think the other girl went to tell another girl that I said I didn't like the [friend's] hair, and I think she's ugly. Then the next day at school, everyone was giving me the certain look, and I went up to one of my other friends...and she was really close to me. And she was like, 'Is it true you said all of these things about [this friend]?' And I was like, 'No, I never said anything about [her].' And then the girl came...the girl who dyed her hair green. She came crying to me, and then she was like, 'Oh, I thought we were close, you were like one of my best friends, and I can't believe you'd say these things about another person. Why didn't you just come say it to me?' I was like, 'What did I say?' And she explained to me everything that's been going around. I was like, 'No, I didn't say that.' It got to the point where she wanted to slap me, but we sat in this room. The teacher was like, 'We have to settle this', and we sat in a room, and she literally won't talk to me. So I explained everything, and she was listening, but she wasn't saying anything. And then after, she was like, 'Okay, I believe you. If you say you never said it, I believe you, because you haven't lied to me before'.*

(girl, 11-13)

**There is clearly potential for distorting reports of what has been said online, perhaps sometimes maliciously, and broadcasting this, which can sour relationships.** In the story above this might have

led to physical aggression had the teacher not intervened.

Sometimes these rumours, accounts of what other people had done, are not even solicited, and young people like Ade below simply did not want to know these types of things, in the same way as some children are not interested in offline gossip:

*Ade: Some people I might not even know...will just message me and say: 'Do you know someone's done this? And I'll just I'll ask them: 'Why do you need to tell me?' It's none of my business. I don't need to know. And I just tell them, don't tell me any more secrets because I don't really need to know.*

(boy, 11-13)

Rumour is not the only type of communication that can come to be perceived in a negative light. Candice was among those children who got tired of Facebook because of the sheer amount of communication. At first she recounts a theme mentioned by others – that there was simply too much communications as people were supplying so many updates about themselves. But then she shifts to critically commenting on the nature of communication, the gossip, speaking online behind other people's backs – that was putting her off because of its negative consequences:

*Candice: At first, since everybody was going onto Facebook, when I wasn't allowed back in primary school, it was the most wonderful website ever. They were all using it and I wasn't allowed to and I didn't want to do it before my mum said that I could. At first it was really good, because I could see all my friends and photos and after a while, it's not very interesting. [...] It's just that it gets annoying when you have people updating their status every two minutes.*

*Interviewer: Does this mean you get loads of notifications about what they're doing?*

*Candice: Yes, I do. [...] I don't really check, because it's not very interesting. I don't really want to know your life that much. You can tell me this in person, not over the internet.*

*Interviewer: Does that mean, because it's public, people say less interesting things over the internet than if they were speaking person to person?*

*Candice: Yes.*

*Interviewer: Why were these things quite interesting at one time and then less interesting?*

*Candice: Because I think the things that people talk about, it was exciting at the beginning, because this was a whole new website that you haven't really created your own profile. This was something that's really personal, you can put your favourite singers. It didn't really interest me after a while I think they were using it for the wrong reasons. Friends of mine, reasons for bashing people.*

*Interviewer: Do you mean criticising them? What's 'bashing' in this case?*

*Candice: Bashing means talking about this person behind their back on Facebook. I think it's immature that you would do that.*

*Interviewer: And a lot of that goes on?*

*Candice: Yes.*

*Interviewer: In that sense, has the existence of Facebook made life a little bit more difficult at school, would you say?*

*Candice: Yes, it has. If something that happens in real life in school, it has to be said on Facebook. If somebody's seen this fight in school, they'll say, 'I've seen this fight with so-and-so'. And then more people see the status. If they didn't know about it, then they'll ask the particular person who was in that fight, about it the next day. That person won't be very happy.*

(girl, 11-13)



Apart from the notifications from other status updates and the online backstabbing, the other issue identified here is that, in Candice's eyes, **too much of the offline world can be reported online. Again, there is the potential for a negative experience offline to be amplified when broadcast online.**

Returning to the theme of there being simply **too much communication, too many notifications**, expressed by a number of those interviewed, the boys below give examples of what those communications **might include, from emotional states to banal consumption – unnecessary and unwanted communications in their eyes:**

Interviewer: *You indicated that you thought sometimes people put too much stuff on their profiles.*

Shiv: *Yes, people just put anything up. They put unnecessary things up that people don't want to hear. They just put anything up if they're bored, they'll just write 'I'm bored'. On BBM they'll just write 'Eating pasta'...they'll probably take a picture of their food and put it under their picture.*

Interviewer: [Speaking to Nathaniel who was nodding] *Same type of experience?*

Nathaniel: *Yes, when people make statuses and they say random stuff. There's a button and you just type in what you want, pick an emoticon and it could be eating breakfast, and then they say 'Feeling hungry'. It's just like no one really wants to know, people keep bugging you and then more people do it.*

(boys, 11-13)

And finally there were the types of communication, not gossip, but nevertheless comments that people could more easily make because of anonymity online which were in others senses inappropriate:

Abe: *Yes. On Facebook you have something called trollers and let's say if there's a*

*Facebook page, a memorial to someone who died, I remember, I don't remember how long ago it was, but this person died by a shark when he was swimming and these trollers went onto their Facebook page and they were making bad comments about the person who died and they were trying to make jokes about the person who died.*

Interviewer: *So you didn't think that was very good taste, in that sense?*

Abe: *No.*

(boy, 11-13)

This section has outlined experiences, some associated with social drama, beyond those normally associated with more standard typologies of risks that collectively appear to be far more common and which are perceived to be negative, to various degrees. One was rumour, which, whether based in truth or distortions, can be negative in its consequences. Indeed, some children try to avoid rumours or even feel negatively about SNSs because of the amount of (negative) rumours there. Then there are the other, sometimes distasteful, negative comments encountered online. Finally, adults sometimes see children's communications as banal when the children see them as being important. But here we see how even children sometimes find some of their peers' communications to be a waste of time and tedious, creating too much 'traffic' online.

### 3.7 Excessive use

In the EU Kids Online survey, UK children were more likely than the European average to report various forms of excessive use (Livingstone et al, 2010). For example, over half (51%) agreed that they have spent less time with family and friends or doing schoolwork than they should because of the time they spend on the internet (whereas the European average was 35%).



**In the qualitative study, most of those interviewed did not think their own use was problematic in this respect, but a few of the older children referred to the issue.** Mary (14-16), like the other girls in the group interview, checked her Facebook every day, and had earlier mentioned that she missed internet access and got annoyed when she could not go online while on holiday. However, she was also already worried that the time she spent on Facebook was affecting her schoolwork. Hence, she did not want to engage with any other forms of SNS since this would make things worse.

*Mary: I won't let myself on Tumblr. From what I can gather it's like people who are just blogging and stuff, and you never, ever get out of it. And I'm already, sort of, in a pit with Facebook, and I'd rather not dig myself into a deeper hole, especially with my GCSEs coming up.*

*Interviewer: And what is that...? And do you mean 'a hole' in terms of time, or kind of experiences?*

*Mary: Yes, because last night, I was babysitting my little brother, and was, like, with him for about two hours, and I got, like, five minutes' worth of homework done. The rest was spent on Facebook or on my account. And if I was on Tumblr, that time would just double, so...*

*Interviewer: So it sounds like you sort of know what the appeal might be, especially as you're a person who collects pictures.*

*Mary: And things, yes. I know what the appeal is, but with all...like, my GCSEs and stuff coming up, I really can't afford to get sucked into anything else.*

(girl, 14-16)

In fact, it was not just schoolwork – she later noted that she would like to follow up her other hobby of fan fiction writing, but social media were also taking time from that creative outlet: *'I have an account on a writing website, and I post my work*

*on there, and I get reviews and, like, stuff, and it's really interesting. And if I didn't have Facebook, I'd actually spend a lot of time on there, as well, just, like, reading through other people's work.'*

Logan also saw it as a potential distraction, even referring to Facebook as potentially addictive. But like some of the other young people, this was more from observing others than from his own experience.

*Interviewer: Facebook...does that feel like something you had to kind of resist, not to go on it, or did it just never appeal and you never saw the point, or...?*

*Logan: No, I didn't really see the point of doing it. It distracts you a bit...because once you get on it, you can't really get off it. Because my cousin's got it and he's on it all the time. And you're sort of boring after a while because all you're doing is just uploading pictures and talking to people and doing stuff like that.*

*Interviewer: So what does it mean, that 'you can't get off it'? Because you could?*

*Logan: It's sort of like, addictive really. Once you start talking to people you want, like, someone to talk to...different people. It's, like, you have to update your status all the time,*

(boy, 14-16)

In this case, Logan not only appreciates how someone can get drawn into using SNSs, and how this is a potential distraction, but he was also critical of the type of 'boring' person that can make you – something from which he wanted to distance himself.

In this section we have seen examples of how older children can be reasonably reflective about the appeal of SNSs, they can understand it, and in one case have experienced becoming locked in to using it. But they also recognised **that heavy use of social media has costs, in terms of schoolwork and other**

interests, and in terms of the type of person you become, or are seen to become.

### 3.8 Commercial content

While the survey had sought information about a range of risks identified in the literature on children's use of the internet, the qualitative research asked about what was problematic from the child's perspective. As with their European counterparts, **UK children were often frustrated and irritated by commercial material on the internet**, often citing it early in the interview and with some feeling – even if they were also willing to talk about some of more standard risk areas covered previously.

Francis: *But the annoying things that come up are pop-ups. Say you want to click on that game. You click on it but before the game comes up...some big 'Sign up here and you get loads of money'...comes up. That's annoying.*

Interviewer: *It's like a form of advertising is it then?*

Francis: *Yeah. Because they find a way to get on a game and you click that game and that comes up...and you have to wait ages for it to load before you can click the off button...like close button...close the window.*

Interviewer: *Right*

Francis: *And it takes forever!*

(boy, 11-13)

**Children, like many adults, do not like things that interrupt and waste their time.** And Francis was not alone in being particularly **peevled when commercial material suddenly appears in the middle of playing a game, disrupting the flow.**

**Pop-up adverts were the worst culprits.** Some pop-ups did relate to risks areas, for example: *'I was typing what I wanted to listen to, and then suddenly*

*this pop-up screen came up of like dating and naked ladies over there, and then I'm like "What!"'* (Rawan, girl, 11-13). Or *'...the pop-up said "Sign up for this website where you can talk to a woman and tell her to do anything you want. You can tell her to take off her clothes and stuff"'* (Huzafah, boy, 11-13).

However, these were exceptions, and the more **common complaint was that adverts were simply a distraction and wasted the children's time if they were difficult to get out of, or else if the children were redirected to a different site when they tried to close the pop-up down.** *'Some of them, when you click on the X, it still ends up going on to the website'* (Shelley, girl, 11-13).

**Others resented the fact that adverts were often trying to mislead them**, as in claims that they had won something (or could win something): *'They try to trick you, saying something is free and then saying it costs something'* (Cath, girl, 9-10). In fact, some **children noted that they could get into trouble with their parents if they did not read these adverts carefully** (Robin, girl, 9-10). Younger children in particular, but also older ones may be indignant that people or companies online were trying to cheat them. For the younger ones, this was simply not fair, while older ones could be a little more worldly wise and cynical.

Other concerns were that adverts asking you to fill in something were trying to get hold of personal details, they might contain viruses, and there was a **danger when typing quickly that an advert came up and it was easy to click on something inadvertently that would start a download.** And some children were aware that if they did show an interest in some advert and clicked on it, the resultant cookie could attract yet more adverts. Lewis graphically characterised the experience of adverts below:

Lewis: *It's a bit like if you're trying to walk down the road and all your friends are coming up to you and saying 'Have you heard of this'... [makes the gesture of trying to push them out of the way and push past them] 'Excuse me, out the way, I'm trying to get somewhere'. And then someone else comes along and says... [mimics the same 'have you heard of this'] ...like that, in your face!*

(boy, 9-10)

In this section we have seen that children can be at least as annoyed as adults about unwanted commercial content, and for many of the same reasons. And compared to other risks, they clearly encountered disruptive, unsolicited commercial content often. The interviews convey a sense that every child could complain about this if asked, and most, in practice, did, volunteering these as some of the first examples of negative experiences online. At the very least they were irritating and sometimes offended their sensibilities that someone was intentionally lying to them, and they had to be careful in case mishandling them or inadvertently clicking at the wrong time could cost money and get them into trouble at home.

### 3.9 Technical issues

Children referred to a range of technical issues such as the **slowness of their internet access in general, or the speed of downloading from particular sites. Another problem was the internet crashing** (again, especially when in the middle of playing a game). Another problem was the **screen freezing**, meaning that there was a delay in relation to pressing keys or clicking: *'...and when it suddenly comes back on you've got five pages with the same thing...because you've clicked it so many times'* (Martin, boy, 9-10). Adult computer users would know what they mean. Several mentioned the case when, whatever the problem, they were forced to close down the device and start again. For example:

Lewis: *Whenever you go on these password or codename games...I put in the code and it says 'Your code has not been found, please try again'. And you keep trying it. Then you just think 'I'm getting off this website'. And of course it flashes up again and you can't get off it. Eventually you just have to try and turn the whole computer off and put it back on again.*

(boy, 9-10)

Again, clearly young people were also as frustrated as adults about technical problems as online adults, and again were likely to volunteer these as being problems, as the negative side of the internet, as much as normal safety concerns.

## 4. PREVENTATIVE MEASURES

The EU Kids Online European qualitative report pooled the data from participating countries to create a typology of the preventative measures that young people adopt to avoid problematic online situations (Vandoninck and d’Haenens, 2014). That report is more comprehensive than the UK report can be in terms of discussing which responses are more favoured by children in relation to which risks, and which factors might influence children’s choices. We refer readers to that report.

In the section that follows, illustrations are provided to convey a sense of how children are active in anticipating and avoiding the potentially negative things they might encounter online.

### 4.1 Content

**Reflecting the high degree of eSafety training<sup>1</sup> in the UK, the children interviewed were, in general, careful.** When searching for something or checking out a peer’s recommended websites, many of the **younger children (aged 9-10) asked parents to check these out first** (as noted later in the section on parental mediation). **Younger children usually asked permission to download things.** Since even the younger ones had had some digital literacy training, they were **aware that some websites were misleading, they often checked them twice, evaluated the information online against what they had been told in school, searched several times, and compared answers on several websites.** **When asked to supply personal information on a site they would usually ignore the request** (reflecting the 87% in the UK survey who said this) or else they would give false information, as in the case of Jane (girl, 11-13), who imaginatively

supplied names and addresses from the *Harry Potter* stories. Sometimes **giving false names is associated with accessing a SNS under-age, but here it is a tactic used by children to protect themselves.** In addition, **some children developed their own strategies**, as in the case of Lawrence (boy, 9-10) who specifically used the platform Spotify to download music because it did not have the versions remixed with swearing. Meanwhile Robin had developed her own search procedure:

*Robin: I always put ‘for kids’ as well. And if it says it in the name, ‘for kids’, or in...because when you type it, it has the title, and then it has a little paragraph about it. If it either says in the title or in the little paragraph, ‘for kids’, I would click on it. I would probably check with my mum first of all.*

(girl, 9-10)

### 4.2 Communication

Although the previous section provided a few examples of young people talking to strangers, on the whole the children in this sample did not. Following school (and parental) advice, the EU Kids Online Survey had shown that only 19% had communicated with strangers, less than the European average of 25%. This was reflected in the qualitative data, **where most children and none of the younger children communicated with people they did not know**, and they turned down Friend requests from strangers. **Even those older children who were willing to make contact often took some precautions**, as in the case of Roland who wanted to see via a webcam that he was actually talking to another young person, and tended to make contact when other friends were physically around:

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<sup>1</sup> All those interviewed had had eSafety lessons, sometimes for several years.

Roland: *Oh, no, I don't go on the one where you can't see them because it's then kind of dodgy.*

Interviewer: *Right, so you can see who you're talking to?*

Roland: *Yes, but I only go when I'm with mates because then I, it feels kind of weird when you're just on your own.*

(boy, 14-16)

Again, **some developed their own rules about communication**, such as Robin (girl, 9-10), who would sent a text message to friends warning them in advance that she was going to email them. And as in the Spotify example, some chose certain platforms rather than others because they were safer in some way. Hence Cath (girl, 9-10) chose to use Club Penguin because it had rules about swearing and threatening behaviour, and Theo chose Twitter over Facebook for a related reason – because of their respective reputations:

Theo: *The reason I chose Twitter over Facebook was I heard kind of people saying 'Oh, Facebook, so-and-so has said this about me'...and it kind of sounded as if people are using it on purpose to either bully people, other people or something. But on this, in Twitter I haven't heard that much kind of criticism about it.*

(boy, 14-16)

### 4.3 Empathy

Lastly, even though they could describe cases when hasty comments had been made or teasing had led to a situation that had 'got out of hand', a number of those interviewed indicated that they personally tried to be **cautious and reflective, and not do something online that was going to create problems for others**:

Ade: *I don't want to put up something that's so bad that it can be harmful to other people, like something racist that can hurt other people's feelings, so I need to know where the limit is and where's the line to push the boundaries.*

Interviewer: *And how do you find that then? Are there some grey areas, you're thinking, I'm not sure?*

Ade: *If I'm not sure, I don't do it, just in case. It depends how sure. If I'm very not sure, I don't do it. So I just stay away from trouble.*

(boy, 11-13)

In sum, although not claiming that all UK children are as careful as the ones in this research, their range of preventative measures was impressive, indeed sometimes inventive, and would make many of those who provide eSafety training proud. And while the previous sections on rumour and perhaps aggression may reflect some children being insensitive when online, here we have examples, and they were by no means the only ones, demonstrating thoughtfulness and empathy.

## 5. COPING

As in the case of preventative measures, the European report pools data to develop a more systematic typology of different ways of coping (Barbovchi, 2014). Hence we focus here on providing UK illustrations of the key points regarding how children cope with online risk.

### 5.1 Content

As regards **encountering unwanted websites or pop-ups, most of those over the age of 11 dealt with them by technical means - often, deleting the pop-ups or simply moving on.** So, when Fahima (girl, 11-13) encountered a pop-up for a dating website, she deleted it, and when the system then offered her an option to block pop-ups, she took it. Younger children sometimes did this: when Mohammed (boy, 9-10) recognised the site was 'trying to trick him', he left it. Meanwhile, Abe's (boy, 11-13) brother installed some software that stopped his pop-ups. Sometimes this did not work, which was itself frustrating, and a number of children mentioned that they had to resort to closing the computer down in those cases:

*John: There's an X button but it won't...you try to press it, but it doesn't. So you have to minimise it, and then, obviously, it keeps popping up, so you get really annoyed. So it only goes away when you turn the computer off.*

(boy, 9-10)

However, some admitted that their patience was really being strained:

*Francis: As soon as a pop-up comes up...I don't like it...because pop-ups will become more pop-ups...and it'll just become a big pop-up mess.*

*Interviewer: Right. And as you said before, that irritates you.*

*Francis: Yes. So much. I almost broke my laptop.*

*Interviewer: What?... it ground to a halt, or what?*

*Francis: No, I almost...ripped the screen in half...I mean...seriously like...I was holding the middle of it...and you could see little cracks appearing...and then I stopped and I thought 'No, no, better not'.*

(boy, 11-13)

Incidents like this, when there is such a strong reaction that the child almost destroys the machine, make it understandable that **when asked in an open-ended way 'what bothers them' or 'what is negative about the internet', sometimes the first thing volunteered is not the higher profile risks identified in eSafety teaching.** Those can sometimes seem distant from their own personal experience, albeit important, whereas something like the frustrations, built up over time, of pop-ups can feel really immediate.

### 5.2 Communication

**If younger children (aged 9-10) received a communication that they were not sure about or decided was negative, they usually told a parent.**

As regards aggressive communication, it was clear that many children of different ages had been warned by parents and/or teachers to tell someone if this happened, but also **not to reply in order to avoid escalating the problem. Most did exactly this, or else used the 'report' mechanism** (e.g. if someone was swearing at them). In the example below, where Jane was threatened, not only did she report the case, but she also received social support from her friends.



Jane: *There was the guy and he said that he was going to kill me and then all of my friends. So I reported him... All my friends were calling him names because of this.*

(girl, 11-12)

We only had one UK example of what the coping section of the European qualitative report identified as a 'retaliation' response, here responding to aggression with aggression:

Keith: *Yes, and some kid on there, he called me a bad name and I sort of hacked his Penguin account...he's like, really quiet.*

Interviewer: *So, it can get quite aggressive; quite tough, what you guys do to each other?*

Keith: *Yes, well, it wasn't really my fault; well it was my fault because I sort of, well...*

Interviewer: *You hacked his thing.*

Keith: *Yes, so, like, so I kept on making the guy crash into walls, yes, and he got really annoyed and called me a name, yes.*

Interviewer: *And did that upset you, or did you think that was like, one point to you because you'd got to him?*

Keith: *Well, one point to me.*

(boy, 13-14)

Apart from this case, the **more mainstream and immediate response of ignoring aggression, or in the example below, virtually 'walking away', can sometimes be followed up by measures to prevent this situation happening again.** As the European qualitative report noted, additional new 'preventative measures' can be a response to a previous negative experience. Here, Fahima's friend took an additional longer-term measure after an incident, no longer adding names she did not know to her Facebook account:

Fahima: *I was talking to my friend on Facebook...like this really close friend of*

*mine. And then all of a sudden...you know people sometimes invite themselves to a chat? I don't know how they do it, when you don't invite them. And me and my friend was talking, and they start saying rude things to her. And I was like, 'Just stop it'... I was like, 'You know, what. Don't reply back.' And we just both left the group chat. I think they just added her on her Facebook before that thing started. So then she went on her Facebook and she deleted all of them that she didn't know. So she got a lesson. She said that she never did it again...if she doesn't know anyone she never adds them.*

(girl, 11-13)

As noted earlier in the section on aggressive communication, the case of hacked accounts could be a particular problematic case of aggressive behaviour. Note in the story below how Elsie 'freaked out' when she got messages from her friend Isadora's account because it had been hacked. In our small sample of interviews several children reported that their account had been hacked in this way, and that often it required a serious effort to try to apologise to friends, convince them they were not to blame, and to generally sort it out afterwards.

Isadora: *I got a virus on my Twitter, and they were, like...*

Elsie: *And then they were...she was sending me, like, really horrible messages. I was, like: 'What the...?'*

Isadora: *Like, nasty messages. 'It wasn't me. It wasn't me'.*

Interviewer: *So it looked like Isadora was sending Elsie really horrible...*

Isadora: *Nasty messages, but I wasn't... I got the virus, so I deleted my account, but the virus reactivated it. [...]*

Elsie: *I got really freaked out when I first got it.*

Interviewer: *And then you just have to close your whole account, and start all over?*

Isadora: *Yes, but then, because of the virus, it reactivated my account, so I can't make a new one on that email. So I just don't do Twitter anymore. I kind of gave up with it.*

(girls, 14-16)

The issue of how to deal with teasing that had the potential to escalate required more subtle social responses. The young people interviewed talked of mixed responses from peers when they asked them to remove posted photos that they were unhappy about. Below, Mary reports the case of two boys who had been photographed in such a way that it made it look like they were kissing. She was impressed by the way they successfully managed to deal with the teasing by laughing it off since she admitted that in their shoes, she might not have managed that coping response.

Mary: *We, lightly teased them about it, for about a few days, and it, sort of, just wore off. And I mean, like, it's... Like, the best part was, they were able to take the joke. If they hadn't...if it had been me, I might not have been able to take the joke, but they were able to, so it was all right.*

[And later]

Interviewer: *Yes, okay. So do you think it makes you all a bit, kind of, tougher, really? Because the teasing is quite... It sounds like there's quite a lot of teasing.*

Isadora: *Yes, because you know it's a joke.*

Mary: *Yes, but it's like, it's sort of light-hearted, it's not like proper, we're actually laughing at you, it's more...it's quite light-hearted.*

Isadora: *It's like you're laughing with them, not at them.*

(girls, 14-16)

**In general it is clear that children do often heed much of the internet safety advice to which they are exposed.** In terms of content, they often dealt with content by technical means – deleting unwanted items, or if all else fails, turning the device off. However, unwanted content (which includes much commercial material, not just sexual content) was often one of the most frustrating and annoying experiences voiced by children, evoking some emotion. As regards communication, many children, especially younger ones, did tell parents about aggressive online contact, and tried not to escalate such confrontations. One of the most problematic of these to cope with was when the account was hacked, spoiling a child's reputation with peers. One other tricky situation to handle, which some managed better than others, was the posting of socially embarrassing (but not necessarily sexual) photos.

## 6. PARENTAL MEDIATION

### 6.1 General parental concerns

The concerns shown by parents in the European qualitative research (Smahel and Wright, 2014) were echoed in what the UK children reported, and so will be summarised here.

As we will see, some concerns and interventions relate to historic concerns about ICTs (e.g. TV, cinema) such as seeing violence and sexual content. These can be found in awareness campaigns, but children report that their parents also talk to them about some aspects more specific to the internet, for example, about the dangers of giving out personal information online or encountering strangers. **This implies that many parents, like the children at school, have been reached by eSafety messages.**

To be more specific, a number of children reported their parents' concerns about them giving out personal information, seeing sexual content, seeing violent content (especially in online games), meeting strangers and getting into arguments. Sometimes this included more specific warnings, for example, about playing multiplayer games where it was possible to communicate with others. On this issue children were divided. While some heeded the warning, an earlier section noted that others talked to children online because it was about innocuous subjects, like the game itself.

**Certain concerns were extensions of more long-standing worries about screens and screen-related activities.** As in some previous studies of parents regulation of TV, restrictions on the time children spent online was often mentioned by children. Sometimes they said their parents were concerned that the internet might become addictive. Other parents worried that being online

was potentially bad for children's eyes, while others worried about it keeping children awake. **Occasionally the concern was more that playing on or exploring the internet in whatever form could be a distraction from schoolwork. More generally, and in keeping with the theme of trying to find a balance in the children's life, some parents were concerned that time spent online might lead to them missing out on 'something else' offline that might be beneficial.** Finally, there were also more practical reasons for limiting time online, when the family device was shared with siblings.

On the other hand, children were allowed to spend additional time online as a reward (often after doing homework), or if their activities online were seen as being positive; for example, some children were allowed additional time if they could demonstrate they were learning (but not for playing games). In addition, a few children mentioned that their parents did not impose time rules, but sometimes this was because the child did not spend much time online anyway.

It is worth noting that this listing of concerns and rules, above and in the sections that follow, does not mean that all parents were equally worried: some children reported that their parents simply thought that seeing some content would not affect their child – or, as we will see in the next section, that the children were now old enough to cope.

### 6.2 Age-related concerns

**Parents' concerns and rules about internet use were often related to the child's age** - for example, that their child should not play games with a higher age rating than their actual age, or see films online with a higher age rating than their age. Many young children paid attention to the advice, though some

did not, but the point is that such parental rules carried over from offline life, relating to rules about games and films in general.

Turning to the online specific version of the same age-related concern, some children were not allowed on Twitter or allowed to have email until a certain age. Even more generally, some parents had banned children aged 9-10 from going online at all, or banned them from having a smartphone, until they reached a certain age (an age when the particular parent thought that the child was responsible enough).

One form of parental mediation that affected more children was the rule that they should not go on to SNSs that were too old for them. **In this respect, certain parents were stricter about 'official' age limits, such as the child needed to be 13 to go on Facebook. But others were more flexible,** perhaps not allowing the child on Facebook when they were 10-11, but deciding that by the age of 12 they were old enough to do so. In the case below we have a more rare but not unique example of a mother teaching her young son about Facebook in preparation for allowing him to get an account at a slightly later age:

Andrew: *My mum said she'd get me a Facebook account but she's actually teaching me a bit of how to like...do stuff on it*

Interviewer: *What, she's showing you hers?*

Andrew: *Yes, showing what not to do and what to do. So, like, not to make friends with people who you don't know...and only friends you know from your family. And don't give away your personal information and that sort of general stuff.*

(boy, 9-10)

**Encountering bad language was also a parental concern more often mentioned by younger children (aged 9-10).** In one household, the mother specifically banned the use of Twitter because she had found out that some people, including children,

were swearing when using this application. But slightly older children were more likely to make the point that it was hard to avoid encountering bad language in films and games, and besides, as noted earlier, they heard it in everyday life anyway, including at school. **Hence some parents acknowledged this reality, and had said their children could see content with swearing as long as they did not swear themselves.** However, while some children accepted this deal, others, like Jane, did not and this remained a tension:

Jane: *My mum's quite friendly on Facebook, but she still goes on my account. 'Cos I hide like my statuses from her 'cos I know she'll shout at me. She doesn't go on Facebook a lot anymore but like when she looks at my one she just shouts at me: 'One more swearword!' 'Why are you arguing a lot?'*

Interviewer: *So is the main thing she complains about you arguing?*

Jane: *She [Jane's mother] just doesn't like me swearing. Like my auntie and some of my mum's friends are on Facebook and then they all see – even though I hide stuff. And she [Jane's mother] says they're probably all, like... [saying] 'What the hell's wrong with that child?' But I don't care. I don't like them.*

Interviewer: *Do you mean that your mother's concerned that this reflects badly on her?*

Jane: *Not really. She just thinks...like...because in my primary school [e.g. aged up to 11] I didn't really swear that much, but now I'm at secondary level I swear all the time.*

(girl, 11-13)

Lastly there were concerns about age-appropriate behaviour relating to sexual content, such as in the case of Lewis below – that a boy of his age should not be singing songs about being sexy, even though he was clearly aware of sexual content online and continued to sing in defiance of his parents:

Lewis: *Like there's lots of songs like 'I'm sexy and I know it' that have got a lot of...you know...shaking bodies... [he cups his hands in front of his chest and moves them from side to side to indicate shaking breasts] ...and they have parodies of Gangnam style where they're a bit rude and like...sexy stuff.*

Interviewer: *So this is what your parents don't want you to see, or you don't want to see?*

Lewis: *I don't really want to see it either...but I think they're just saying 'Don't watch too much'. They don't want me to have a sort of different idea in my brain...you know 'I'm sexy and I know it.' Also my mum and dad just don't like those songs...you know, they just don't want me to start singing them around the house.*

(boy, 9-10)

In sum, parents have a range of rules about different aspects of the internet that are age-related. Sometimes these rules reflect official guidelines, but sometimes they are more flexible, allowing children to do things when they feel they are mature enough, even if 'under-age'. And some parental concerns specifically reflect perceptions of what sexual content children should know about at certain ages.

### 6.3 Parental advice, rules and monitoring

**Children reported that parents gave a good deal of practical advice about such things as hacking, fake competitions online and related misleading pop-ups. Though reported less often by the children, some parents also warned their children about their own potential behaviour online (i.e. conduct risks) – that they should not say negative things online.**

In addition to more general rules relating to the concerns noted in the previous section, parents sometimes had more specific advice. For example,

parents warned their children that they should be wary of adding Friends to their SNS profile in general, they should think twice when posting pictures, or be careful about which peers were added as Friends. Other examples were when Robin (girl, 9-10) was told she should not show her face on Skype to someone she did not know, while Roland (boy, 13-14) was banned from watching films over the internet when his parents were out of the house.

Some rules related specifically to monitoring what the child was doing. For example, Martin (boy, 9-10) had to let his parents know whenever he was watching YouTube and indicate what he was watching. (In fact, he found this so tedious that he gave up watching YouTube.) **Other parents simply asked to see what they were doing online now and again, while for others it was good enough, and in the YouTube example above, if their child simply told them what they were doing online. Many children are very happy with this degree of light monitoring, this 'checking in', and, especially when younger, were happy to comply** (though one thought her parents were gullible and lied about what she did online).

**Sometimes the rule was, in effect, a trade-off. For example, some children were allowed to have a SNS profile if the children let their parents (or an older sibling or another member of the extended family) be their 'Friend' – so if the privacy settings were set to private, the parents could still see what their child was doing online. That could create ambivalence. Josie (girl, 11-13) had abandoned her use of BBM when her father insisted that she let a cousin be her Friend in order to keep an eye on her. Others commented that they were simply careful about what they did on their profile because their parents could see it.**

A variation of this was when some **parents demanded to know the child's password. As we shall see later, their monitoring was sometimes resented as an invasion of privacy, and some older**

**children noted that they may have initially given out a password, but they then changed it to block their parents.**

Examples of direct actions by parents to block something were more rare but existed. For example, one father set a PIN number to control what films his children could watch via the internet, one mother had set up a filter, and one father had made a game inaccessible because he thought that it was problematic.

In general we saw how parents monitor their child to various degrees, the form most acceptable to the children being when they have to check in from time to time about what they are doing. Sometimes monitoring is more stringent, and can involve trade-offs, like children having to give their passwords, which children sometimes, in effect, resist.

## **6.4 Explicitness and credibility of parental concerns**

**Children reported that parents differed in the degree to which they articulated why they were concerned about some behaviour.** Some parents specifically explained that giving out personal information might lead to the house being robbed or accounts being hacked, or that talking to strangers might lead to the child being abducted. Below we saw an example of why Lawrence's parents were concerned about violence:

*Interviewer: So, what is it that your parents don't like about the violence when it looks like real people? Did they explain? Did they say?*

*Lawrence: Yes. They say it's because there are so many wars, and so many real people die, it's just not good to be doing that on a computer. It's basically the same as killing people in real life. It gives you the idea, you start to think, 'Oh my God, this is really fun. It's a cool game. I might go and do this for real'. So they don't like that.*

(boy, 9-10)

Candice was slightly older and had been on Facebook on condition that her mother was allowed to be her Friend (and her mother checks what she does there). But Candice was not annoyed by this because she was really close to her mother. Her mother had made it clear why she disapproved of Facebook – and to some extent Candice came to agree with her about the status updating in particular:

*Interviewer: Why was your mother initially reluctant for you to have Facebook?*

*Candice: All her friends have Facebook and she had heard all the bad stuff about arguments. She doesn't really like the idea of people putting their pictures up on there or updating their status. She likes her life to be calm. She doesn't get why people have to put their life out there.*

*Interviewer: That's why she doesn't like it? Why didn't she like the idea of you being on it?*

*Candice: Because she thought that, maybe if I got Facebook, I would get over-excited and start doing all the things that other people were doing... Updating my status every two minutes. Putting my photos on it. She didn't like the idea of that, because she's very over-protective and I'm an only child.*

*Interviewer: The updating business, is that because she viewed it as time-wasting?*

*Candice: Yes, she does. After a while, I think like that now. But before, it was a really fun thing to do. If it's a really important thing that you want to say, then I'll say it. But if it's: 'What I'm having for breakfast', I don't think that's important.*

(girl, 11-13)

These are examples where the parents have been explicit about the rule and articulate about their concerns. **However, not all rules are explicit and not all parental concerns are voiced in discussion.**



For example, one girl reported how she was sure her mother would not like her to encounter bad language even though her mother had never said this. Another said her mother had warned her not to watch violent things, but had not explained why. **This creates a degree of uncertainty, where in general it seemed the children like to know what the rules were and why.**

Sometimes there was a problem, in the child's eyes, of the credibility of the advice. For example, only once in the UK interviews was illegal downloading mentioned as an issue that a parent was concerned about, but the example below illustrates how the children can have a different perspective about whether this is really a bad thing:

Interviewer: *So is there anything else you do that your parents don't like you doing, even if they're not checking up on you?*

Jane: *My mum says I need to stop downloading illegal stuff.*

Interviewer: *Right. Why?*

Jane: *Because it's illegal [all laugh]. 'Cos she says 'You don't want to get involved in that'. But I said: 'No mum, I just want to watch the Simpsons'. I've become a criminal from watching TV!*

Interviewer: *So she's concerned about your reputation?*

Jane: *Yeah, that I'll get a criminal record. I don't get why. I mean, I'm not...no one's getting killed or hurt.*

(girl, 11-13)

In a similar vein, in one UK focus group the boys (11-13) felt parental advice was confusing because they were asked to avoid looking at violence online, but they saw it regularly on the TV news in war coverage, and as noted earlier, were asked to avoid sexual material on the internet, and yet could see pictures of topless women in some of the popular daily newspapers. In other words, **in the children's**

**eyes, the parents had lost perspective when their fears about the online world were out of proportion given what children encountered in the offline one.**

Huzaifah was also were beginning to question some claims about why things might be bad for children, indicating that in certain cases **the arguments were too universal if they implied that children would automatically be influenced by the online world:**

Huzaifah: *My parent doesn't say this, but some parents will say if you constantly play this game you'll be addicted and it will affect your mentality. And you'll try to copy what's happening in the game in real life. But to be honest I find that a bit... I don't really agree with that statement because it depends on who you are, and it depends on if you are smart enough to do it or not. And it also depends on parenting as well.*

(boy, 11-13)

In sum, parents differ in the extent to which they make rules explicit and explain them. Sometimes parental advice loses some credibility, for example, if it is seen as out of perspective or too universal.

## 6.5 Inviting and resisting parental mediation

**Many of the younger children (9-10) simply accepted what their parents wanted.** For example, if they were **unsure about a website, they might ask a parent to check it for them before continuing.** This sometimes included asking parents to check URLs that their peers had recommended, where they trusted their parents' judgements more than their peers. Nearly all the **younger children noted that if they encountered problems, they would always tell their parents, while the slightly older children sometimes said that they might, but it depended on what the problem was.**

In fact, **some children were even more proactive, inviting parents to see what they were doing**

**online**, and some were not so much following the rules as trying to avoid certain online experiences, as illustrated by Andrew who wanted his parents to intervene and vet sites for him:

Andrew: *Some people put things on websites that are not very nice, like some pictures have some not very nice stuff so like...killing stuff...I'm not one of those persons who likes looking at killed animals, so...my mum and my dad have a look and make sure that there's nothing on there.*

Interviewer: *Right. Have you ever had this experience that you've come across a site that is violent to animals or gruesome or something like that?*

Andrew: *Well, one time I went on the website and there was a not very nice thing on there...so I know now to tell me dad to go and have a look at it first.*

Interviewer: *Right. So you were a bit upset about this or...?*

Andrew: *Well, I was a bit upset when I looked at it. But I know now that one of my parents will have a look at it and if it was something bad, like they wouldn't show me it.*

(boy, 9-10)

However, once children started to get older, one process was that they felt they **had reached an age when they felt they should, in principle, be more independent, and hence it was not always appropriate even to check in with parents to see if they were doing the right thing** – even if they admitted that it was still difficult to make judgements about the online world.

Interviewer: *Do you think you're going to get more adventurous in the future...try more things out or...?*

Francis: *Yeah. Because when I'm older I'll become more...like...brave. Not like I'll try everything...because you've got to be safe on the internet. And the internet's like...tough for someone like me, a 12-year-old.*

Interviewer: *Why...you mean it's complicated or what?*

Francis: *You don't know about stuff and you don't really want to ask your parents at that time, like when you're like 12, 13. You want to try and do stuff on your own. But when you're older you can try and just figure it out for yourself. 'Cos you're older, you're more wiser.*

(boy, 11-13)

Another process at work as children aged was when some had proudly noted that when they were younger they were monitored more, but **as they got older, they had behaved in such a way that they had earned more trust in general, and this applied to what they did online. Clearly trust was, for many, precious**, and following on from the above discussion of 'becoming independent' Francis went on to indicate this:

Interviewer: *So what type of things would you not want to ask your parents about? Would it be things where they would think you're not so competent if you ask them? Or what?*

Francis: *Like...stuff where I go on it. It could be like they don't trust me on some sites. And then they would start checking my history and all that.*

Interviewer: *So if you like...the dilemma is how not to lose your parents' trust?*

Francis: [Quickly] *Yeah, like you've got to stay on a safe website so you don't lose your parents' trust. Really...that's all it is.*

(boy, 11-13)

Francis was by no means alone in mentioning the trust issue. This was shown in the ambivalence for one 11-13-year-old whose mother had said she trusted her daughter, but then checked what she was doing online. **In other words, this monitoring did not imply trust.**

The problem for others, however, was that if they reported some experience online, even if not initiated by them (such as accidentally going to a site with sexual content), their general relations with their parents were such that they anticipated they would lose that trust – in other words, it was best not to risk telling their parents.

Interviewer: *If something that came on the internet that you thought was wrong or problematic, would you tell them...if they're not very good with technology?*

Mathew: *Well, you could have, say you accidentally you went on to inappropriate site and then your parents suddenly start questioning you about this because maybe they saw you. And straight away they're going to judge you. Because even if you say by accident they're probably not even going to believe you.*

(boy, 11-13)

Among the 11- to 13-year-old children we also find more examples of **the desire to be allowed some privacy**. In the quote below, Ade shows how sometimes this is not because he is doing anything that his parents would not like, but simply because he values his private space:

Ade: *I don't like people coming into my business and stuff.*

Interviewer: *Does this include your parents? You don't like them looking at your business either?*

Ade: *It includes my parents, yes. But at times...when they ask me what I'm doing, I tell them the truth: 'I'm on the news'. And I ask them sometimes: 'Do you want to look what I'm doing?' If they say 'yes', then, yes [I show them].*

Interviewer: *Are there any things that you are looking up that you don't want your parents to see? Or communicating with others?*

Ade: *Yes. When I'm communicating, like on Facebook – not just Facebook, social networking – I don't want my mum to look at my business because that's my social network. And YouTube. I don't like my mum seeing the videos that I watch. Like if I'm watching cartoons, I don't want my mum to be watching it.*

Interviewer: *Why's that?*

Ade: *Because normally, my free time is when I use YouTube or Facebook. And I don't want my free time to be invaded by my parents or anyone, my brother or friend. Because it's my personal time and I will use that time by myself.*

Interviewer: *Right. So it's not particularly what you're communicating about or what you watching – in other words, not the content – it's the fact that it's personal.*

Ade: *Yes. And I like to be by myself at times.*

(boy, 11-13)

One specific form of intervention mentioned by children of all ages was the **more invasive monitoring whereby parents checked the histories of the websites that they had visited** (and sometimes the YouTube sites visited and games they might play, more so for younger children). **The older children in particular often resented this. Several mentioned the dilemma that they might not like it in principle, but if they protest against it, it looks as if they have something to hide – and, once again, they would lose the trust that they had built up.**

The 11- to 13-year-old UK girls below thought that their parents were more overprotective than they needed to be because the parents were 'out of their comfort zone' given the newness of the internet. They had mixed feelings about parental interventions, because sometimes they wanted their parents to support them, and they even understood that from a parent's perspective it can be a 'duty':

Interviewer: *Is this an issue, or are you quite happy for your parents to check?*

Rawan: *It's an issue because...you want your life to be private. Everybody butts in to your life, and that kind of gets annoying at times.*

Josie: *Yeah*

Shelley: *But at the same time, you don't want it to seem like you're hiding something, because you've done nothing wrong.*

Anabel: *Yeah.*

Shelley: *You're just talking to your friends and families, but obviously they might have heard from someone else that someone did this and that. And after they worry and they want to check your profile.*

Fahima: *Yes, but then sometimes it could be good, because sometimes if you're struggling...something's going on on Facebook, like you maybe added a friend that's trying to bully you. Your parents should see it, because if you keep quiet your parents don't bother to check about it, then...*

Rawan: *It's going to hurt you.*

Fahima: *It's going to hurt you or cause you problems. Yes. But a lot of times you do need your parents to see.*

Interviewer: *So, what you might call a mixed blessing, then, isn't it? All right. Would you say your parents get it right, or that they're more worried than you think they should be?*

Josie: *They're more worried than they should be.*

Rawan: *Yeah. But maybe they don't think they're worrying too much.*

Shelley: *Because they're parents, they probably have a duty to worry, as well.*

Interviewer: *Mm-hmm. What, because your parents' parents worried about them when they were young, so they've got to do it now?*

All: *Yeah. [nod agreement]*

(girls, 11-13)

**Older children aged 14-16 were generally even more articulate about wanting privacy from their parents** and not so much because they were doing anything dubious (or 'dodgy' in the discussion below), but **because interactions with peers were different in nature from interactions with parents, and these young people wanted to keep the two social worlds apart.**

Mary: *My dad only let me go on Facebook because I asked him about two months before, and he had to talk it over with my mum before he let me go on it. And he made sure he knew the password to it, even though I've changed it a couple of years later because he kept logging on and seeing what I was doing. So I was, like, sort of, under parental supervision. And then I don't... First rule of Facebook, I got told by everyone, was, never add your parents as your Friends, because then they'll see everything you're up to!*

Interviewer: *Are there things that you don't want them to see?*

Mary: *No, it's just like, it's a bit more private. It's you and your friends.*

Isadora: *Yes, because the way you act around your friends isn't always how you act around your parents, even if it's not anything that would be...*

Interviewer: *Dodgy.*

Isadora: *Yes, dodgy or anything like that. And still, you know, it's different to how you act around them.*

(girls, 14-16)

In fact, these **older children were not only thinking about their 'rights' to privacy from invasive checking, but also the moral issue from seeing parents increasingly as equals**, and, as Roland argues below, he would not check up on his mother.

Mathew: *When I was at home my dad occasionally takes my phone. I'm like 'okay'. [i.e., he was not happy about this] And then, like, he has a little flick around on it, check maybe even on the history I don't even know and then gives it back to me. And I was, like 'okay'.*

Interviewer: *He doesn't talk to you about that?*

Mathew: *No, he just takes it for a minute and then gives it back.*

Roland: *Yes, that's what my mom does, she kind of goes through my instant messaging to see who I've been talking to, what I've been talking about.*

Interviewer: *With you there or when you're not there?*

Roland: *Well, when I'm not there. She does do it sometimes when I'm in the house.*

David: *Because I don't want anyone checking my Twitter, like, what I'm saying to my friends or my text, what I'm saying.*

Jack: *There's a couple of things you say to your friends you would never dream about saying to your parents.*

Roland: *I think if my mum wants to see what I was writing, it's not that I'd be writing bad stuff, it's just I think it's an invasion of my privacy. Because I wouldn't ask my mum to see her text messages that she's sending to her friends. And I doubt she'd hand over her phone to let me see what she's talking about. So I don't see why she should do it to me.*

(boys, 14-16)

**Some of the young people went out of their way to conceal what they were doing. Sometimes that was indeed to conceal that they were not quite doing what parents wanted.** In the example below the boy concerned deleted histories, replacing them with more 'respectable' ones because he was playing games when his mother thought he should have been studying:

Interviewer: *Why [do you delete the history]?*

Huzaifah: *I just always do it. Say your mum says do your homework and then sometimes you go on games. And she will check your history. Sometimes I'm worried so I just delete my history.*

Interviewer: *And she doesn't say, why isn't there a history here, where's it gone?*

Huzaifah: *Not really, because I just search for a few things, then I'll go and do my homework.*

(boy, 11-13)

**But at other times, deleting histories when something came up accidentally was a way of avoiding the whole issue of whether they would be believed and having problematic interactions with parents.**

Josie: *It just looks like you did something wrong and stuff...these links that come up and they're bad links...it's good so you can clear them, because you don't want to get in trouble for what you've never done.*

(girl, 11-13)

Below, Ade notes that it is not just his parents he is worried about when he deletes histories, but the family's reputation:

Ade: *...it's better to delete the history [...] because if anything happens, they see it and they might think I'm actually purposely going on it, which I'm not. I might be in real trouble [...] I don't want bad things to turn up in the history just if anyone goes on it and presses it wrong, they will think that my family goes on bad stuff, just in case any other people used the history and see bad things.*

Interviewer: *But who's going to be in a position to do that?*

Ade: *No. If a cousin comes and the internet goes down and they want to go back on the history, I don't think it would be right for*

*them to see that bad things, and they will think my mum lets us do bad things or anything we want, and it would be a bad image on our family.*

Interviewer: *So your reputation's at stake here.*

Ade: *Yes. So it would just be better to delete the history.*

(boy, 11-13)

While younger children are often more accepting of parental monitoring and advice, and sometimes request it, a number of processes take place from the children's perspective. One is the feeling that they should be more independent, sometimes meaning they check in less with parents. Another is that they feel they have earned the right to trust. And a third is that in the process of becoming adults they have earned the right to degrees of privacy. That said, children can have mixed feelings, putting themselves in the position of the parents, and understanding their perspective. They can also face dilemmas about how to handle parental demands that they are uncomfortable with because this goes against how they think they should be treated as they get older. But it also means that sometimes they conceal things from parents if they think this is going to be problematic, especially if it threatens to undermine trust.



## 7. CONCLUSIONS

The value of a report such as this, even if based on a relatively modest number of interviews with children, lies in hearing their voices directly. Thus we have tried to capture just how children experience the online environment, including the clear risks of harm that adults (usually, parents and teachers) have often warned them about and also the more ambiguous or contextual risky situations that they must navigate online.

We have been most struck – and sought to convey here – that, on the one hand, children are indeed listening to adult advice but also, on the other hand, they are struggling to make sense of it. The touchstone against which they judge the advice they receive is whether or not it illuminates their own experience.

For example, if adults worry about online sexual content or swearing or rudeness while similar content is readily available and little noted offline, children are concerned at the discrepancy.

Similarly, if parents are seen to expect one rule for themselves and another for their children, then the children – seeking respect from and parity with their parents – can be critical.

Then, children face a host of minor yet troublesome daily irritations and worries regarding their online experiences on which adults rarely comment or advise. These include commercial, technical and interactional frustrations. Conversely, adults worry a good deal about rare albeit severe risks – by and large, it seems children have grasped these concerns loud and clear.

However, children may not seem to act wisely in risky situations – at least as adults see it – because for children it can be difficult to match the advice given and the online situation they face. Online situations are often ambiguous or confusing. Clear rights and wrongs are difficult to determine, and children can find adult advice to be more confusing than clarifying.

Moreover, the trickiest risks are posed not by strangers but by peers, complicating children's lives. For instance, it is striking that children are often concerned with the offline consequences of online interactions, finding it necessary to put right or repair their or others' peer relationships face to face because of something that got misinterpreted online.

Provided children are not given to think that their internet access might be either removed or intrusively monitored, it seemed to us that children are broadly accepting that their online activities will be subject to adult advice, supervision and support. For the most part, they even welcome this and it is particularly encouraging that the youngest children welcome adult support and intervention.

Perhaps if adults can intervene and guide children when they first go online – at ever younger ages – their advice will be accepted, children will learn to act wisely, and a positive dynamic can be established between child and adult that will stand them in good stead as they become teenagers deserving of greater privacy and independence.

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# ANNEX: EU KIDS ONLINE



## Overview

In its first phase (2006-09), as a thematic network of 21 countries, EU Kids Online identified and critically evaluated the findings of c.400 research studies, drawing substantive, methodological and policy-relevant conclusions. In its second phase (2009-11), as a knowledge enhancement project across 25 countries, the network surveyed children and parents to produce original, rigorous data on their internet use, risk experiences and safety mediation.

In its third phase (2011-14), the EU Kids Online network provided a focal point for timely findings and critical analyses of new media uses and associated risks among children across Europe, drawing on these to sustain an active dialogue with stakeholders about priority areas of concern for child online safety.

Specifically, the network widened its work by including all member states, by undertaking international comparisons with selected findings from countries outside the European Community, and extending its engagement – both proactively and responsively – with policy stakeholders and internet safety initiatives.

It deepened its work through new and targeted hypothesis testing of the pan-European dataset, focused on strengthening insights into both the risk environment and strategies of safety mediation, by testing innovative research methodologies for the nature, meaning and consequences of children's online risk experiences, and conducting longitudinal comparisons of findings where available over time.

Last, it updated its work through a rolling programme to maintain the online database of available findings, and by producing timely updates on the latest knowledge about new and emerging issues (e.g. social networking, mobile, privacy, personal data protection, awareness-raising in schools, digital literacy, geo-location services, etc.).

## Work packages

- WP1: Project management and evaluation
- WP2: European evidence base
- WP3: Hypotheses and comparisons
- WP4: Exploring children's understanding of risk
- WP5: Dissemination of project results

The present report is an output of WP4.

## WP4 objectives

- To identify and stimulate the use of innovative qualitative methods for exploring difficult contextual and ethical issues that arise when researching children's understandings of and responses to online risk.
- To explore the qualitative meanings of risk for children, drawing on innovative methods where possible.

## International Advisory Panel

- María José Cantarino, Corporate Responsibility Manager, Telefonica, Spain
- Kuno Sørensen, Save the Children Denmark, European NGO Alliance on Child Safety Online
- Professors David Finkelhor and Janis Wolak, Crimes against Children Research Center, University of New Hampshire, USA
- Lelia Green, ARC Centre of Excellence for Creative Industries and Innovation, Australia
- Natasha Jackson, FOSI and GSMA, UK
- Amanda Lenhart, Pew Internet & American Life Project, USA
- Janice Richardson, Project Manager at European Schoolnet, Coordinator of Insafe, Brussels, Belgium
- Michael Dreier, Project manager at the Outpatient Clinic for Behavioural Addictions Mainz, Germany