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From EU Kids Online III, KU Leuven, Belgium

New Study on Online Parental Controls from EU Kids Online:

Parenting issues will not be solved because 'there is an app for that'

A critical stance towards online parental controls is paramount as their functionalities cut both ways. Notwithstanding all good intentions, the use of parental controls has repercussions that not only involve opportunities with respect to children's safety, but also threats that affect the trust relationship between the parent and child.

Parental controls should not be conceived of as helicopter apps

In their [EU Kids Online research report](#), reviewing English language academic research on the topic of parental controls and children, Bieke Zaman and Marije Nouwen conclude that **the majority of today's parental controls are all about prevention**, focusing on avoiding risks and restricting behaviour. However, **(over-)controlling and (over)protective parenting** practices may come with the unfortunate by-product that children are likely to [miss out on online opportunities](#).

[A one-sided focus on protection by means of prevention may even be detrimental](#) to children's rights and wellbeing. Preventing online activities from happening may, for instance, impede children's right to benefit from online relationships, communications, explorations, information, etc. When restrictions are enforced by the parent without any explanation or negotiation, it is likely to worsen internal family dynamics. **Big brother-like 'spying' behaviour** through the use of parental controls may also involve the risk of revealing information about others.

Therefore, parental tools should **not** be conceived of as **helicopter apps** that serve the needs of parents who would like to 'hover' over their child wittingly or unwittingly at all costs. The **potential of parental controls lies beyond mere preventive and protective functions**. Since we can never fully protect children online, protective measures may include solutions that [help children build more resilience](#) to cope with the risk and harm they may encounter. Control and restrictive measures cannot achieve this goal.

How effective are parental controls?

As for the effectiveness of parental controls, Bieke Zaman and Marije Nouwen scrutinized the existing body of research to come to the conclusion that "We don't know whether parental controls really work! Previous research on the use of parental controls **has not yet reached a conclusive answer on their effectiveness** in reducing children's online risks."

The question of whether or not they work can never yield a black or white answer. If parents decide to install parental controls, they will not integrate them in a similar way in the mix of parental mediation strategies, which tend to be [complex, dynamic and often paradoxical](#) in nature. Parents' mediation practices depend on contextual demands, which evolve over time (see for example, the rapidly changing popularity of a particular content or device) and vary between locations (for example, more relaxed rules in the car or restaurant). Under certain circumstances, technologies serve as a substitute (for example, as a 'babysitter'), while under others they form the subject of parent-child interactions.

Recommendations:

Recommendations for parents:

- Avoid overprotective parenting
 - Parents should avoid over-controlling or overprotective parenting;
 - Parents may not conceive parental controls as helicopter apps for 'hovering' over their children wittingly or unwittingly at all costs;
 - Parents should be aware that punishments (for example, prohibiting adolescents' use of social media) do not teach children values or norms, and increase the likelihood of secret misbehaviour.
- Be aware of ethical challenges
 - Parents should discuss parental control settings with their child, as these settings will eventually affect children's future (online) activities and privacy;
 - Parents should be aware of the far reaching ethical consequences that the use of parental controls may present beyond the family unit. Monitoring children's online behaviour may disclose information about children's friends and other individuals.
- Parental controls as a communication starter
 - The use of parental controls should not be based on (c)overt control, but should focus on parental support and the creation of clear expectations instead;
 - Parental controls should be understood as facilitators of parent-child discussions on what entails appropriate and inappropriate content and behaviours;
 - Parents should be transparent in discussing their motives and intentions when using parental controls.

Recommendations for industry:

- Focus on digital literacy development in families with children
 - Industry and app developers should integrate parental controls with the existing, but fragmented, educational initiatives that are spread over various websites, brochures and workshops.
- Building resilience
 - Protective measures should also entail solutions that help children build resilience to cope with the harm and risks they may encounter.
- Facilitating opportunities
 - The next generation of parental controls should provide more than setting limits, and also support parents in processes of (mutual) learning and (joint) engagement.

For more information:

The report *“Parental controls: advice for parents, researchers and industry”* updates and deepens the understanding of online parental controls by providing an understanding of the functionalities of parental controls to guide families with children and adolescents to use them wisely. It provides a fine-grained analysis of the characteristics of technical mediation, to support parental mediation researchers in the development of up-to-date scales and analysis schemes. Finally, the report provides a substantial analysis of the potential for the design of the next generation of parental controls that may inspire industry.

The full report is available at <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/65388/>

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Information about the project and survey:

The EU Kids Online network has been funded by the EC Safer Internet Programme in three successive phases of work from 2006–14 to enhance knowledge of children’s and parents’ experiences and practices regarding risky and safer use of the internet and new online technologies.

As a major part of its activities, EU Kids Online conducted a face-to-face, in-home survey during 2010 of 25,000 9- to 16-year-old internet users and their parents in 25 countries, using a stratified random sample and self-completion methods for sensitive questions.

Now including researchers and stakeholders from **33 countries in Europe** and beyond, the network continues to analyse and update the evidence base to inform policy.

For all reports, findings and technical survey information, as well as full details of national partners, please visit **www.eukidsonline.net**

For more information on the **Belgian team in EU Kids Online**, we refer to <http://www.lse.ac.uk/media@lse/research/EUKidsOnline/ParticipatingCountries/belgium.aspx>

EU Kids Online: findings, methods, recommendations

Our overarching report is interactive – do explore it at www.eukidsonline.net. With links to all our updated findings and [reports](#) from 2011-2014 – it is a comprehensive resource for all our work. This includes our [YouTube playlist](#) (where you can hear from our researchers in multiple languages). For researchers and research users, there’s also our [European Evidence Database](#) of 1500+ studies, and our quantitative and qualitative [research toolkit](#) (with everything needed for those planning new research).

Stay in touch

EU Kids Online is now coordinated by Uwe Hasebrink and Claudia Lampert at the [Hans Bredow Institute for Media Research](#), Hamburg. Please stay in touch for updates. Visit www.eukidsonline.net for links to all our reports and project information. Join us on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#), and [email](#) us for updates. Do pass on this message to others interested in our work

For more findings, other reports and technical survey details are at www.eukidsonline.net