

## **Sensationalist media coverage skewing children's ability to assess online risk**

Sensationalist media coverage of online risks such as cyberbullying or the dangers of meeting an online 'friend' offline, may be acting as a barrier to effectively educating children on e-safety, a new report has claimed.

The report, released today (Monday 2 June) from the EU Kids Online project based at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), explores how children between the ages of 9-16 across Europe experience the internet.

The findings reveal that children are strongly influenced by the media's often sensationalist reporting of certain online risks, despite the fact that these are in reality less likely to be experienced by the majority of online users.

This can lead to them focusing more attention on these potential risks than those they are more likely to experience, such as exposure to violent or sexual content, which is in reality a more common online problem reported by children, or witnessing or receiving nasty messages.

E-safety education, the researchers recommend, should therefore incorporate the need to educate children on the drawbacks of some media coverage as well as warning about potential online dangers.

Dr Leslie Haddon, a visiting lecturer at LSE and one of the report's authors, said: "We believe that most of the current prevention programmes are too narrowly focused on issues such as personal data protection and the dangers of meeting online strangers offline whereas children are in reality, more likely to have to deal with nasty messages. Children need a more thorough and broader education about the online world to help them to evaluate better and deal with the broad assortment of problematic situations they may encounter."

The research also shows how children's perceptions of online interactions can differ from adults. This is especially the case with online bullying, with children reporting the online aggression they have experienced as something that 'just happens' rather than viewing it as cyberbullying. This can lead to children disengaging or minimising their problems with this online behaviour, which can have the result of normalising peer aggression.

Professor Sonia Livingstone who heads the EU Kids Online project at LSE said: "It's important to help children to understand how 'just teasing' can escalate into serious harmful incidents. Once they see how online communication can make things worse, children should be motivated to take preventive measures to neutralise aggressive exchanges before they get out of hand."

For the full report, *Meaning of online problematic situations for children. Results of qualitative cross-cultural investigation in nine European countries* edited by David Šmahel and Michelle F Wright, see the EU Kids Online project.  
<http://www.lse.ac.uk/media@lse/research/EUKidsOnline/EU%20Kids%20III/Reports/D4.2MeaningsReport.pdf>

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### Information about the project and survey:

- **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. The project is funded by the EC Safer Internet Programme (SI-2010-TN-4201001).
- **In this report, the findings of EU Kids Online III qualitative research are presented. The research included children aged 9-16 years who used the Internet at weekly.** The children were from nine European countries: Belgium, the Czech Republic, Greece, Italy, Malta, Portugal, Romania, Spain, and the United Kingdom, and included 56 focus groups and 114 interviews.
- **This qualitative research focused on the following questions:** what children perceive as being potentially negative or problematic while using the Internet, what risks children are aware of when using the Internet, what consequences might online negative experiences have, how children react to negative experiences, what children do to avoid or prevent these problematic experiences, and why children perceive certain situations as negative.
- **Countries included in the project are:** Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey and the UK. In addition the project includes research teams from Australia and the US
- **For more findings,** other reports and technical survey details see [www.eukidsonline.net](http://www.eukidsonline.net).

### Quotes from children

- *I was on one of those online games. And there's a chat that allows you to speak with everyone else in the game. And I was speaking, I don't remember what, I was a beginner and I asked different things and they offended me; and I told them to cut it out. And it got even worse, but I don't understand why they got mad, for something silly. He said, 'Just wait, I'll find you and beat you up,' and stuff like that. (boy, 15–16, Romania)*
- *I can use the internet as long as I don't upload any photos, and that, because later the kidnapers may chat with me... My parents have already told me, not to chat with people I don't know. They don't want me to talk to unknown people in case they are kidnapers and they want to meet me face-to-face... I've seen lots of cases. But I don't mind, since it's like it won't happen to me... They show cases on the television, people who have started chatting to somebody, then they have met up and been killed. (boy, 11–13, Spain)*

- *You have to be careful because, not that there are so many people but... But kidnappers or paedophiles or so... But I know, I heard about this story from a friend of mine, and his friends. They were with a group of friends, and they once pretended to be a little girl. And someone responded to this, but apparently it was a paedophile, and he responded to their posts. And then they arranged a meeting, but the police was hidden at that place. (boy, 15, Belgium)*

- *Girl: And there are people who can cause harm with some photos that they post, who are not aware of what can be done with those photos. People don't realize.*

*Interviewer: When you say that harm can be done, do you mean deliberately, or...?*

*Girl: Yes, Older people who pretend to be your age and may use some photos to cause you harm. Like I have heard a few times on the television, some paedophile has taken photos from the internet or has asked people for photos of them in their underwear and has used these photos to harm that person (girl, 15, Spain)*

- *Girl: Yes, my dad knows my Messenger and Facebook passwords. He sometimes checks to see if I've spoken with strangers after the cases they've heard of...*

*Researcher: What cases? What do you mean?*

*Girl: On the TV, someone killed a girl from Facebook and he checks every now and again.*

*(girl, 12, Romania)*

- *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, UK)*

- *When I was nine years old, I was Googling for animal pictures... anyway, there was a pop-up. [It was a naked girl, moving here and there], and because I was too young, I was shocked and called my dad [laughter]... Well, I was very young and didn't know about such stuff, I was younger, at first grade of primary school. I haven't seen a naked body before and it felt weird. My dad was close by, and I couldn't pretend nothing had happened... (boy, 16, Greece)*

- *There's a page on Facebook called 'you bastard sex maniacs', not it's 'I hate those bastard sex maniacs', where people who receive messages from individuals with a by-end, and with a mental disorder in my opinion, so they take a screenshot of the conversation and post it on this page, and sometimes you really see scary conversations, they make me feel anxious, it is really sex maniacs that harass young girls. These are the things that scary me. I mean, if it happened to me... (girl, 14–16, Italy)*

- *Interviewer: And what did your other classmates do? The ones you were more intimate with...*

*Girl: They were scared too. They supported me when we were not at school, when we were at my place or out, but at school they were afraid of being mocked too.*

*(girl, 14–16, Italy)*

- *Girl 1: 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?*

*Girl 1: No, it's just like, it's a bit more private. It's you and your friends.*

*Girl 2: 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.*

*Girl 2: Yes, dodgy or anything like that. And still, you know, it's different to how you act around them.*

*(girls, 14–16, UK)*