Older children with emotional problems and high levels of sensation seeking are most at risk of excessive internet use.

Older children with emotional problems and those who have high levels of sensation seeking are most at risk of developing of excessive internet use a new report by EU Kids Online has found.

Parents with concerns over their children's internet use, however, should not simply focus on how much time a child is spending online, but ask whether the child is displaying one or more of the five signs of excessive use which could indicate a problem: not sleeping or eating; feeling bothered when they cannot go online; not doing schoolwork or socialising because of the time spent online; unsuccessfully trying to spend less time online; and surfing despite not being interested in doing so. A child experiencing all five of these signs could be at risk of internet addiction.

Researchers from the EU Kids Online project, based at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), surveyed children aged 11-16 across the EU to find out how often they experienced these five signs of excessive internet use. Their research reveals that only 1% of European children experience all five of the signs listed above. However, it was the older children who had emotional problems or high levels of sensation seeking who were most at risk of displaying several of these indications of excessive use.

Although the majority of children are managing the internet well, children who identify themselves as having experienced several of the above signs of excessive use are still of some concern. This could also indicate that they face a range of psychological and emotional challenges which may contribute to this online and offline behaviour.

The percentage of children who say they have experienced at least one of the signs related to excessive internet use ranges from 17% in Italy to 49% in Estonia. In the UK, 40% of children have experienced at least one of the signs of concern. Children in Cyprus are most likely to experience all five of the indicators measured, with 5% of children saying they had experienced all five excessive use indicators.

Of the five signs of excessive use, children were most likely to report that they caught themselves surfing when they were not really interested – 42% experienced this at some time. Children were least likely to say that they have gone without eating or sleeping because of the internet – only 17% across Europe experienced this.

LSE Professor Sonia Livingstone, who is responsible for the survey, indicated where the UK was positioned in these findings: "The UK is in the top five European countries where children are experiencing several signs of excessive use of the internet. It's time for some soul-searching on why this is – do British children lack other things to do? Can we give them more freedom to visit friends?

"As the report notes, it is important for parents to talk to their teens about internet use – not because they are 'addicted' (which generally they are not), but because signs of excessive use can be linked to other, online and offline, problems. It's not just about an issue of the attractiveness of the internet itself."

Excessive use and 'internet addiction': What should parents do?

In terms of preventing excessive internet use, EU Kids Online recommends that parents become actively involved in their child's online activities through support and discussion,

especially, but not only, when a child has been bothered by something online. Commenting on the report, the main author Dr David Smahel, said: "When these matters are addressed directly, though parents talking and communicating openly about these issues, it is more likely to mean that time spent online, and the development of digital skills, will help the child move towards a healthy use of the internet as they get older"

The research suggests that protective strategies start offline and at an early age, taking notice when children display relevant psychological characteristics such as sensation-seeking and emotional problems.

It is important to note that restricting the time young people spend online is not the best way to deal with excessive internet use since it ignores the causes of this behaviour.

If the child already experiences pathological excessive internet use, demonstrated by displaying all of the behavioural components identified earlier, the report recommends that parents ask for help from relevant professionals, such as clinical or educational psychologists, or school counsellors, who can help to solve the associated offline problems the child is likely to experience.

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For more information:

The report *"Excessive Internet Use among European Children"* surveys European children's risk of excessive Internet use, and the national differences that exist. The study is an in-depth analysis of 19,834 European 11-16 year olds in 25 European countries who have one or more indicators of excessive use.

For the full report, *Excessive Internet Use among European Children* by David Smahel, Ellen Helsper, Lelia Green, Veronika Kalmus, Lukas Blinka and Kjartan Ólafsson, see http://www2.lse.ac.uk/media@lse/research/EUKidsOnline/EU%20Kids%20III/Reports/ExcessiveUse.pdf

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or see www.eukidsonline.net

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).

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

Countries included in the survey are: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Turkey and the UK. In addition the project includes research teams from Croatia, Iceland, Latvia, Luxembourg, Malta, Russia, Slovakia and Switzerland.

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For more findings, see Livingstone, S., Haddon, L., Görzig, A., and Ólafsson, K. (2011). *Risks and safety on the internet: The perspective of European children. Full findings.* LSE, London: EU Kids Online. Other reports and technical survey details are at www.eukidsonline.net