

Sexting, cyberbullying and when online and offline worlds clash – children's online experiences in their own words

Children are taking on board parental advice about using the internet but often struggle to make sense of it, meaning they still may act unwisely when confronted with a risky situation finds an LSE report, published this week.

The report by Dr Leslie Haddon and Professor Sonia Livingstone of EU Kids Online, captures how children aged 9-16 across the UK experience the online environment in their own words. Children were asked about a range of issues in a series of focus groups and individual interviews, including sexual content, sexting, bad language, cyberbullying, strangers, excessive use and e-safety.

The researchers find that children are listening to adult advice, and indeed tend to welcome parental support, but this does not always mean that the advice is followed through. While children have learned that parents are fearful of the notion of meeting strangers online, for example, a number of them had still been in touch with someone they had not met offline.

The hypocrisies between the online and offline world also do not go unnoticed by children.

“Children have learnt to call sexual content ‘inappropriate’ following warnings from their parents and often expressed concern that younger siblings should be protected from sexual content” the researchers state. “However, even the youngest interviewed were aware that similar images often existed to sell products and could be seen in the press and elsewhere in their daily environment offline. They therefore found it puzzling that online sexual images generated such strong warnings from parents.”

This confusion was also raised when discussing parental concerns over bad language, with children questioning why bad language was a focus of parental anxiety about the internet when swearing could commonly be heard offline.

There are a whole set of practices related to the internet that would not usually be termed ‘risks’ parents but which were of concern to children. This may mean that there is a gap between the advice that parents are giving, and the issues that children really need help with managing.

The trickiest online risks for children, for example, are posed not by strangers but by peers, the report argues. Furthermore, while cyberbullying and online aggression do trouble children, many of the online concerns raised might not be classified as risks in adult terms, for example issues of drama and rumour, where communications inappropriately distort or share information.

“While social drama always exists among young people (as well as adults)” the report says, “it can be amplified when online.” This can lead to increased anxiety, with children feeling they need to repair interactions offline because of what has taken place online.

“Provided children are not given to think that their internet access might be either removed or intrusively monitored, it seemed to us that they are broadly accepting that their online activities will be subject to adult advice, supervision and support” the authors write. “It is particularly encouraging that the youngest children welcome adult support and intervention. This indicates that if adults intervene and guide children

when they first go online, their advice will be more accepted as children age, rather than if first offered to them as teenagers.”

To read the full report, see

<http://www.lse.ac.uk/media@lse/research/EUKidsOnline/EU%20Kids%20III/Reports/UKQualitativeReportEUKidsOnline2.pdf>

Ends

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