Cyberbullying now more common than face-to-face bullying for children

Cyberbullying and exposure to online sites with negative content such as messages of hate or self-harm is a growing problem for the UK's children, according to a new report from the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE)

The report from EU Kids Online, a research programme based at LSE, examines how the UK's children are using the internet and digital communications and updates the findings of a 2010 EU Kids Online survey with the results of a new 2013-14 survey conducted by Net Children Go Mobile.

The research reveals that cyberbullying now more common than face-to-face bullying, with children also reporting a sharp rise in exposure to potentially negative forms of content such as self-harm sites and hate messages.

- In 2010, 16 per cent of children reported being bullied face to face, 8 per cent on the internet and 5 per cent via mobile phone. By 2013, this ratio had reversed, making cyberbullying (12 per cent) more common than face-to-face bullying (9 per cent) – most cyberbullying occurs on SNSs.
- Twenty-nine per cent of 11- to 16-year-olds had seen one or more of the potentially negative forms of user-generated content (UGC) asked about, with hate messages (23 per cent) being the most common, followed by self-harm sites (17 per cent). Such exposure represented a sharp increase on 2010, and was more common among teens, especially 15- to 16-year-olds.

One-third of children using smartphones are also found to be not technically savvy enough to deactivate functions that could leave them at risk of displaying their personal whereabouts, paying for unwanted pop-ups, or choosing the wrong apps – with younger girls particularly lacking the skill to use their personal devices effectively.

There have, however, also been successful changes in how children experience the internet, over the past few years.

- UK children aged 11-16 report receiving fewer sexual messages (4 per cent) than the European average (11 per cent). This represents a notable decrease since 2010 (when the figure was 12 per cent).
- Seventeen per cent of children aged 9-16 said that have been in contact online with someone they hadn't previously met offline, but just 3 per cent of children said they had been to meet such a person face to face. This represents a reduction from 2010, when 27 per cent were in contact with people online that they hadn't met face to face, and 5 per cent had met such a person offline.
- Seventeen per cent of UK children aged 9-16 reported seeing sexual images in the past year, online or offline – a reduction from 24 per cent in 2010. This is more common among teenagers, and girls, who are also more likely to report being upset, or even very upset by this.

Professor Sonia Livingstone, lead researcher at EU Kids Online and a professor at LSE, said: "In just a few years, UK children have shifted from accessing the internet via a desktop computer to accessing it primarily via a smartphone or laptop. This demands an equally profound shift in how their internet safety is to be managed. Parental or teacher supervision is becoming ever harder and the online options open to children will only continue to grow.

"Children must be educated to become competent and resilient digital citizens and this education should link technical competence in managing online interfaces with personal, social and sexual education so that children are empowered to respond constructively – with critical literacy and moral responsibility – to the online risk of harm."

Notes to editors:

Read the full report here.

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