

Internet: are European children at risk?

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The risks encountered by young people on the Internet are less significant than is often believed. This has been demonstrated by the EU Kids Online survey, conducted in 25 European countries by a research network led by the London School of Economics, including a French team headed by Dominique Pasquier of the Laboratoire traitement et communication de l'information. The survey, funded by the European Commission, shows that only a small minority of youngsters is confronted with problems on the Internet, and that very few of these children say they have been upset as a result. The relations between parents and children with respect to the Internet seem to be more harmonious than they are with regard to television. However, about half of those parents whose children have encountered problems online were not aware of them. The results of this survey, carried out in 2010 among 25,140 European Internet users aged 9–16, along with their parents, were disclosed on January 13, 2011.

The survey was carried out in the participants' homes between May and August 2010, using a sample of 25,140 [Internet](#) users aged 9–16 (in France, this represents 87% of 9–16 year olds), and one of their parents. Its main findings are as follows.

Internet usage and behavior of 9–16 year olds

The Internet is part of children's daily lives: 93% of 9–16 year olds surf the web at least once a week, and 60% connect to the Internet daily or almost daily. They spend on average an hour and a half online every day; 50% say they " find it easier to be themselves" online than in face-to-

face relationships (this is true of slightly more boys than girls, and slightly more children from low than high socioeconomic status (SES), with 13–14 year olds making up the highest percentage). Children go online at an increasingly young age: the average age at which a child first uses the Internet is 7 in Denmark and Sweden, compared to 8 in several other Northern [European countries](#). In France, 9 is the average age of first web use.

87% of European children use the Internet at home, 63% at school, 53% with friends, and 42% with other family members. At home, 49% connect in their bedroom, compared to 39% in a shared space. In France, use in the bedroom (41%) is below the European average, while a large majority of young Danes (74%) log in from their room.

A majority of children take part in social networks and participation increases with age: while 59% of 9–16 year olds have a profile on a social network; this percentage rises from 26% of 9–10 year olds to 81% of 15–16 year olds. Their profiles are public in 26% of cases. Girls are more likely to have a private profile. Youngsters communicate overwhelmingly with people they already know or who have connections with people they know. Only 25% of children are involved in online communications with strangers, especially through chats, games, or virtual worlds.

Internet dangers: clarifications

The two problems most frequently encountered by children are access to unhealthy content and excessive use of the Internet. The survey reveals that 21% of 11–16 year olds have been confronted with unhealthy content online: hate messages directed against certain groups (12%), pro-anorexia content (10% on average, but 19% of girls aged 14–16), encouragement to self-mutilation (7%), drug-taking (7%), or suicide (5%). However, France is the EU country least affected by this problem,

reported by 14% of young French people compared to 21% of all Europeans and 43% of Czechs and Norwegians. The survey found 23% of 11–16 year olds reporting negative experiences related to excessive use of the Internet, such as neglecting their friends, lack of sleep, or problems at school.

The study also shows that what adults identify as a problem is not necessarily seen as such by their children. For example, 14% of young people had seen sexual images on the Internet, but only one third considered this experience uncomfortable. 15% had received sexual messages, but only a quarter said they found these upsetting. 9% of children had a face-to-face encounter with someone they met on the Internet, and only one in eight found this a disturbing experience. In 53% of these encounters with strangers, the child took a friend along. The children who reported being made uncomfortable by a problem on the Internet are a small minority: only 8% of 9–16 year olds in France and 12% in Europe as a whole.

In contrast, being harassed by hurtful or nasty messages on the Internet, while rare, causes more pain. 6% of 9–16 year olds have received nasty or hurtful messages (and 3% say they have sent such messages themselves). Two thirds of recipients said they felt "somewhat" or "very" bothered. The percentage of those who say they were upset by online harassment is significantly higher among girls and lower SES children. But the upset does not last very long: 62% of children forget about it straight away, and only 2% still think about it several months later. Furthermore, face-to-face harassment is more common (13% of children) than it is on the Internet (6% of children) or through mobile phones (3%). Online bullying takes place primarily in social networks and instant messaging. Boys, especially adolescents, are more exposed to sexual images online (3), while girls tend to receive more nasty or hurtful messages. However, girls are generally more likely to be upset by the problems they encounter. Adolescents take more risks than younger

children, but claim to be less upset by them.

Parents and children

There is little conflict between parents and children regarding the Internet, and what they say is much more in agreement than in surveys on television use, where children's accounts can differ greatly from their parents'. The use of technical mediation for parental control is relatively low: only a quarter of parents block or filter out certain sites (28%) or monitor the history of sites visited by their children (24%). Parents especially restrict personal data disclosure (85%) and downloading (57%). Most parents (70%) say they talk with their children about what they do online. More than half (56%) give their children advice on how to interact with others online, or discuss things that might worry them (52%). A third of parents have helped their children when something went wrong (36%). Two thirds of children (68%) think their parents know "a lot" or "quite a lot" about their Internet use. Less than half (44%) believe that mediation by their parents restricts their online activities, and only 13% would want their parents to be less involved. But while three quarters of parents think it is "not very likely" or "not at all likely" that something bad will happen to their children on the Internet over the next six months, many were actually not aware of problems that had in fact arisen: 40% of parents of children who had seen sexual images were convinced that this had not happened. 52% of parents whose children had received sexual messages and 56% of those whose children had been sent bullying messages did not find out about it. The same was true for 61% of [parents](#) whose children had face-to-face encounters with someone they met on the Internet. Parental underestimation of problems is therefore substantial.

Other sources of advice

Teachers play an important advisory role, especially in the case of older teenagers and lower SES children. But there are significant differences between countries, the two extremes being 97% of teachers involved in Norway and 65% in Italy (in France, this percentage is 76%). Three quarters of children (73%) say that their peers help them with the Internet, most of the time by providing practical assistance, and that they are the ones they first turn to if they have problems. Information from the mass media (television, radio, newspapers, cinema, advertising) is little used (20% of [children](#)) and online safety advice even less so.

More information: More information on the EU Kids Online Survey: www2.cnrs.fr/sites/en/fichier/rapport_english.pdf

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