

Toddlers rush online—to unknown risks

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Over the last six years there has been a major increase in online activity by children up to eight years old, a leading international internet survey has found.

The trend has prompted growing concern for children's safety – and especially the risks they may be exposed to through videos, apps and touch-screens, says the EU Kids Online Report, to which Australia contributes through the ARC Centre of Excellence for Creative Industries and Innovation (CCI).

"Children under nine years old now enjoy a variety of online activities, including watching videos, [playing games](#), searching for information, doing their homework and [socialising](#) within children's virtual worlds. The range of activities increases with age," explains Dr Donell Holloway, an associate investigator with CCI at Edith Cowan University.

"Results from previous AU Kids Online research show that, compared to children in other countries, Aussie kids are early adopters of new digital technologies—so the findings of this report probably apply here".

"However there is a lack of [survey data](#) about how children under nine are using the internet in Australia, on the benefits and risks – which we need to overcome quite urgently."

The report says it has not been established that children under nine years old have the capacity to engage with internet in a safe and beneficial manner in all circumstances, especially when it comes to this age group

socialising online, either within age-appropriate virtual worlds or as under-aged participants in sites intended for teenagers and adults (such as Facebook, You Tube etc.).

"Video sharing sites are popular with children in this age group and are one of the first sites very young children visit. As such, the ease at which children can access inappropriate [video content](#) is of concern," Dr Holloway says. "The widespread availability of touch-screen devices nowadays means that very young children can access and use the internet far more easily.

The report finds there is an emerging trend among very young children (toddlers and pre-schoolers) using internet connected devices, especially touchscreen tablets and smartphones. This is likely to result in an increasing number of very young children having access to the internet, along with a probable increase in exposure to risks associated with such internet use.

"The variety of internet connected devices and apps available today risks compromising the privacy and safety of young children," Dr Holloway cautions.

"Different operating environments complicate the use of security and safety settings on individual devices, and the numerous applications (apps) available for children tend not to disclose the company's data collection and sharing practices. Nor do they usually provide easy-to-use opt-out options for parents or children.

An emerging concern is that children often appear on the internet from a very early age, without knowing it and without their consent – courtesy of proud parents and family.

"Children's digital footprints are now taking shape from very young

ages," the study cautions.

"Some parents are writing blogs, and parents and grandparents regularly post photographs and videos of babies and children.

"These digital footprints are created for children who are too young to understand or consent (or who may not even be born, if their parents post ultrasound scans).

"Children's future ability to find, reclaim or delete material posted by others is uncertain," the study warns.

The EU Kids Online report makes several recommendations, including:

- The development and promotion of realistic, evidence-based guidelines to help parents guide very [young children](#)'s engagement with digital technologies and the internet.
- The development and promotion of age-appropriate internet safety education for all [age groups](#)—including pre-primary school and kindergarten
- Engagement of device manufacturers, internet service providers, content providers, games developers etc to include safety features and privacy protection for very young users
- Education for parent regarding posts, pictures and videos of their children, and their potential effect on their [children](#)'s digital footprint.

Dr Holloway says that these recommendations apply equally in Australia as in EU countries, and should be taken into account by the IT industry, government and parents here.

More information: www.cci.edu.au/reports/ZerotoEight.pdf

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