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Risks and safety for children on the internet: the Ireland report

SUMMARY FINDINGS

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Initial findings from the *EU Kids Online* survey of 9-16 year olds and their parents

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SUMMARY FINDINGS

Children in Ireland going online

Children and young people in Ireland, as shown throughout the *EU Kids Online* survey, in many respects are among the leaders in most aspects on internet use compared to their counterparts from across Europe. Use of the internet at home among Irish children is well above the European average (87% vs. 62%). Access via school or college is much the same (66% vs. 63%). Using the internet 'when out and about' is also higher for children in Ireland than in Europe generally (20% vs. 9%) reflecting the growing popularity of mobile internet access through smartphones, laptops and other handheld devices.

Yet, this diversification of internet use nor its privatisation has not quite reached the levels experienced elsewhere. As revealed in this survey, fewer children in Ireland access the internet from their own room compared to the European average (37% vs. 49%). Other means of access, such as using internet cafés (IE 9% vs EU 12%) or public libraries (IE 14% vs. EU 12%) for internet access are relatively similar.

In some other respects, it is interesting to see that children in Ireland lag somewhat behind their European counterparts. 53% of children use the internet daily or nearly daily. This rises to nearly three quarters of 15-16 year olds. But this is somewhat behind the European average of 60% and well below the high figures of 80% daily use reached among Northern European and Scandinavian countries. Similarly in relation to time spent online, Ireland lies below European norms. Irish children spend just over one hour per day online (61 minutes). In the United Kingdom, by contrast, children spend about 50% more time online (99 minutes per day on average). Such patterns are a good indication of the general embeddedness of the internet in daily life which in the Irish context is well established. But as internet penetration grows, children will undoubtedly spend more time online and close the gap on to those northern European countries where daily ubiquitous internet use is now a fact of life.

Curiously, even though Irish children are not amongst the heaviest users of the internet in Europe, they are among the highest when it comes to declaring some concern in relation to excessive use of the internet. 43% of Irish children compared to 30% in Europe generally have suggested that their internet use has been at the expense of some other aspect of social or family life and which they regret. While it is debateable as to whether this amounts to internet addiction, the findings do pose some issues of concern for parents, educators and policy makers.

Another aspect that gives rise to concern is the fact that a large majority of children in Ireland (67%) believe that there are things that will bother their age group. 11% of children, rising to 16% of 15-16 year olds have themselves been bothered or have had a negative experience of something online.

Despite high usage even among children, there is still plenty of scope for adults – parents, teachers, and so on – to teach and guide children's internet use. When asked about a general range of skills related to going online, children in Ireland say they have four of the eight skills asked about. This compares to the European average of 5.7. Most 11-16 year olds can bookmark a website (66%), block messages from someone they do not wish to be in contact with (64%) or find safety information online (64%). Over half can change privacy settings on a social networking profile (58%), block junk mail and spam (49%). Less than half (43%) can delete their history on an internet browser. Only 42% say they compare websites to judge the quality of information. Less than a quarter can change filter preferences (21%).

Risk factors and Irish children

A summary of online risk factors experienced by children aged 9-16 in Ireland is presented in Table 30. This brings together the different forms of content or contact encountered by children that may also lead to risk of harm. Note that this does not itself suggest that harm arises from such experience or that children are not able

to cope with risks or problematic content they come across. More detailed analysis of children’s responses to risks and coping strategies is presented in the full European report. Given the smaller numbers involved, detailed analysis is not possible for the individual country report.

Table 30: Summary of online risk factors encountered by children in Ireland

% who have...	Age Group				All
	9-10	11-12	13-14	15-16	
Ever had contact on the internet with someone not met face to face before	11	18	32	43	28
Have come across one or more types of potentially harmful user-generated content in past 12 months	n.a.	12	21	42	25
Have experienced one or more types of misuse of personal data in past 12 months	n.a.	10	12	15	12
Seen sexual images on websites in past 12 months	1	6	9	29	11
Seen or received sexual messages on the internet in past 12 months	n.a.	3	7	21	11
Ever gone on to meet anyone face to face that first met on the internet	2	1	4	10	4
Have been sent nasty or hurtful messages on the internet in past 12 months	1	2	5	8	4
Encountered one or more of the above	8	35	47	63	39

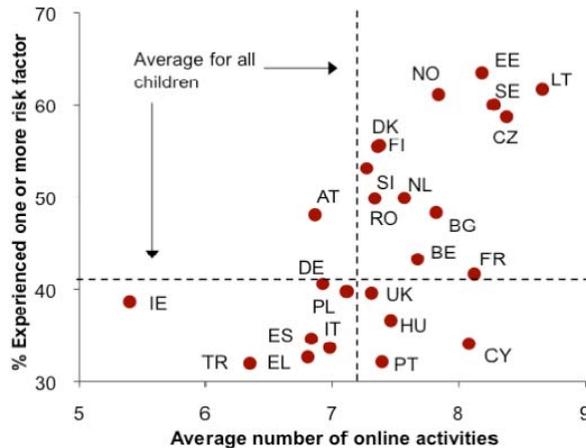
- Having contact online with someone they have not met face to face before is the most common of the risk factors encountered (28% of all children; 43% of older teenagers). The nature of such contacts remains to be determined and may reflect the growing use of online communication as a social medium used for making new friends and contacts. The extent to which this risk may lead to harm needs to be carefully assessed by policy makers.
- Coming across harmful user generated content is the next most common risk, encountered by a quarter of all children and 42% of older teenagers. Again, this is not to suggest that children are not able to cope with coming across such content but educators and awareness raisers need to be vigilant regarding the range of harmful content online. The need for positive content is also an important implication.
- Personal data misuse is the third most prevalent risk encountered by children and has been experienced by 12% of children overall and by 15% of older teenagers.
- 11% of children have seen sexual images online (29% of older teenagers). 11% have also seen or received sexual messages on the internet (21% of older teenagers).
- 4% have had face to face meetings with contacts they first met online, mostly teenagers including 10% of 15-16 year olds.

Regarding other forms of risk, such as behaviour where the child is an actor rather than a passive recipient, 2% of children have acted in a hurtful nasty way towards others (6% of older teenagers), and 3% have posted or sent a sexual message in the past 12 months (5% of older teenagers).

This overall experience of risk is placed in a European context in Figure 35 which sets out average risk factors by average number of online activities for all countries included in the survey.

Table 30 shows that:

Figure 35: Children who have encountered one or more online risk factors by average number of online activities, by country



In this graph, Ireland is placed in the bottom left quadrant with a relatively low average number of online activities (for a country of reasonably high usage) and a relatively low experience of risk (39%). There is much to be further explored here but it does provide an overall impression that children’s internet use is less adventurous and consequently safer, or more conservative, than other European countries. This finding is supported by the fact that forms of restrictive mediation, the setting of rules and restrictions, regarding internet use were found to be highest in Ireland for all European countries.

There is, as further explained and argued in the full European report, a clear association between opportunities and risks and which is evident in all the countries studied: the more use (daily use, amount of time spent online), the more opportunities but also the more risks. For a range of Northern European countries – including Scandinavian countries and the Baltic states, it is clear that with very high usage, there is also much greater experience of the range of risk factors studied in the report. But with high use, there are also greater skills and coping strategies and there is no evidence in the European report of greater use leading to greater harm.

Risk and safety on the internet

One of the features to emerge strongly from the *EU Kids Online* survey is that parents overall do take an active interest in their children’s internet safety. The vast majority of parents (91%) mediate their children’s internet use in some way. This is above the European average of 87%. Most parents (72%) stay close or watch their children when using the internet, particularly in the case of younger children. Many parents also talk to their children about what they do online (67% overall and over 75% for younger children).

Irish parents are also active in promoting internet safety: 72% have explained to their children why certain websites are good or bad and have suggested ways to use the internet safely. A majority of parents also take positive steps such as suggesting how to behave towards others online (62%) and talking about things that might bother the child (64%). Many parents have also helped their child when something arose in the past (39%).

This high level of parental mediation is reflected most particularly in the setting of rules regarding internet use. Restrictive mediation, in this sense, is in fact the highest in Europe and 91% of children say that restrictions of some form apply to their internet use. A similar number report that such restrictions apply also in a school setting. Teachers are also a very important source of internet safety and 68% of children have received information about using the internet safely from school. Children in the secondary school cycle receive most support from their teachers. Clearly, with ever younger children going online, there is an urgent need to address internet safety more directly at primary school level. It is also clear that the school is pivotal as a source of internet safety advice: when asked where they would like to get more advice from, the child’s school is the most popular choice for parents (52%). Traditional media, government and ISP sources also feature (30% to 34%). Only 5% of parents say that they don’t want further information on internet safety.