

Blessing and curse at the same time

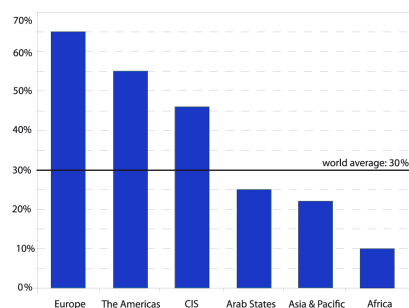
Children and the World Wide Web

How do children use the Internet and what risks are they exposed to? This article centres upon international surveys focussing on children's experiences with the Internet.

Evolution of the Internet

Since researchers started tracking Internet statistics in 1995, the number of users has risen from a handful of computer scientists to 2.1 billion users worldwide in 2010.

According to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), the leading United Nations agency for information and communication technology issues worldwide, 1 person in 3 is an Internet user (cf. ill. 1).



Ill. 1: Internet users per 100 inhabitants 2010

Children, youth, and the Internet

In the developed countries, the Internet has found its way into the children's rooms. EU Kids Online (2011), for example, a recent representative survey among 9- to 16-year-olds in 25 European countries, revealed that the average age of children first using the Internet is 9 – forerunners are

Sweden and Denmark with an average age of 7.

In Europe and the US, the Internet has become an integral part of children's everyday lives: about 60 % of all kids go online every or almost every day (EU Kids Online, 2011; Pew, 2010). The average time that Europe's youth spends on the Internet is roughly 1.5 hours a day (with time augmenting with increasing age).

Kaiser Family Foundation and EU Kids Online found out that the majority of children go online at home; the second most frequent location is school. At home, almost half of all European children (49 %) and over one third of US-American kids (33 %) have Internet access in their own bedroom, which means that they use the Internet without any adult supervision.

Internet activities among youth

EU Kids Online found out that the majority of 9- to 16-year-olds use the Internet for school work (85 %). Regarding other activities, both EU Kids Online and Kaiser Family Foundation discovered that Internet activities depend, to a great extent, on age and gender. Among European kids, for example, social network sites, instant messaging, downloading music or films, and e-mailing are much more common activities among 13- to 16-year-olds than among younger kids (cf. table 1). By tendency, boys of all age groups are more inclined to play Internet games and create avatars than girls.

Risks and harm

The Internet does not only offer an immeasurable treasury of information, it also exposes young users to inappropriate content and risks (cf. table 2). According to EU Kids Online, misuse of personal data has been experienced by roughly one-tenth of the children surveyed, with the most common form being someone using their password or pretending to be them, followed by someone misusing personal information revealed on the Internet. Furthermore, 14 % of all European 9- to 16-year-olds have seen pornographic material and sexual images on the Internet, most

% who have	9-12 year old		13-16 year old		all
	boys	girls	boys	girls	
Used the Internet for school work	79	82	87	90	85
Played Internet games on their own or against the computer	86	84	88	71	83
Watched video clips	66	64	87	85	76
Visited social networking profiles	40	42	80	81	62
Used instant messaging	43	47	76	77	62
Sent/received emails	42	47	74	76	61
Read/watched the news on the Internet	38	36	60	57	48
Played games with other people on the Internet	47	33	63	33	44
Downloaded music or films	27	26	61	56	44
Put (or posted) photos, videos or music to share with others	22	24	54	55	39
Used a webcam	23	25	37	38	31
Put (or posted) a message on a website	18	19	44	40	31
Visited a chatroom	14	14	35	28	23
Used file sharing sites	11	8	30	22	18
Created a character, pet or avatar	20	17	21	13	18
Spent time in a virtual world	15	14	21	12	16
Written a blog or online diary	4	6	15	18	11
Average number of activities	5.7	5.4	9.0	8.1	7.1

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Tab. 1: Children's activities online in the past month (surveyed in spring/summer 2010)

% who have	Age				all
	9-10	11-12	13-14	15-16	
Seen sexual images on websites in past 12 months	5	8	16	25	14
Have been sent nasty or hurtful messages on the Internet in past 12 months	3	5	6	8	6
Seen or received sexual messages on the Internet in past 12 months	n/a	7	13	22	15
Ever had contact on the Internet with someone not met face-to-face before	13	20	32	46	30
Ever gone on to meet anyone face-to-face that they first met on the Internet	2	4	9	16	9
Have come across one or more types of potentially harmful user-generated content in past 12 months	n/a	12	22	29	21
Have experienced one or more types of misuse of personal data in past 12 months	n/a	7	10	11	9
Encountered one or more of the above	14	33	49	63	41

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Tab. 2: Summary of online risks shaping children’s probability of experiencing harm

of all through pop-ups. Of the children concerned, 32 % reported that they felt bothered and upset at what they saw. Consequently, the harmful effects of children’s exposition to pornographic material should not be underestimated. Beside pornographic content, 21 % of the children said that they have encountered some kind of harmful user-generated content, ranging from hate messages and anorexic/bulimic sites to self-harm and suicide sites or pages where drug taking is discussed. Another issue is bullying: 19 % of all children questioned in the EU Kids Online survey reported on having experienced bullying, either online or offline. Face-to-face harassing is yet still more common (13 %) than being bullied online (6 %) or by mobile phone (3 %). An alarming issue is the parents’ ignorance of this form of annoyance: only one third of parents (29 %) whose children have experienced online bullying know about it. More than half of them (56 %) say that their child was not bullied online, 15 % admit that they did not know. As with bullying, parents considerably underestimate their children being exposed to sexting, i.e. the practice of receiving/sending messages with sexual content, e.g. by pop-up, instant messenger, or e-mail.

15 % of all 11- to 16-year-olds have encountered some kind of sexual messaging, be it receiving sexual messages, being asked to talk about sex to strangers, or even being asked for a photo/video showing private parts.

Probably the greatest danger for children is meeting online contacts offline. On the one hand, EU Kids Online found out that children have learnt to keep certain information private (e.g., 70 % of respondents have a social networking profile not open to the public) and a majority of children (87 %) communicate online exclusively with people they know in person face-to-face. On the other hand, 9 % of 9- to 16-year-olds have met face-to-face with someone they got to know on the Internet (e.g., on social networking sites, by instant messaging, or in chat rooms). Frighteningly, 11 % of all children who have been to an offline meeting were bothered by what happened; the bad experiences range from a person saying harmful things (22 %) to sexual infringement (11 %) and even encountering physical violence (3 %). Even worse, 30 % of all children who met an online contact had not told anyone about it in advance.

Risks, benefits, and safety education

It is beyond debate that the Internet involves immense risks for youth. On the other side, researchers agree that it offers enormous benefits for children’s cognitive development, since they get the chance to develop a new “set of cultural competencies and social skills” (appropriation, multitasking, collective intelligence, critical judgment, networking, and negotiation; Jenkins et al., 2007, p. 4). Moreover, it offers chances to promote tolerance through global communication, and opportunities of self-expression and creativity through active participation, and thus plays a role in children’s identity formation.

Some even consider it an important means to a more democratic media environment, as it bears the chance for children to “overcome many of the disadvantages and inequalities of real life” (Byron, 2007, p. 62).

Therefore, instead of demonising the Internet, it is rather essential to promote children’s digital literacy and safety education. Since most children use the Internet at home – and many of them in their bedroom –, parents play a major role in mediating their children’s Internet use. The second important instance is school. Since the sources of danger from the Internet vary with age – younger children lack technical and critical skills, teenagers communicate about private matters, older teenagers socialise with unknown people –, it is necessary to provide children with age-appropriate training and advice from both parents and educators.

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