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Irish Kids Online: Comparing Youth and Parent Perspectives

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Irish Kids Online: Comparing Youth and Parent Perspectives

Brian O'Neill and Thuy Dinh

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Multiple opportunities

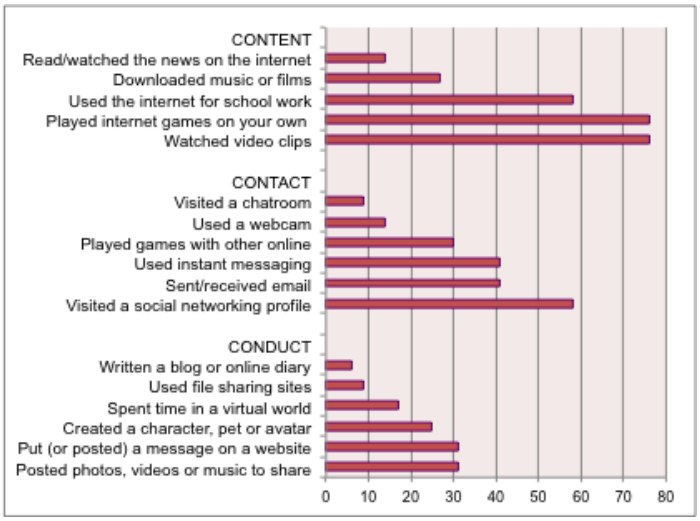
Using the internet

- **Going online is now an everyday occurrence for the vast majority of Irish children**. Young people spend on average one hour per day online (80 minutes per day on average for older teenagers).
- Most go online at home (87%). Many also do so at school (66%), in friends' homes (64%), in public libraries (14%) and in internet cafés (9%).
- Internet use is still mostly via a shared PC (64%) but young people also go online using other devices such as a shared laptop (51%), mobile phone (46%), a games console (44%), their own laptop (28%) or smartphone (23%).
- **Most parents interviewed in the survey (83%) are also active internet users.** 61% say they use it every day. 40% described themselves as 'very confident', 44% 'fairly confident' though 13% were 'not very confident'.
- **Parents will not always be able to supervise their children's internet access:** 37% of Irish children go online in their own room, or when out and about, for example, using their mobile or smartphone (20%).

Activities

Despite widespread use, young people do not avail of the full range of online activities. The most popular activities are *content-related,* followed by *online communication*, especially social networking. Less common are more *creative and participative activities*, such as creating online content, posting photos or videos or using virtual worlds. Therefore, in terms of the 'ladder of opportunities'[1], many Irish children rarely get beyond the most basic of internet activities.

Figure 1: Children's activities online in the past month



QC102: How often have you played internet games in the past 12 months? QC306a-d, QC308a-f and QC311a-f: Which of the following things have you done in the past month on the internet?

- Compared to the 25 countries surveyed in EU Kids Online, **children in Ireland engage in far fewer activities (5.4 per month or 2.7 per week) than nearly all other countries.**
- Young people do however appear to be quite confident in their internet use: 63% of older teenagers (15-16 years) say they know more about the internet than their parents.
- When it comes to digital literacy and safety skills, just 36% of 11-16 year olds say it is very true that they know lots of things about using the internet; 51% say it is a bit true. Young people also had on average just 4 of the 8 skills asked about in the survey.

Parental Concerns

Parental concerns about dangers children may face online have always been a factor in attitudes towards internet use. In 2008, a **Eurobarometer** study[2] found that among Irish parents, the main concerns regarding children's internet use were:

- Seeing *sexually/violently explicit images* on the Internet (64%)
- That their child could become a victim of *online grooming* (60%)
- That their child could be *bullied online* by other children (52%) or bullied by others by mobile phone (56%)
- Getting information about *self-harm, suicide, anorexia* (55%)
- That their child might become isolated from others when spending too much time online (49%)
- 49% were worried that their child might *reveal personal or private information* when using the internet; a fifth said they were very worried.

Nearly all parents agreed (96%) that more awareness-raising about online risks would help them and their children to use the internet more safely. The vast majority also said they want more and better information and advice for parents about websites that children use most frequently and stricter regulation for businesses that produce online content and provide online services.

Online Risks: Parent and child account

EU Kids Online asked young people about risks (seeing sexual images, bullying, sending/receiving sexual messages, meeting strangers) they might encounter online (see Ireland Report for full findings)[3].

At the same time, we asked parents if they were aware if their children had experienced any of these same risks. When we compare youth and parent responses, we find some discrepancies between their accounts:

- For those children who reported having seen **sexual images online,** 36% of parents agreed this was the case, 15% did not know and *49% said this had not happened*
- For children who had been **bullied online**, 29% of parents were aware this had happened, but *68% were not aware of this*. 3% said they weren't sure.
- For those 11-16 year olds who acknowledged receiving **sexual messages online** ('sexting'), 21% of parents were aware of this, 27% did not know and *52% said it had it not occurred.*

Young people (11-16 years of age) also come across other kinds of potentially harmful content, including user-generated content. When we compare children's accounts of what they had seen with parents' answers, we see:

- 16% of young people say they have come across **hate speech online** but just *4% of parents* were aware of this.
- 11% had seen sites promoting **ways to be very thin** (such as being anorexic or bulimic) but just *5% of parents say this was the case.*
- 9% of those surveyed had seen sites that talked about **experiences of taking drugs**; 3% *of parents said they were aware of this*.
- 9% of young people had seen sites promoting ways of **physically harming themselves**, and just *3% of parents were aware of this*.

12% of young people (11-16 year olds) also experience some form of data misuse, such as through someone stealing their password or hacking into their account. Parents were generally aware when this happened though fewer seemed to know of when somebody used their password to access their information (10% of young people vs. 7% of parents).

Parental Mediation

With internet use predominantly located in the home, parents have an important role to play in guiding children's online experience. This can involve a number of different strategies, depending on the age of the child and parenting approaches. Many young people, however, think that parental mediation limits

what they do online, and 35% of teenagers say they ignore what parents say when they use the internet.

Table 1 compares adult and child accounts of what parents actually do. Some efforts by parents appear to either go unrecognized by young people or may be an overestimation on the part of adults.

Table 1: Parent's active mediation of the child's internet use

% of who say …	Children	Parents
Stay nearby when you use the internet	72	79
Talk to you about what you do on the internet	67	84
Encourage you to explore and learn things on the internet on your own	49	60
Sit with you while you use the internet	42	49
Do shared activities together with you on the internet	35	43
At least one of the above	91	95

QC327: Does your parent / do either of you parents sometimes…

QP220: Which of the following, if any do you sometimes do with your child..... *(Multiple responses allowed)*

Base: All children who use the internet, and one of their parents.

- Most parents believe that the things they do relating to their child's internet use helps to make their online experience better (38% a lot; 36% a bit better).
- The vast majority of parents/guardians (85%) also feel confident they can help their children deal with anything on the internet that might bother them. Most also feel (79%) that their child will be able to cope with anything they may encounter online.
- At the same time, over half of Irish parents also feel they should do more (27% a lot more; 37% a bit more). Younger children would also like parents to take more interest (22% of 9-12 year old boys; 25% of 9-12 year old girls).

We also compared parents' and young people's responses when it comes to *advice on internet safety* (Table 2). Here answers are much closer and even reflect a degree of uncertainty on the part of parents when it comes to providing safety advice.

Table 2: Parent's active mediation of the child's internet safety

% who say that …	Children	Parents
Explained why some websites are good or bad	72	74
Suggested ways to use the internet safely	72	66
Helped you when something is difficult to do or find on the internet	69	63
Talked to you about what to do if something on the internet bothered you	64	60
Suggested ways to behave towards other people online	62	60
Helped you in the past when something has bothered you on the internet	39	27
At least one of the above	92	92

QC329 Does your parent / do either of your parents sometimes…
QP222 Have you (or your partner/carer) ever done any of these things with your child ... *(Multiple responses allowed)*

Base: All children who use the internet, and one of their parents.

It is in the area of *restrictive mediation,* or the setting of rules about what children are and are not allowed to do online, that Ireland stands out as the highest in Europe (95% of parents). Here, we look at parents' accounts of the rules they apply to children's internet use:

Table 3: Parents' restrictive mediation of the child's internet use

% who say that rules apply about…	Can do this anytime	Can only do this with permission or supervision	Can never do this
Give out personal information to others on the internet	6	9	85
Download music or films on the internet	26	28	46
Upload photos, videos or music to share with others	24	25	51
Use instant messaging	34	23	43
Have your own social networking profile	38	21	41
Watch video clips on the internet	45	40	15

QP221: For each of these things, please tell me if your child is CURRENTLY allowed to do them all of the time, allowed to do them but only with permission or supervision, or never allowed to them

Base: All children who use the internet and one of their parents.

Parents also say that they *monitor children's internet use*. Comparing parents' and children's accounts (Table 4), we see that parents state more often that they check what their children do online, though it is possible that this also goes unnoticed by the child

Table 4: Parents' monitoring of the child's internet use

% who say parents check/they check…	Children	Parents
Which websites you visited	54	65
Your profile on a social network or online community	47	56
Which friends or contacts you add to social networking profile	40	57
The messages in your email or instant messaging account	23	38
At least one of the above	57	75

QC330: Does your parent/either of your parents sometimes check any of the following things?

QP223: When your child uses the internet at home, do you sometimes check any of the following things afterwards?

Base: All children who use the internet at home, and one of their parents.

Parental controls or filters are also often promoted as a technical means of preventing access to unwanted contact though there is much discussion about their effectiveness. Parents' reports of using such software are again somewhat greater than that of young people.

Table 5: Parents' technical mediation of the child's internet use, child and parent accounts

% who say check/parents check …	Children	Parents
Software to prevent spam/junk mail or viruses	79	87
Parental controls or other means of keeping track of the websites you visit	42	51
Parental controls or other means of blocking or filtering some types of website	41	48
A service or contract that limits the time you spend on the internet	12	17
Any of the above	82	89

QC331: Does your parent/either of your parents make use of the following?

QP224: Do you make use of any of the following …

Base: All children who use the internet at home, and one of their parents.

Conclusion and recommendations

The theme of Safer Internet Day 2012 *Connecting Generations* is particularly appropriate to the Irish case given that over half of Irish parents say that they should do more in relation to their children's internet use. Younger in children, in particular, would like their parents to be more involved in what they do online.

Parents in Ireland have an important role to play in guiding their children's internet use and supporting internet safety. They practice a variety of strategies and are quite involved in their children's use of the internet.

The most common form of mediation in Ireland is *restrictive mediation,* the highest in Europe at 95%. While this has the effect of reducing risks and potential harm for children, it also restricts opportunities and limits young people's ability to avail of the full range of online opportunities. Most children say that such forms of mediation limits what they do online and 20% say it limits their activities a lot.

Active mediation of the internet by parents – encouraging children to explore and learn things online, doing shared activities, talking about their internet use – is a valuable means of promoting greater opportunities, acquiring new skills and reducing online risks.

Most parents are also active internet users and feel they have the skills to help their children. More needs to be done however to assist those who are not very confident in their use of the internet

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[1] Livingstone, S., & Helsper, E. (2007). Gradations in digital inclusion: children, young people and the digital divide. *New Media Society*, 9(4), 671-696.

[2] Eurobarometer. (2008). *Towards a Safer Use of the Internet for Children in the EU: A Parents' Perspective*. Luxembourg: European Commission Safer Internet Programme.

[3] O'Neill, B., Grehan, S., Ólafsson, K. (2011). *Risks and safety for children on the internet: the Ireland report*. LSE, London: EU Kids Online.