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New study about children and social networking sites in Europe:

Age restrictions not effective

Significant numbers of children are breaking the rules by setting up their own profiles on social networking sites such as Facebook, finds a new study published today. The report, *Social Networking, Age and Privacy*, reveals that 38 per cent of 9-12-year-olds use social networking sites, with one in five of the age group having a profile on Facebook, even though the network sets a minimum age of 13 to join.

Young children have public profiles

Researchers who carried out the *EU Kids Online* survey of 25,000 young people across Europe say it shows that age restrictions are only partially effective and that a growing number of children are taking online risks. A quarter of children on social networking sites have their profile set to 'public'. One fifth of children whose profile is public display their address and/or phone number, twice as many as for those with private profiles.

Professor Sonia Livingstone from the London School of Economics and Political Science, who directs the project, said: 'It seems clear that children are moving to Facebook – this is now the most popular site in 17 of the 25 countries we surveyed. Many providers try to restrict their users to 13-year-olds and above but we can see that this is not effective.' Especially younger children are less likely to use privacy options and to understand the safety features that are available.

Across the 25 European countries surveyed, 57 per cent of children (aged 9 to 16) use Facebook as their sole or main social networking site. This ranges from 98 per cent in Cyprus, to only two per cent in Poland.

Need for better protective measures

The findings raise the possibility that removing age restrictions from social network sites might be the most effective way of improving online safety as the rules have the consequence of driving kids' social networking underground. Elisabeth Staksrud, from the University of Oslo and one of the report's authors comments that: "since children often lie about their age to join 'forbidden' sites it would be more practical to identify younger users and to target them with easy-to-use protective measures. However we accept that abolishing age limits could lead to a substantial rise in the numbers using the sites."

Among other findings, the survey shows that almost one in six 9-12-year-olds, and one in three 13-16s, has 100 or more online contacts. Around a quarter of SNS users communicate online with people who have no connection to their offline lives, including one fifth of 9-12 year olds across all SNS (and one quarter of younger Facebook users).

The report also shows that:

- Social networking sites (SNS) are popular among European children: 38% of 9-12 year olds and 77% of 13-16 year olds have a profile. Facebook is used by one third of 9-16 year old internet users.
- One in five 9-12 year olds have a Facebook profile, rising to over 4 in 10 in some countries.
- Age restrictions are only partially effective, although there are many differences by country and SNS.
- Younger children are more likely than older to have their profile 'public'. A quarter of 9-12 year old SNS users have their profile 'set to public'.
- Parental rules for SNS use, when applied, are partly effective, especially for younger children.
- One fifth of children whose profile is public display their address and/or phone number, twice as many as for those with private profiles.
- The features designed to protect children from other users if needed are not easily understood, by many younger and some older children.

The full report, *Social Networking, Age and Privacy*, is available online at <http://www2.lse.ac.uk/media@lse/research/EUKidsOnline/ShortSNS.pdf>

Questions about the report can be directed to:

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Detailed information about the study can be found at www.eukidsonline.net.

Information about the survey

This report presents findings related to SNS use, based on **a new and unique survey** designed and conducted according to rigorous standards by the *EU Kids Online* network. It was funded by the EC's Safer Internet Programme in order to strengthen the evidence base for policies regarding online safety.

- **A random stratified sample of 25,142 children** aged 9-16 who use the internet, plus one of their parents, was interviewed during Spring/Summer 2010 in 25 European countries.
- **The survey investigated key online risks:** pornography, bullying, receiving sexual messages, contact with people not known face to face, offline meetings with online contacts, potentially harmful user-generated content and personal data misuse.
- In this report, **'children' refers to internet-using children aged 9-16 across Europe**. Countries included are Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Turkey and the UK.