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Online dangers for children – report exposes the top 10 myths of internet safety

Researchers today published a list of the top 10 myths about internet safety for children to show how many peoples' knowledge of online dangers are out of date.

Among common mistakes is the belief that putting a PC in the family living room will help keep young people away from risky behaviour.

In fact, say the team from EU Kids Online, children find it so easy to go online at a friend's house or on a smartphone that this advice is out of date. Parents are better advised to talk to their children about their internet habits or join them in some online activity.

Another common myth highlighted in the study is that children know more than adults about the digital world – in fact only just over one in three youngsters are sure that they know more than their parents.

The top 10 list is published as part of the final report of EU Kids Online – a research project based at the London School of Economics and Political Science which surveyed 25,000 children and their parents across Europe to understand where the true online risks and opportunities lie. Funded by the European Commission's Safer Internet Programme, the project aims to give policy makers the best possible advice on how to educate and protect against risks such as bullying, pornographic or inappropriate content and making contacts with unsuitable people in the real world.

The report makes a series of recommendations to governments, industry, children, parents and teachers which range from a call for more user-friendly parental controls and online safety features to ensuring children also lead a rich life away from the computer.

Professor Sonia Livingstone, who headed the project, said: "Most people have concerns about the internet and the effects it can have on a new digital generation of children. But are they concerned about the right things?"

'Our study showed that in general they are not. Often their view of how children behave online is out of date and needs updating – that's why we included the list of Top 10 myths in our report. For example, while parents worry more about 'stranger danger', children find cyberbullying the most upsetting risk. Also, it's

interesting to note that the parents who are most worried have children who encounter no more risks than children of parents who aren't worried.

“Often people also don't appreciate that the digital world brings both risks and opportunities for young people, or that risk isn't automatically a bad thing as it may give children a chance to learn how to cope and become resilient. It's only by understanding and balancing these things that we'll be able to give children the practical help they need to get the best from the internet and other online activity.

“The work our team of researchers has done offers governments, parents and teachers the most comprehensive insight yet into how to help.”

A conference to mark publication of the study's final report is being held at LSE on Thursday and Friday (22 and 23 Sept).

For a copy of the full report and further information about EU Kids Online visit their site at www.eukidsonline.net

The top 10 myths about children's online risks

1 Digital natives know it all.

Only 36 per cent of 9-16-year-olds say it is very true that they know more about the internet than their parents. This myth obscures children's needs to develop digital skills.

2 Everyone is creating their own content

The study showed that only one in five children had recently used a file-sharing site or created an avatar, half that number wrote a blog. Most children use the internet for ready-made content.

3 Under 13s can't use social networking sites

Although many sites (including Facebook) say that users must be aged at least 13, the survey shows that age limits don't work – 38 per cent of 9-12-year-olds have a social networking profile. Some argue age limits should be scrapped to allow greater honesty and protective action.

4 Everyone watches porn online.

One in seven children saw sexual images online in the past year. Even allowing for under-reporting, this myth has been partly created by media hype.

5 Bullies are baddies

The study shows that 60 per cent who bully (online or offline) have themselves been bullied. Bullies and victims are often the same people.

6 People you meet on the internet are strangers.

Most online contacts are people children know face-to-face. Nine per cent met offline people they'd first contacted online – most didn't go alone and only one per cent had a bad experience.

7 Offline risks migrate online

This is not necessarily true. While children who lead risky offline lives are more likely to expose themselves to danger online, it cannot be assumed that those who are low-risk offline are protected while online.

8 Putting the PC in the living room will help

Children find it so easy to go online at a friend's house or on a smartphone that this advice is out of date. Parents are better advised to talk to their children about their internet habits or join them in some online activity.

9 Teaching digital skills reduces online risk

Actually the more digital skills a child has, the more risks they are likely to encounter as they broaden their online experience. What more skills can do is reduce the potential harm that risks can bring.

10 Children can get around safety software

In fact, fewer than one in three 11-16 year-olds say they can change filter preferences. And most say their parents' actions to limit their internet activity is helpful.

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