

Growing Up Online

Children's online activities, harm and safety in Northern Ireland - an Evidence Report



Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

Aims

This mixed-methods research study was funded by the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland and conducted by a team from the Centre for Research in Educational Underachievement at Stranmillis University College, Belfast.

The project set out to undertake an evidence report relating to children's online activities, harms and safety.

The project aimed, first, to address the emergence, nature and impact of online risks of harm and trends among all groups of children and young people in Northern Ireland, including risk and protective factors, access to support and intervention when issues arise and the implications for safety policy and practice; and, second, to review online safety provision including educational initiatives to safeguard and protect children online.

Methods

Two online surveys were administered to children and young people from across Northern Ireland, aged between 8-18 years. One version of the survey was administered to 8-13 year olds (with slight amendments made to ensure age appropriateness) and another version was given to 14-18 year olds. The surveys remained open for a period of 4 weeks, from 6th February to 6th March 2023. In total, 6481 children and young people responded to the surveys.

In addition, a wide variety of different target populations were recruited to take part in interviews and focus groups, almost all of which were conducted face-to-face (the remainder online). In total, 95 participants took part in the qualitative aspects of this research, including children and young people in primary,

post-primary, special schools and youth club settings, as well as parents, teachers/school leaders, and professionals working in the field of online safety. The qualitative engagement included Traveller/Roma children, LGBTQI+ young people, children with (severe) learning difficulties, young people in a youth club setting in a disadvantaged urban context, and pupils from an Irish-medium school.

Two children and young people's advisory groups were established, one involving primary school children and another involving post-primary school children. These groups helped inform the design of the qualitative engagement with children and young people, and made recommendations regarding dissemination. The project was also supported by an expert advisory group convened by the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland.

Findings/Conclusions

Finding/Conclusion 1

Children and Young People in Northern Ireland reported a wide range of positive online experiences. They use a range of online devices (predominantly phones) which allow them to enjoy listening to music, watching videos, playing games, messaging friends and family, shopping, sharing photos, following celebrities/influencers, learning and much more. For children and young people, being online is not a bolt-on to their lives; it is absolutely integral to how they live almost every aspect of their lives today.

As one young person commented: "We're teenagers. We spend most of our day on the internet." For many children and young people and particularly for some young people at risk of exclusion (e.g. LGBTQI+ young people) being online represents an important source of 'comfort', support and genuine friendship. Such positive messages are an important and timely reminder to adults (parents, teachers, professionals, policy makers) who are prone to adopting an exclusively negative discourse when discussing children and young people's online lives.

Finding/Conclusion 2

This study has also provided evidence that children and young people are spending many hours online each day, on school days but especially at weekends and during holidays. While most internet use is within reasonable limits (2-4 hours per school day), there is evidence that many children and young people are spending much greater amounts of time online e.g. 34% of 14-18 years olds reported spending 4 hours or more online on a school day, while at weekends and during the holidays 64% reported that they spent 4 hours or more online, with 22% reporting more than 7 hours per day. Several young people in the focus groups reported even higher internet use, with up to 23 hours per day cited by one young person. The impact of this high usage, as reported by the young people and confirmed by their teachers, was a growing trend for pupils to come in to school "wrecked" or "in a complete state" or with their "heads down... sleeping" in class.

All post-primary focus groups confirmed that this was commonplace and becoming more common, while 27% of the survey respondents (aged 14-18) reported feeling tired the next day as a result of their online activity at night. While we would resist a simplistic binary association between screen time and wellbeing, we feel that there are nonetheless grounds for concern and would recommend that attention is given to this through meaningful dialogue with children and young people themselves in schools and in the home. We would therefore recommend and endorse the "precautionary approach" proposed by the UK Chief Medical Officers (2019), noting their concern that excessive screen time can "displace" (p.6) health-promoting activities by children such as physical activity, healthy diet, regular sleep and quality time spent with families. Moreover we would urge families to "try to find a healthy balance" (p.6), agreeing boundaries for screen use and with parents themselves being careful to model moderate screen use in front of their children.

Finding/Conclusion 3

A further conclusion relates to the role played by parents (and/or carers) in supporting their children to grow up safe online. The findings of this study found a disparity between children and young people's perceptions of their parents' (often low) level of interest in what they were doing online, and the genuine fears and concerns expressed by the primary and post-primary parents who volunteered for the focus groups. For instance, only 17% of 8-13 year olds and just 8% of 14-18 year olds reported that their parents were 'very interested' in what they were doing online, while 20% of 8-13 year olds and 34% of 14-18 year olds felt that their parents were 'not at all interested' in their online activities. By contrast, in the focus groups, parents seemed extremely interested in what their children were doing online. Indeed, they often expressed feelings of guilt, fear, powerlessness and exasperation as they sought to strike a balance between, on the one hand, the pressure to 'bow to peer pressure' by making it

possible for their children to be online (by buying phones or downloading apps), and on the other hand, their very real concerns about what their children were being exposed to online and the impact that screen time was having on family relationships and their ability to communicate face-to-face. There is consequently a need for further research into parental experiences, perceptions and behaviours in relation to supporting their children's online lives, but also an urgent need for more training and resources to build confidence and competence among parents. Only through relevant and accessible training and support for parents, can we address the perception among too many children and young people that their parents are simply not interested in what they are doing online. The challenge in doing so is to develop an appropriate model to communicate effectively with busy parents, and to do so in a way that is informative, supportive and non-judgemental.

Finding/Conclusion 4

This study has found clear evidence that around 1 in 5 children and young people in Northern Ireland (20% of 8-13 year olds and 18% of 14-18 year olds) have experienced something nasty or unpleasant happening to them online over the past couple of months, most commonly on social media apps. While this compares favourably with two other recent studies (Ofcom, 2023 and Blurred Lives Project, 2023 in press), this still represents an issue of significant concern for policy makers and educators. This research has highlighted the wide range of online risks experienced by children and young people in Northern Ireland, especially 14-18 year olds. The results have also shown (as in other previous studies) that girls are much more likely to experience something nasty or unpleasant online, both among the younger cohort (23% girls vs 17% boys) and the older cohort (20% girls vs 15% boys). For instance, among the older cohort (14-18 years old), girls (5.4%) were 3 times more likely than boys (1.7%) to be asked to send nude photos/videos of themselves, girls (6.9%) were more than twice as likely as boys (3%) to be sent inappropriate photos they didn't ask for, and twice as likely to see or be sent pornography (girls: 5.6% vs boys 3.0%). Girls were also more likely to see or be sent content promoting self-harm (girls: 3.3% vs boys 2.2%), eating disorders (girls: 4.1% vs boys 1.6%) or suicide (girls: 3.6% vs boys 3.0%).

Levels of reporting were low for boys and girls (45% among 8-13 year olds and 30% among 14-18 year olds), and in both cases children and young people were most likely to report to friends and family.

In terms of the outcome of reporting, over a quarter (27%) of 8-13 year olds and almost half (46%) of 14-18 year olds felt that the matter was not dealt with well at all.

Once again, this highlights the need for further research, particularly into the negative experiences of girls online, but already from this research it is clear that more needs to be done to protect girls in particular from online risk or harm through education, and a joined up approach which promotes healthy relationships both on- and offline for both boys and girls. Such an approach must involve schools, parents, youth workers and professionals working together with children and young people to address the targeting of girls online. A currently underexploited opportunity is offered by Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in the Northern Ireland Curriculum which has the potential to address these sensitive issues. It is recommended that content relating to healthy online relationships should become mandatory, not least given the growing prevalence (as evidenced in this report) of toxic masculinity and online pornography, and the negative impact this is having on boys' attitudes, language and behaviour towards girls.

The clear evidence presented through this study of the online (sexual) victimisation of girls in particular in Northern Ireland also serves to justify and inform the ongoing work of the Northern Ireland Executive Office to develop a much needed Ending Violence against Women and Girls Strategy.

Finding/Conclusion 5

While there were high levels of confidence in keeping themselves safe online among more than three-quarters of the children and young people, there is evidently a strong need to provide relevant, up-to-date, age-appropriate, supportive and engaging training and resources (in English and Irish) for children and young people, but also for parents and teachers/educators. This research has highlighted the benefits of children receiving online training, revealing that (across both age cohorts) children who had been trained were less likely to report recent negative online experiences happening to them than those children and young people who had not received any training. This evidence should serve as an encouragement to those currently providing such training: clearly online safety training is helping to protect more of our children and young people from harm. However, there were clear messages from children and young people, parents, teachers and professionals that we need to do more,

and that there are genuine challenges in keeping up with the constant evolution, proliferation and diversification of online apps and the associated risks. From the data gathered and also the review of current training and resources undertaken, we would recommend that action is taken as a priority to provide a central, managed resource hub where children and young people, parents and teachers could easily find resources and training designed specifically for them. This would provide much-needed coherence and quality assurance to the training and resources currently available, where too often schools and parents are left to their own devices to source training and support, without the time or understanding to assess whether it is truly fit for purpose. We would also recommend that, where possible, children and young people themselves are involved in a participatory process of co-construction of future resources and training to help ensure relevance and appropriateness of content and mode of delivery.

Finding/Conclusion 6

Finally, we would recommend that there is greater regulation of social media companies by government to help ensure: closer monitoring of online material that is potentially offensive or harmful to children and young people; more transparent, consistent and child-friendly online reporting mechanisms; the timely removal of offensive material; and stricter enforcement of age restrictions on certain apps or sites, where currently it is much too easy for children to enter a false date of birth.

In conclusion, this has been a large, multi-method, participatory study which has yielded important new insights into the lived online experiences of a broad spectrum of children and young people in Northern Ireland. It is our sincere hope that its findings and recommendations will help to inform the delivery of the actions associated with the Northern Ireland Executive's *Keeping Children and Young People Safe: An Online Safety Strategy 2020-2025*, and so contribute to our children and young people growing up safe online.

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