BRIEFING

Keeping children and young people safe online: balancing risk and opportunity

Dr Kelly Stone
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Key Messages

- The internet provides extensive opportunities for children and young people to learn, socialise, and play, yet there are also *content* and *contact* risks which they need to be protected from and learn to protect themselves from online

- Monitoring and managing children's internet use needs to be relevant to the child or young person's age and stage of development as well as to social and ecological factors, such as vulnerability

- Children start to use the internet at increasingly younger ages so issues of online safety and protection are particularly relevant to this age group

- Internet access is on the rise, particularly among older children

- Children use the internet mostly at home

- Devices to access the internet are diversifying.

Introduction

Increasing access to the internet, at school and at home, means that children and young people are spending more time online[1]. While the internet provides extensive educational, entertainment and socialising opportunities for children and young people, it also presents risks, to which children and young people are more vulnerable than adults[1]. Government policies which address the management of such risks often use the language of *protection* and *protecting children*. This briefing considers the risks and opportunities associated with internet use, and practice implications which focus on monitoring and managing children's internet use relevant to their developmental age and stage, protecting children whilst also supporting the development of their self-protection skills.

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Why is this issue important?

Recent figures from Ofcom reveal that in the UK:

- 99% of children and young people aged 12-15
- 93% of children aged 8-11
- 75% children aged 5-7

use the internet[2].

It is important to note that children, like all internet users, are affected by the digital divide. When they lack the opportunity to access the internet, they cannot be affected by online risks; however, they also miss out on the opportunities and benefits the internet offers. Certain groups are more vulnerable to *contact* and *content* risks, so protecting - and enabling these children and young people to protect themselves online – is essential[3,4].

What does the research tell us?

Online risks to children and young people

Online risks can be identified as *content* and *contact* risks. The three categories of **content** risks are:

- illegal content
- age-inappropriate or harmful content
- harmful advice.

Contact risks occur when children and young people interact online and fall into the following categories:

- the interaction takes place with the intention to harm the child (for example cyberbullying, cybergrooming)
- children are exposed to hateful online interactions (such as hate websites)
- the child places her/himself in a harmful or potentially harmful situation (for example illegal filesharing).

Opportunities

Decisions to block, filter or ban children and young people's internet use need to be carefully weighed against considerations of opportunities to use the internet as a tool for learning, communicating, socialising, and entertainment. For example, mobile phones are widely seen as protective tools which benefit children and young people in case of emergencies; however as mobile devices are increasingly used to access the internet, concerns about content and contact risks to children and young people also increase. In a recent study of 1300 teachers in the UK, 75% stated that mobile phones with internet access make it much easier for pupils to access inappropriate material at school, and 69% claimed that it is difficult to control what pupils access on their phones during the school day[5]. *Mobile learning* provides opportunities in terms of motivating and engaging children and young people through the use of technology and learning methods which are connected and relevant to their interests[6].

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Implications for practice

Monitoring and managing children's internet use – a model for practice

Adults who care for and work with children and young people need to take an active role in monitoring and managing children's internet use, matching measures to the child's age and stage of development. The Byron Review[7] presented the following model of a child's cognitive development and the associated implications for their internet use at key stages :

Pre school

Key characteristics	Implications for monitoring and managing internet use
Focus on family Attachment relationship is key Full support required	Given that pre-school children lack critical evaluative skills, self regulation and impulse control, there should be 'robust monitoring' of their internet usage in terms of what they should access, when and for how long.

Primary

Key characteristics	Implications for monitoring and managing internet use
Shift to interests outside the family Developing friendships, learning and behaviour Supervised exploration	A child's impulse control is not yet at adult level; critical evaluative and self regulation skills are relatively poor, so adults need to allow children to explore but move from 'heavy control' to management by supervision with plenty of discussion about online behaviour, which allows the child to develop critical evaluative and self regulation skills whilst being supported.

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Secondary

Key characteristics	Implications for monitoring and managing internet use
Drive for social interaction

Risk taking important for development

Collaborative management strategies | For **11-14 year olds** this is a time of 'significant drive for social interaction'; the focus of the child's interest changes from home and family to the external world and peers. Exploration and experimentation in this phase is linked to risk-taking and increased impulsivity; there is some evidence that social networking sites enable young people to engage in 'safe' risk taking[3]. Also, as the outside world is increasingly seen by parents as unsafe young people migrate to online spaces for their socialising/developmental needs. Adults need to engage in *'collaborative management'* by protecting them from some content and experiences and openly discussing risk and content with them.

For **15-18 year olds**, their brain functioning is close to that of an adult so young people want and are able to operate with a degree of autonomy. The role of the adult is to afford opportunities for young people to experiment with different roles and identities whilst providing opportunities to discuss issues and support them. |

Understanding that children and young people develop at different rates and that due to social environmental factors some children will be more vulnerable than others, this is a useful model because it recognises the varying abilities of children at different stages to judge the credibility of sources, and the moral or social appropriateness of content[7].

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Media literacy – promoting self-protection skills

When framed within the wider practice of monitoring and managing children's internet use relevant to their developmental age and stage, blocking internet access at home and at school denies children and young people chances to learn media literacy skills[7,8] which can develop their analytical, evaluative and critical capacities. These skills are foregrounded in Curriculum for Excellence as 'the important skills of critical literacy'[9] and are sometimes also referred to as:

- media literacy[7]
- critical media literacy[10]
- digital literacy and safety skills[11].

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) states that media literacy is part of the wider definition of literacy and explains that it 'does not simply refer to technical skills, but rather has to do with understanding, critical reading, the ability to analyse and reason and social participation'[12].

Being media literate is not merely about being able to locate and validate online sources, but also about being able to actively challenge and critique online content and communication. As it is impossible to block or filter all potentially risky content and contact children and young people might encounter online, it is important that they have the necessary critical skills to recognise and resist it[3,7,8]. Children are starting to use the internet at increasingly younger ages, so it is important that critical media skills are taught and developed from the early years onwards[3,7].

The EU Kids Online study suggested that:

- schools have a major role to play in teaching digital literacy and safety skills to all children, including the 'hard to reach'
- peer mentoring schemes should be supported in schools, particularly as children are most likely to talk to a friend about online content which they find troubling.

Learning how to be a responsible citizen in online communities is the main focus of the collaboration between The Good Play Project and Project New Media Literacies. The project foregrounds the importance of ethical thinking, which is defined as 'the capacity to think about one's roles and responsibilities in the communities in which one participates, offline and online'[13]. In other words, children and young people need to be guided in developing an ethical framework, to understand that their individual choices have social consequences and that what they do online might affect others. *Our Space: Being a Responsible Citizen of the Digital World: A collaboration of the GoodPlay Project and Project New Media Literacies* is a set of educational resources which can be downloaded from the project website (www.thegoodproject.org/the-goods/toolkits-curricula/).

References

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[13]The GoodPlay Project and Project New Media Literacies (2011) *Our Space: Being a responsible citizen of the digital world*. Accessed online at www.thegoodproject.org/the-goods/toolkits-curricula

About the Internet safety briefing and factsheets

These resources were written by Dr Kelly Stone, Research Fellow/Co-ordinator at WithScotland, following a high level of demand from multi-agency professionals for materials about risks associated with internet safety. The original plan was for a single internet safety briefing; however, as there were so many key research strands, it was decided instead to produce several resources. The main document *Keeping Children and Young People Safe Online: Balancing risk and opportunity* outlines the key messages from research and presents models for monitoring and managing children's internet use. Four factsheets address prevalent issues most requested by multi-agency professionals:

• Cyberbullying
• Safer Social Networking
• Online Gaming
• Sexting, Pornification and Sexualisation

Throughout the process of developing these resources, many useful websites and resources promoting safer use of the internet were identified and are collated in the fifth factsheet entitled *A Guide to Internet Safety Resources for Multi-Agency Professionals.*
The resources have been peer-reviewed by multi-agency colleagues.

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