Children’s Online Activities, Risks and Safety: A Literature Review by the UKCCIS Evidence Group

Aims
The review emphasises trends, recent developments and anticipates emerging issues related to online risk of harm to children. It addresses implications for safety policy and practice using key findings of qualitative and quantitative research, useful graphs and verbatim quotes from children where available.

Key Findings

Children’s internet access and use
- While a small minority of children (mostly from poorer homes) remain without internet access, for most children, internet use is occupying ever more time, in more locations, including younger children (now four in ten 3- to 4-year-olds) and more personalised devices.
- While it seems many UK children have learned to be cautious online, there is little evidence that their digital skills and literacies are increasing over time (although undoubtedly they increase with age).

Risk of harm online
- One in ten children to one in five young teens say they encountered something worrying or nasty online in the past year.
- Children’s top worries are pornography and violence; they report encountering these most often on video-sharing sites; top parent concerns include online violence.
- It is not possible to determine whether the internet has increased the overall amount of risk children face as they grow up, or whether the internet instead provides a new location for risk experiences, but the nature of the internet itself surely alters and amplifies the consequences.

Specific risks online
- Cyberbullying: Estimates vary between 6-25%+ depending on measures.
- Sexting/sexual harassment: most children experience neither; among those who do, such experiences are often associated with developing intimate relationships as teenagers.
- Pornography: Some estimates suggest the vast majority of teenagers have seen this; there is qualified evidence of adverse effects, including that children may be learning about sex from pornography, hence the importance of sex education.
- Sexual solicitation: Research suggests this may affect up to one in ten children; there have been some investigations of the behaviour of groomers, some of the consequences for victims. There are many gaps here.
- Radicalisation: There are currently no UK studies related to online radicalisation of children.

Who is vulnerable or resilient?
- Correlations among risks mean that children vulnerable to one type of risk are likely to be vulnerable to others.
- A host of risk/vulnerability factors are likely to shape children’s online experiences, and this is mediated by the ways in which children develop emotionally, cognitively, in terms of their identity needs, social relationships and need for support, and their peer cultures; however, it remains difficult except in retrospect to pinpoint the moment when children succumb to specific online risks.
- More research is needed about how vulnerable children face risks and how resilient children cope.

https://www.gov.uk/government/groups/uk-council-for-child-internet-safety-ukccis
A range of safety initiatives

- The overwhelming picture is that while diverse stakeholders have tried many initiatives, very few are independently evaluated. This makes it difficult to determine what works and why. Such evaluations as are undertaken tend to focus on immediate outcomes (reach, appeal, etc.) rather than a long-term reduction in harm or improvement in wellbeing.
- Parents use a range of mediation strategies including technical controls, rules regulating online access and use, including the majority preferring to talk to their children about the consequences of their online activities.
- Gaps remain in parents’ abilities and skills for effective mediation; rules and restrictions tend to keep children safe but constrain their opportunities and invite evasion; enabling mediation is empowering providing children and parents have the skills and resilience to cope with risk when it occurs.

Policy Context

In the wider policy field, the Government’s Internet Safety Strategy of 2017 makes an updated evidence review particularly necessary. In terms of online risks, the policy task is not to eliminate all risk, but to manage risk so that children are prepared for and can learn from milder risks, while resources are also used to minimise harm, especially from severe risks. Because the policy around online child safety has seen dynamic engagement from concerned policy-makers, parents, educators, experts and law enforcement officials, it is important to evaluate initiatives and to understand the reasons for their success or failure. Rather few initiatives have been independently evaluated in relation to children’s internet safety, making it difficult to set out a firm basis for future actions.

Methodology

The review draws on four sources:

- Research Highlights series and the research reports they summarise, focusing on those published since 2012.
- Call for evidence circulated during February 2017 to UKCCIS members and other experts, as well as via relevant mailing lists.
- Keyword searches of academic and grey literatures.
- Research reports and publications already known to the authors.

Background

The UKCCIS Evidence Group identifies, evaluates and collates information from pertinent research findings, and communicates this to stakeholders with the aim of keeping UKCCIS, and the wider public, up to date. This review identifies and synthesises findings and insights across multiple studies, bringing together the richness and depth of qualitative and quantitative research.


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