

## Research for Culture and Education Committee (CULT) - Child Safety Online: Definition of the Problem

### Aims

This research seeks to define and assess the scope of children's online safety, drawing upon evidence of risks that children face online. It is one of three briefing papers produced for the European Parliament's CULT Committee as part of its assessment to ensure there is adequate support for protection of minors and children's wellbeing in the digital age. It aims to inform the process of implementing policies and initiatives to protect children and to identify crimes faced by children online, and document developments in information technology.

### Key Findings

#### Child Safety Online

- Child online safety has been identified as an important priority for governments and policy makers. It requires striking the right balance between protecting children from harm while promoting their rights to participate fully in the Information Society.
- The availability of research studies remains uneven with insufficient research available for younger age groups, diverse technologies and experiences of online risks and benefits.

#### Perceived risks and harm

- Children engage in diverse online activities that, depending on the circumstances, may involve 'risky opportunities'. Risks and opportunities go hand in hand, though important risks do not inevitably lead to harm. The EU Kids Online classification of online content, contact and conduct risks provides an important framework for governance and child online safety considerations.
- Content risks for children are pervasive: Exposure to sexual images online is relatively common. However, not all who had seen sexual content were adversely affected by it.
- Cyberbullying is the contact risk that most adversely affects children and among the most common reasons for children contacting Insafe Helplines. Increased levels of online hate, abuse and extremist content online have also been reported.
- Sexual harassment and the problematic sending and receiving of sexual messages are contact and conduct risks reported with varying incidence rates. Commercial risks have received less attention.

#### Trends in online crimes

- Cybercrimes affecting children incorporate a range of contact and conduct abuses that are both harmful and illegal and may include persistent harassment or stalking, grooming and sexual exploitation, radicalisation and extremist ideologies, as well as commercial exploitation or misuse/theft of personal data.
- Cybercrime targeting children as well as the majority of online sexual abuse of children is non-commercial in nature and in many instances of extortion or abuse, the perpetrators are known to victims. Europol, however, reports increased evidence of extortion activity being carried out by organised crime groups.

### Emerging challenges and risks

- Keeping pace with the rate of change in digital technologies, their uses and unintended consequences is a key challenge of child online safety.
- Children's use of digital technologies at ever-younger ages likewise presents new emerging challenges for their safety and for digital parenting.
- The Internet of Things poses challenges and risks for children both in terms of privacy and security as well as the incremental effects of data collection over extended periods of time.

### Policy Context

Over two decades of policy development related to children and the internet, most attention has been concentrated on intergovernmental, law enforcement and industry cooperation for the purposes of combatting the most serious threats and sources of harms affecting children. More recently, efforts to support better provision to match the embedded nature of the Internet in children's lives is apparent, as is consideration of the values of education for democratic culture through an emphasis on the quality of digital engagement and participation (Council of Europe, 2016).

### Methodology

The EU Kids Online survey of 25,000 European 9- to 16-year-old internet users and their parents in 25 countries was undertaken in 2010 (Livingstone et al., 2011). The Net Children Go Mobile project, carried out in 2014, replicated major parts of the EU Kids Online survey, adding a focus on mobile devices, with 3,500 European 9- to 16-year-old Internet users in 7 countries (Mascheroni & Cuman 2014). Combined, they make up the single largest dataset of its kind in Europe and act as the key reference point for empirical findings on children's experiences of risk and safety online (Livingstone et al., 2014).

### Background

Children's internet use has been much researched with studies concentrated in Europe and the US. However, with wide variation in how children's online experiences are conceptualised and researched, the evidence remains uneven with varying levels of quality and comparability. EU policy making has supported a combination of initiatives and stakeholder cooperation as the basis for supporting positive online experiences for children.

### Source

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