

Evidence that more children across Europe are being exposed to risks online and are increasingly distressed by them was revealed today by EU Kids Online to mark Safer Internet Day.

Social networking spread like wildfire across Europe last year, to the delight of many teenagers. In Norway, for example, 93% of 12-17 year olds use social networking sites. And even in countries where the internet arrived more recently, social networking is popular – more than two thirds of high school students in Estonia, for instance.

Despite the many benefits of social networking, there is also evidence of risk to teenagers' privacy and well-being.

The findings revealed here have been collated from recent research published in the different countries. EU Kids Online is collecting and comparing these findings, in preparation for a report to be published in June. Today's press release includes selected advance findings to draw attention to Safer Internet Day, February 2008.

The EU Kids Online network finds that many of these young people are giving out their personal information online. (Note that as the survey findings were published by different research teams in different countries, the exact age groups or question phrasing varies from country to country.)

Across 21 countries, the highest figures are reported in three countries:

- In the Czech Republic, most online teenagers have given out personal information to a stranger – 91% email address, 79% their picture, 72% phone number
- In Ireland, social networking sites have led to many more children disclosing personal info – from 28% 9-16 year olds giving out names or 27% emails in 2006 rising to 79% (of 10-20 year olds), 49% date of birth, 12% mobile number and 8% home address last year
- In Poland, 64% gave an online contact their phone number, 42% gave their address, 44% gave their photo

There is also growing evidence of risk to teens online:

- In the Czech Republic, an online survey found that 65% 12-17 year olds have met online contacts offline – a figure considerably above the 1 in 12 more commonly found in European countries, and pointing to the need for greater safety awareness here
- In Ireland, despite high figures for disclosure of personal information, risk figures for a range of risks are generally similar to those for other European countries, although there has been a rise from 19% to 27% of 9-16 year olds who have been asked for personal info from an online stranger. In other words, it seems that safety awareness is greater in Ireland.
- Poland, however, stands out as a high risk country for teens online across a range of risks, with 56% of teenage girls online being subject to unwanted sexual conversation, and 52% 12-17 year olds being invited to meet an online contact offline – of those, 44% went to meeting and few told an adult.

Moreover, the evidence shows that children and young people are not just experiencing online risks but also they are distressed by them:

- 17% in Belgium (9-12 year olds) felt threatened online
- 19% in Estonia (6-14 year olds) were disturbed by a stranger online
- 44% girls/30% boys in Germany (12-19 year olds) had unpleasant experiences in chat rooms
- 16% in Iceland had received emails/messages which made them worried or frightened

We conclude that:

- Advice and guidance to teenagers online is sorely needed, especially in some countries new to the internet or where teenagers' experiences are 'ahead' of their ability to cope
- Giving out personal information online does not always result in greater risk, but it may – care is needed in targeting advice depending on cultural and individual circumstances
- Social networking sites could do more to advise teenagers regarding their privacy or ensure they understand the implications of disclosing their personal details

Professor Sonia Livingstone, director of EU Kids Online, based at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), said:

“Although children and young people are delighted with the opportunities open to them on the internet – especially for social networking – many of them are giving out personal information without realising who might see it. As a result, our research has found substantial amounts of bullying, harassment and unwanted sexual messages, which is very distressing for some.”

Dr Leslie Haddon, co-director of EU Kids Online at LSE, said: “It is important for those involved in awareness raising programmes to be kept updated about the latest research findings in order to target their effort.”

Background information

EU Kids Online (www.eukidsonline.net) is the first systematic European comparison of research findings from 21 countries on children and young people's experience of the Internet and online technologies. Now in its second year, the network is funded by the EC Safer Internet Plus Programme.

- EU Kids Online is at <http://www.eukidsonline.net>. Countries included are Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, The Netherlands and The United Kingdom.
- EU Kids Online published 3 new reports in 2007 – one identifying the availability of research findings and the key gaps in the evidence; one comparing Portugal,

Poland and the UK for contextual factors accounting for differences in children's experiences of the internet; one analysing the methodological challenges of researching children in relation to the internet in cross-national perspective. All may be freely downloaded from www.eukidsonline.net

- European Commission's Safer Internet Plus Programme, see http://europa.eu.int/information_society/activities/sip/programme/index_en.htm
- Safer Internet Day 2007, and the European Internet Safety portal, are at www.saferinternet.org
- The Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre <http://www.ceop.gov.uk/index.asp>

Tuesday 12 February 2008 is Safer Internet Day. This seeks to raise awareness of internet risk and safety issues for children throughout Europe.

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Press release from Insafe

The count down to Safer Internet Day has begun! In the lead up to the big event on 12th February, organisations and authorities in no less than 50 countries worldwide are caught up in last minute preparations. E-voting is underway over eight thousand of internauts having selected their winners in the Safer Internet Day competition already. This year's theme "Life online is what YOU make of it" has sparked widespread interest from youngsters and adults the world over and guarantee a more exciting blogathon than ever this year, when it kicks off on 12th February for its 24-hour voyage around the world.

"The virtual environment has become an issue of global concern, too", the spokesperson of the Insafe network, organiser of Safer Internet Day, recently stated. "We hope that on Safer Internet Day citizens everywhere will take a moment out to reflect on what we are really making of the online world. Our children and young people spend hours online every day. As responsible citizens, are we confident that they adventure, network and seek information out there in safety? And if not, what are we doing about it?"

Viviane Reding, European Commissioner for Information Society and Media will launch the Safer Internet Day blogathon in Brussels by at a minute past midnight, with the announcement of the winners in the 2008 competition. To see what leading organisations worldwide are planning to do about this important issue, watch the progress of the blogathon at www.saferinternet.org. Follow it as it travels westward during the day from New Zealand through Australia to Thailand and Korea then through the Middle-East, Europe and South America to wind up in the USA and Canada. In the week following the blogathon, you can put your own questions to bloggers or simply add your comments.

You are also welcome to take part in national events which are published at www.saferinternet.org

Further information:

Child Exploitation and Online Protection (CEOP) Centre Child Exploitation and Online Protection (CEOP) Centre, UK node of the Insafe network .

Press enquiries: +44 (0)870 000 3434 or email press@ceop.gov.uk.

About Insafe

Insafe is the European Safer Internet awareness-raising network co-funded by the European Commission. It comprises national contact centres across the European Union and in Iceland and Norway, with partner organisations in Argentina, Australia and the USA. Insafe aims at empowering users to benefit from the positive aspects of internet whilst avoiding the potential risks. Further information is available at www.saferinternet.org or contact info-insafe@eun.org