

How does your child's internet use compare?

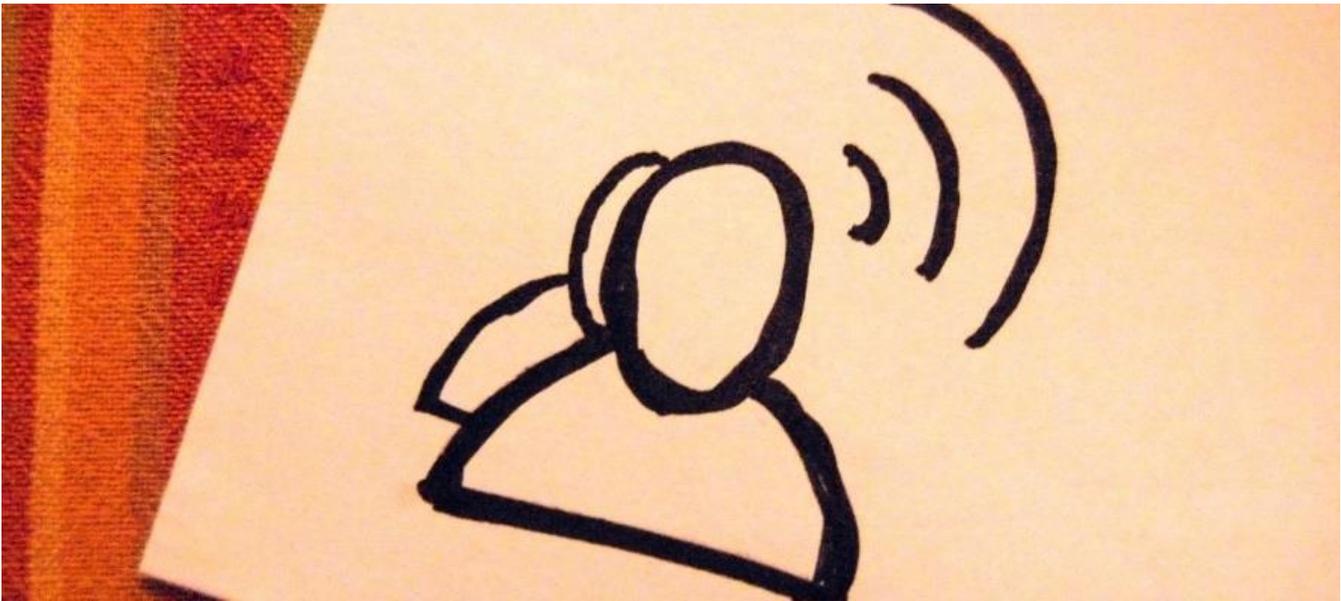


Photo: Ben Wermuller

A major study of young people online¹ has produced its final report, with up-to-date information on how children across Europe interact with their computers, tablets and smartphones.

What devices do children use to access the internet?

In the UK:

- 56% use smartphones daily
- 47% use laptops daily
- 32% use tablets daily

(based on children aged 9-16 who use the internet)

In Europe

(Countries surveyed here and in the rest of the report were Belgium, Denmark, Ireland, Italy, Portugal, Romania and the UK.)

- 41% use smartphones daily
- 46% use laptops daily
- 24% use tablets daily

What do children and young people do online?

Across Europe, the main things children use the internet for are:

- Social networking and instant messaging
- Entertainment
- Schoolwork

Fewer children are using the internet for creative purposes: only 31% of children who use the internet and 40% of smartphone users know how to create a blog.

Facebook remains the most commonly-used social networking site but, increasingly, children use more than one service for different ways of interacting or different groups. Children like safe, private spaces – they praise *Snapchat*, for example, because its messages disappear, reducing the pressure to produce good-looking pictures.

- those who use the internet more develop more skills and take more opportunities
- smartphone and tablet users have nearly twice as many social media skills that help keep them safe (such as protecting mobile devices with a passcode, finding information on how to use devices safely or deactivating location-tracking functions.)

Are children digital natives?

Not really:

- only 38% say it's very true that they know more about the internet than their parents
- 58% say it's very true they know more about smartphones than their parents

Bored or apathetic?

The majority of children agree that they feel less bored as a result of having a smartphone (43% agree a bit, 41% agree a lot).

Some children admit having a smartphone can lead to apathy, with constant information creating a cycle of tedious non-activity, as they scroll through, then look again to make sure they haven't missed anything.

Trapped?

Some teenagers feel trapped by the idea they should be always accessible and are expected to reply in real time – especially when they're using apps that notify the sender that the message has been received and read.

Bullying and cyberhate

Exposure to hate messages and pro-harm websites has gone up in the last four years.

- girls are more likely to report that they have been bullied (26%)
- girls are more likely to be upset by bullying (20%)
- 13-14 years is the peak age for bullying
- the youngest children, aged 9-10, report highest rates of harm (21%)

Not all hostile and aggressive messages on social media are necessarily bullying: unpleasant episodes on messaging apps or social networking sites are often seen by young people as 'social drama'.

Bullying is different: it's one-way, intentional, repetitive, aggressive, and involves a power imbalance between the bully and the person being bullied.

New forms of bullying

Increasing numbers of children are being harassed through calls and messages on smartphones, usually by friends of friends, as a result of their numbers having been given out, without their permission.

Another new form of exclusion happens in 'groups within groups', for example, on WhatsApp talking unkindly about those who have been left out.

Revenge sexting, where one half of a couple who have split up forwards revealing pictures. This is sometimes combined with victim blaming: 'she shouldn't have sent those pictures in the first place'.

Do children use the internet excessively?

- 8% of young people said they had gone without eating or sleeping 'very or fairly often' as a result of their internet use
- 15% felt bothered when they couldn't be on the internet, 'very or fairly often'
- 20% had caught themselves surfing when not really interested
- 18% felt that the internet had resulted in them spending less time than they should with family and friends or doing schoolwork
- 16% had tried unsuccessfully to spend less time on the internet

Are they addicted to their phones?

- 38% had felt bothered when couldn't check their smartphone (very or fairly often)
- 24% had caught themselves doing things on the smartphone that they weren't really interested in
- 50% reported very or fairly often feeling a strong urge to check their smartphone to see if anything new had happened
- 23% believed their phone meant they spend less time with either family friends or doing schoolwork
- 30% had found themselves using their phone in places where it wasn't appropriate
- 20% had tried to spend less time using their phone

When it all gets too much

- 1:3 children say they're not likely to talk to anyone about something that has bothered them on the internet
- mothers are the people that children are most likely to turn to if something bothers them online (71%)
- followed by friends (57%) and fathers (54%)

The key challenges for parents

The report points to the difficulty for parents of balancing protection with freedom to experiment and maximise their opportunities. (There is also growing evidence that doing more online is generally good for making young people safer online.)

Parents need to find ways of helping children to manage their digital lives that young people don't see as intrusive. They need to avoid overprotecting them or betraying their trust (easier said than done).

Parents need to work towards developing consistency of rules, both within the family and between friends.

Some frequently used parental rules:

- Not using smartphones at dinner
- Not using devices during homework (other than for work!)

Tips for parents

- get involved practically - help children to find things on the internet, discuss why some websites are good or bad, get them to show you interesting things they've found online
- emphasize that manners matter online as well as off: there are ways to behave towards others that make life more tolerable for everyone
- tell children it's fine to be offline sometimes; it's OK not to reply immediately to every message or notification
- children need help in managing their online lives, in the same way that we help them towards running their own offline lives. It is OK to set rules, but it's also a good idea to talk to children about rules they might like to set themselves (children will often do this when under no parental pressure – so don't downplay its importance)
- recognise that when we get exasperated with them for being glued to their phones, we might be expecting them to be always available to text or respond to us!
- bear in mind that not all potentially risky activities result in harm
- part of manners is not sharing the phone numbers of other children without permission; this sometimes leads to children being anonymously harassed
- boys need to be reminded that it's not simply the responsibility of girls to ensure that their personal image isn't ruined online, but also the responsibility of boys to treat them with respect

Footnote:

¹Mascheroni, G. & Cuman, A. (2014) Net Children Go Mobile: Final report