The Net Generation

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Introduction

The introduction of new information and communications technologies, such as the internet and mobile phones, has changed the way in which we conduct our daily lives. While some may dispute the claim of universal benefits from these new technologies, there is no doubt that children and young people everywhere have adopted them wholeheartedly to communicate with the outside world and with each other. According to Tapscott (1998), the Net Generation or 'N-GEN' is developing new ways of learning the kinds of social skills that will enable them to survive in this new technological age.

However, it has been reported that the use of these new technologies has brought unforeseen dangers that can affect children in particular. For example, it has been claimed in the media that the use of mobile phones by children can damage their health, for example by contributing to obesity, and that unsupervised access to the internet can leave children vulnerable to sexual predators and 'cyber' bullying.

Nevertheless, according to a recent newspaper report (The Times, 23rd June, 2009) more than half of British children aged between 5 and 9 years now owns a mobile phone, and companies are currently developing a brand for children as young as four years. Computer use is also widespread among children, with four in ten children aged between 8 and 11 years regularly using the internet, and even very young children have PCs or laptops in their bedrooms (BBC, 2007). In addition, data from the 2008 Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey show that more households in Northern Ireland with children under the age of 18 years, than those without children, have computers with access to the internet (86% and 59% respectively), suggesting that these technologies now play a central role in children's lives.

This Research Update explores the availability and use of these new technologies among children in Northern Ireland using data from the 2009 **Kids' Life and Times (KLT)** survey. All respondents to this survey are in their final year of primary school (Primary 7), and so are aged 10 or 11 years. The survey was completed online in school.

Access to technology

The vast majority (93%) of children taking part in KLT had their own mobile phone, with girls being slightly more likely than boys to say they had one (95% of girls and 91% of boys). Access to the internet was equally widespread. Almost all the respondents (98%) said that their family had at least one computer or laptop and, of these, 94 per cent said these computers had an internet connection.

Most respondents used the internet at school (97%), with a slightly lower proportion (91%) using it at home. The majority (86%) of internet users said they used it for schoolwork as well as for fun. Nine per cent of children said they used the internet for fun alone, and 4 per cent said they used it for schoolwork only.

Social Networking

Given that the majority of KLT respondents are using the internet for fun, the survey delved more deeply into some of the most popular applications. Previous research has shown that many younger children are using social networking websites intended for older users (BBC, 2008). This is despite the fact that the terms and conditions set out by the three main providers, Bebo, Facebook and MySpace state that children using these sites must be aged 13 years or over.

Among the 2009 KLT participants – all of whom are aged 10 and 11 years – almost half (48%) said they are on social networking sites like Bebo, Facebook or MySpace. Boys and girls are equally likely to use these sites. Of those who said they were using these sites, 29 per cent said they use them 'a lot', and again there was little difference between girls and boys (see Figure 1).

The survey also asked about the use of multi-player online games, and nearly one half of respondents (46%) took part in these. In contrast to the use of social networking sites, there was a difference in the participation rate of girls and boys in these games – 60 per cent of boys compared with 34 per cent of girls said they play them. In addition, boys spent much more time playing multi-player online games than girls did, with 40 per cent of the former saying they do so 'a lot' compared to 17 per cent of their female counterparts (see Figure 2).

Online friends

Playing online games and using social networking sites involve children interacting with their peers and forming friendships, which is an important part of the socialisation process. However, researchers have begun to question the value of these 'virtual' friendships where personal connections are made without face-to-face contact, meaning that many children may not be developing sound interpersonal skills. Instead, online friendship means that children and teenagers can have hundreds of 'friends' without having to leave their home or open their mouths. In a poll carried out among children and young people aged between 8 and 18 years in 2006, one third said that their social network includes 'friends' they have never met (Klorer, 2009).

To find out who the children taking part in the KLT survey regarded as friends, respondents were first asked how many good friends they had. Overall, as Table 1 shows, boys and girls were equally likely to say they had one

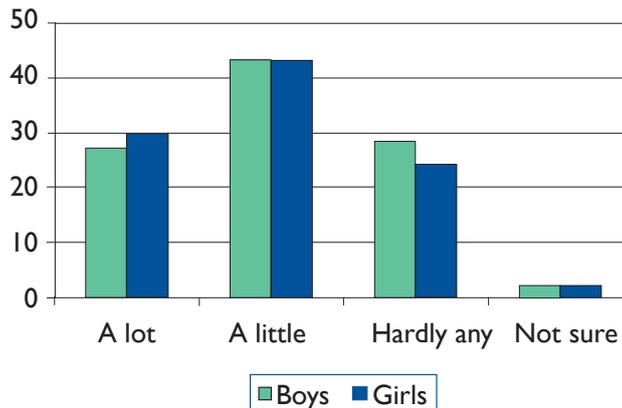Figure 1: Frequency of use of social networking sites

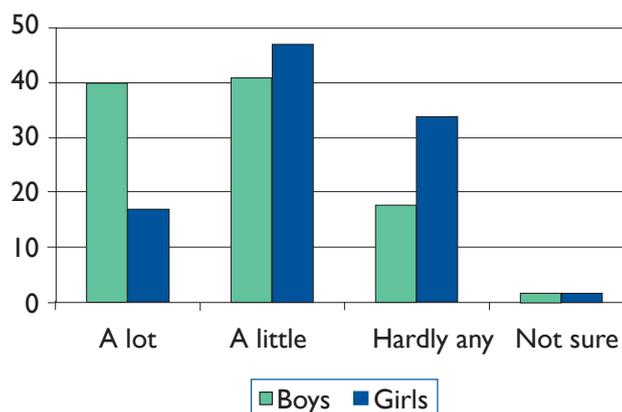Figure 2: Frequency of use of multi-player online games

Table 1: Number of good friends

	%		
	Boys	Girls	All
None	1	1	1
One	1	2	1
Two	3	5	4
Three	3	6	5
Four	6	9	8
Five or more	85	79	82

or more good friends (99%). Indeed, a large majority of children (82%) said that they have five or more good friends, with boys more likely to say this than girls (85% and 79% respectively). Whilst only a very small percentage

(less than one per cent) said they had no friends, this represented 23 children, and is, in itself, worrying.

The children were asked whether the number of good friends they

Table 2: Number of friends - don't meet face-to-face but talk to online

	%		
	Boys	Girls	All
None	59	69	65
1 to 9	23	21	22
10 to 19	6	3	4
20 to 29	3	1	2
30 to 39	2	1	1
40 or more	8	4	6

had included any that they had made through sites like Bebo, Facebook or MySpace or through online games they played – that is, 'virtual' friends. Overall, 17% of children said that the good friends they had included those they had met online. More boys (23%) than girls (13%) said their good friends did include online friends that they had made through social networking sites like Bebo, Facebook or MySpace or through online games that they played.

Finally, the respondents were asked how many friends they had that they did not meet face-to-face but whom they talked to online. Table 2 shows that approximately one third (35%) of children said they have friends that they talk to online but don't meet face-to-face. Once again, there were differences between boys and girls; 41 per cent of boys had 'virtual' friends, compared with 31 per cent of girls. Furthermore, 8 per cent of boys and 4 per cent of girls said that they had at least 40 'virtual' friends that they did not meet face-to-face.

Dangers associated with technology use

Whilst the uptake of technology has changed the way in which people communicate, the effects are not always positive, particularly for children. Research has indicated that some children and young people who believe

their 'virtual' friends are a similar age to themselves are in fact in contact with adults trying to secure information about the children for their own sinister purposes (BBC, 2007). Also associated with high levels of mobile phone and internet use is the potential for bullying. Indeed, one in eight KLT respondents said that they have experienced bullying either online or by text, and this was slightly more prevalent amongst girls than boys (15% and 11% respectively).

Given these potential dangers, it is vital that children are taught about online safety to protect them from the very real dangers that are present in the 'virtual' world. Among KLT respondents, over one third (35%) of those with internet access at home said they had access in their bedroom, which suggests that they may be using the internet whilst alone and unsupervised by adults. However, most respondents (87%) did say that their parents or their teachers had talked to them about internet safety, with one in twenty children saying they weren't sure. More girls (90%) than boys (83%) said that they had been told about internet safety, despite the fact that both were equally likely to use the internet at home or school. One in ten children who used the internet in their bedroom said their parents or teachers had not talked to them about internet safety and this figure rose to 14 per cent for boys (6% for girls).

Conclusion

The data from the 2009 KLT survey indicate widespread access to, and use of, technology such as mobile phones and computers among P7 children in Northern Ireland. The use of mobile phones is often seen as negative, as they have been linked to poor spelling and grammar, reduced attention to school work, text bullying, brain cancers, obesity and the destruction of face-to-face relationships. On the other hand, text messaging is an easy, discrete and effective means of communication, and so can help to maintain and develop relationships (Thompson and Cupples, 2008).

There was much use of online games and social networking websites among KLT respondents, despite some of the best known sites indicating that they are not suitable for children in this age group. The use of these sites and games has implications for friendship patterns, with many children claiming to have large numbers of online friends that they never actually meet, and this was particularly the case for boys responding to the survey. Whilst a lack of face-to-face interaction can be seen as negative because it may prevent children from developing sound interpersonal skills, conversely, there is the potential that online games can help socially awkward children gain acceptance and self-esteem. In addition, games can be useful social tools that allow boys to compete with and/or work cooperatively with peers.

In summary then, this Net Generation relies heavily on technology, which influences the way they think and behave in relation to leisure activities, communication and friendship.

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Key Points

- 93% of P7 children who responded to the KLT survey had their own mobile phone.
- 98% of respondents said that their family had at least one computer or laptop and of these, 94% said these computers had an internet connection.
- Almost half of boys and girls taking part in KLT use social networking sites like Bebo, Facebook or MySpace, although these sites indicate that P7 children are too young to use them.
- 46% of KLT respondents play multi-player online games, with boys more likely to do so than girls. Boys also spend much more time playing these games than girls do.
- More boys (41%) than girls (31%) said their friends include people they talk to online but don't meet face-to-face.
- 13% of KLT respondents have experienced bullying either online or by text.
- Most respondents (87%) said their parents or their teachers had talked to them about internet safety, with more girls (90%) than boys (83%) saying that they had done so.

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Kids' Life and Times is carried out annually and documents children's opinions on a wide range of social issues. In 2009, 3657 children in P7 completed the survey online in schools.

The survey is a joint initiative of the two Northern Ireland universities and aims to provide an independent source of information on what P7 pupils think about the issues that affect them. Check the web site for more information on the survey findings (**www.ark.ac.uk/klt**) or call the survey director on 028 9097 3585 with any queries.

In collaboration with Queen's University Belfast and University of Ulster.