



Research Update



Online and Safe?

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In 2009, we reported how 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 (Lloyd and Devine, 2009). Since then, the development and ever increasing functionality of smart phones and tablets mean that our reliance on such devices has become stronger. However, alongside these technical advantages are concerns about the effect the overuse of these technologies can have on the physical and mental health of children and young people. These issues include cyber bullying, sexual grooming and trolling.

Therefore, in 2013, a module on children's use of the internet was included in the **Kids' Life and Times (KLT) Survey**. Some of the questions had previously been asked within the 2009 KLT; however, given the technological and cultural changes since then, many of the original questions were revised and updated. This Research Update explores the availability and use of new technologies among children in Northern Ireland using KLT data. All respondents to this survey are in their final year of primary school (Primary 7), and so are aged 10 or 11 years old. The survey was completed online in school.

range of technological devices. KLT data since 2008 have consistently shown that the vast majority of KLT respondents (98% or 99%) have said that their family owns at least one computer or laptop. In recent years, there has been a steady increase in the number of these devices owned by respondents' family. Again reflecting previous years, most KLT respondents (90%) in 2013 said that they had their own personal mobile phone, and this was true for slightly more girls (92%) than boys (89%). Of these children who owned a phone, four out of five (82%) had a 'smart' phone, with similar proportions of boys (83%) and girls (81%). (A smart phone was defined as one on which the user could access the internet or use apps.) The high level of ownership of smart phones, as well of smart TVs, means that the whole context of access to the internet has changed since 2008 when the first KLT survey was carried out. Today, internet access is technically feasible and available to children on a continuous basis and across a range of devices.

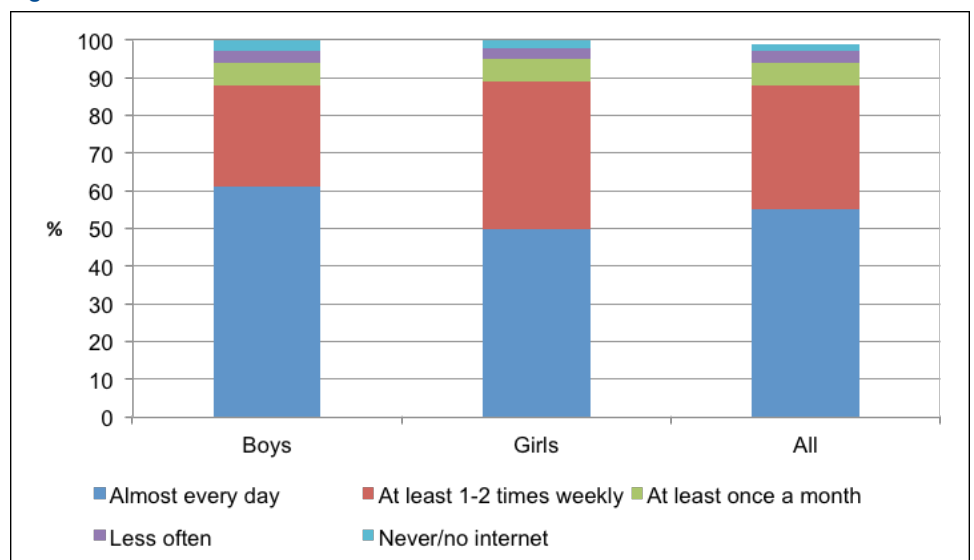
Use of internet at home

Use of the internet is a commonplace activity in the lives of 10 and 11 year olds. In 2009, 91 per cent of KLT respondents said that they used the internet at home. However, by 2013, only a tiny minority (1%) said that they never did, with a further one per cent saying that they do not have the internet at home – see Figure 1. In contrast, over half of respondents (55%) used the internet at home every day, and this is higher for boys (61%) than for girls (50%).

Accessing the internet

Those children who used the internet at home were asked to identify all the ways that they usually did this, and Table 1 shows the top five responses. The most common method was a tablet computer (53%), followed by a computer elsewhere in the house (47%) and a phone (45%). Two key points arise from these data. Firstly, whilst around one half of respondents (49%) access the internet at home using just one method, one quarter of them (27%) are using at least

Figure 1: Use of the internet at home.



Access to technology

Children have extensive access to a wide

three. Secondly, in general, there is little difference in the technology that boys and girls are using to access the internet at home. The exception is use of a games console, which was identified by seven per cent of boys but only one per cent of girls.

The high level of usage of phones, laptops and tablets among children means that internet access is flexible, geographically widespread, and potentially unsupervised. However, some respondents specifically mentioned that their access to the internet is controlled, for example:

- *On dad and mum's laptop with mum watching me which I think is good.*
- *Mostly the kitchen where my mum and dad keep an eye on what I'm doing.*
- *On the family computer in the living room so that mammy can see what we are doing on it.*
- *On my iPod but never for social networking sites.*

Internet safety

There is a growing concern about keeping children safe online, and a series of questions in the 2013 KLT Survey explored this. Three out of five children said that teachers looked at what they were doing when they were using the internet at school always (28%) or mostly (30%). Only three per cent said that their teachers never do this, and a further five per cent said that they didn't know if teachers did this or not.

Figure 2 clearly shows that level of supervision of internet use at home was much lower than at school, with only one third of children saying that their parents/guardians looked at what they were doing (13% all the time, and 19% most of the time). Conversely, one in five (19%) said that their parents/guardians never did this.

This graph also shows that girls reported higher levels of supervision of internet use than boys did, especially at home. Thus, 27 per cent of boys said that their parents/guardians looked at what they were doing on the internet always or most of the time, compared with

Table 1: Ways of accessing the internet at home

	%		
	Boys	Girls	All
On a tablet computer	52	54	53
On a computer elsewhere in the house	46	48	47
On a phone	46	45	45
On a computer in a bedroom	24	23	23
On a games console, eg Xbox, Wii	7	1	4

Note: respondents could identify more than one method

37 per cent of girls – a difference of 10 percentage points.

Around one half of children (53%) said that their parents/guardians had set rules about their use of the internet, and this is higher for girls (61%) than for boys (46%). In 2009, 87 per cent of children who used the internet said that their parents or teachers had talked to them about doing this safely, with girls more likely to say this than boys (90% and 83% respectively). However, in 2013, similar proportions of girls and boys (94% and 91% respectively) said that they have been taught about staying safe online in the last year.

Teachers were the source most frequently identified as having taught the children about internet safety (73%), followed by parents or guardians (62%) and a TV programme (16%) – see Table 2. Girls were more likely than boys to identify parents/guardians or a teacher, whilst boys were slightly more likely to identify a TV programme. Respondents could also identify other sources, and these included police (11%), an internet

safety talk or event (6%) and Childline/NSPCC (1%). Many children specifically mentioned the Bee Safe programme.

Whilst 43 per cent of respondents identified only one source of information on internet safety, 60 per cent identified at least two. Thus, children are getting information from a range of sources, as the following comments show:

- *My Mum, Dad, Granny, Granda and several police visits to school.*
- *My class went to a bee safe day (about being safe) and the police talked to us about staying safe online.*
- *My parents said don't go on Facebook or anything because of people sending bad messages.*
- *My big brother works with computers and he put this thing on my iPad where he can see what am doing and if I am on anything I shouldn't or someone's being nasty to me or I am being nasty to them it beeps on his iPhone or Blackberry or iPad.*

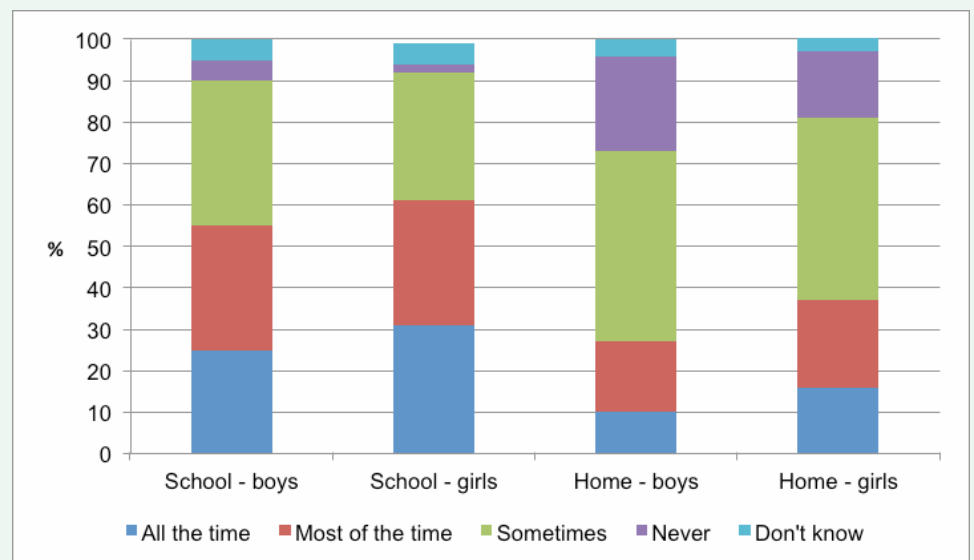


Figure 2: Supervision of internet use at school and at home.

Table 2: Source of information on staying safe online

	%		
	Boys	Girls	All
My teacher	68	78	73
My parent(s) or guardian(s)	57	67	62
A TV programme	18	14	16
Police	11	11	11
Internet safety talk or event, eg Bee Safe	5	6	6
My friends	5	6	5
Childline/NSPCC	1	1	1
I can't remember	4	3	3

Note: respondents could identify more than one method

Upsetting experience on the internet

Whilst access to the internet can be seen as beneficial for educational and social development, one in six children (16%) said that they had seen something on the internet in the last year that upset or worried them. This figure was slightly higher for girls (17%) than for boys (14%). However, one in ten respondents said that they could not remember.

As shown in Table 3, the most commonly identified reactions to seeing something upsetting were to leave the website/turn off the computer, and to tell an adult (45% each). One in six (17%) respondents said that they reported it online, and a slightly lower proportion said that they didn't do anything (12%). The use of Childline or other helplines was identified by a very small proportion of respondents (2%). In general, responses from girls were similar to those from boys, with the exception of telling an adult (49% for girls compared with 40% of boys).

The following quotes indicate children's reaction to upsetting online images:

- *I put something nasty up to upset the person that upset me but I regret it.*
- *I cried and couldn't sleep that night.*
- *Got scared because it was about the end of the world.*
- *I saw the Boston marathon so I got scared and told my parents.*
- *Started laughing.*

Social media

In 2009, 48 per cent of KLT respondents who used the internet said that they were on social networking sites like Bebo, Facebook or Myspace. Since then, the use of social networking sites has grown (65%); however, sites such as Bebo and Myspace have fallen in popularity, counterbalanced by an increase in the use of sites such as Facebook and Twitter.

In 2013, of those children who had a social networking page or profile, 44 per cent used these sites at least once a day. In 2009, the question and option responses were phrased differently. At that time, 29 per cent said that they spent 'a lot' of time on these sites, 43 per cent said that they spent 'a little' time, whilst 26 per cent

Table 3: Action when seeing something upsetting online

	%		
	Boy	Girl	All
I left the website or turned off my computer or device	43	46	45
I told an adult	40	49	45
I reported it online	16	17	17
I made contact with Childline or another helpline	4	2	2
I did something else	8	7	7
I didn't do anything	14	11	12
I can't remember	3	4	4

Note: respondents could identify more than one method

Table 4: Use of social media

	%		
	Boy	Girl	All
I don't use these type of websites	47	46	46
Of those that use these sites			
At least once a day	41	46	44
2 or 3 times a week	26	25	26
Once a week	9	12	10
Less often than once a week	16	10	13
I don't know	9	7	8

said 'hardly ever'. Despite the difference in wording, these figures are broadly comparable to the figures shown in Table 4 for respondents to the 2013 survey.

Whilst the frequency of use of social media was fairly similar among boys and girls, boys were more likely to have a more public presence on these sites. One in five boys (21%) said that their page or profile can be seen by anyone, compared with 11 per cent of girls (see Table 5). At the same time, 53 per cent of boys said that their page or profile can only be seen by their friends, compared with 69 per cent of girls.

Bullying

Around one in eight children (13%) said that they had been bullied by someone sending nasty texts or putting up bad things about them on the internet, with slightly more girls (15%) than boys (11%) saying this. The figures for 2013 are similar to those found in previous years of the KLT survey. Of interest is the fact that in 2008, 9 per cent of children did not know if they had been victims of this type of bullying, whilst more recently, the figure has been five per cent. This slight decrease could suggest that children are more aware of cyberbullying as an issue, and so can be more definitive in their response to this question.

Conclusion

The use of technology, and almost universal access to the internet, is a basic feature of the lives of most 10 and 11 year olds in Northern Ireland, and this matches the pattern found in other research (for example, see Gardiner, 2012). Over recent years, the development of internet-enabled devices, such as mobile phones and tablets, has provided the opportunity to access information, games and social networking sites at any time and in any place. However, along with opportunity comes risk, and for many children, this activity is unsupervised. This risk has been identified by parents

Table 5: Visibility of social media pages/profile

	%		
	Boy	Girl	All
It can only be seen by my friends and no one else	53	69	62
It can only be seen by my friends and their friends	12	9	10
It can be seen by anyone	21	11	16
It can't be seen	5	4	5
I don't know	8	7	7

and schools, and so nine out of ten KLT respondents have received some form of information on internet safety. Nevertheless, the public nature of many children's Facebook site, and the fact that 16 per cent of KLT respondents said that they have seen something on the internet

that upset them, highlight the challenge that is faced in making technology and the online world a safe and appropriate resource for children.

References

- Gardiner, Adele (2012) *The online behaviour of children and young people*, Edinburgh: Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People
- Lloyd, Katrina and Devine, Paula (2009) *The Net Generation*, ARK Research Update 62

Key points

- 90% of Primary 7 children own a mobile phone, and 82% of these are smart phones.
- 55% of 10 or 11 year olds use the internet at home every day.
- At home, one half of KLT respondents access the internet on a phone.
- 58% of respondents say that their teachers always or mostly always supervise their use of the internet.
- 37% say that their parents always or mostly always supervise their use of the internet at home, and this is higher for girls (32%) than boys (27%).
- Nine out of ten Primary 7 children have been taught about internet safety.
- 16% of 10 or 11 year olds have seen something on the internet that upset them.
- 54% of KLT respondents use social networking sites, and 16% of these children say that their page can be seen by anyone.

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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 2013, 3,773 children in Primary 7 completed the survey online in schools during May and June.

The survey is a joint initiative of the two Northern Ireland universities and aims to provide an independent source of information on what Primary 7 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 5962 with any queries.

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