

Children Online: Access, Wellbeing and Bullying

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In 2009 and 2013 the annual Kids' Life and Times (KLT) online surveys of 10/11 year-olds in their final year of primary school in Northern Ireland included questions on internet and mobile phone usage (Lloyd and Devine, 2009; Devine and Lloyd, 2014). Since then, and particularly as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the use of technology has become increasingly ubiquitous in all our lives. However, more attention has been paid to the role of the online world in the lives of children and young people, including on the benefits and risks the internet brings. Reflecting this growing interest, the 2024 KLT survey revisited the topic and included questions on mobile phone and internet use among our 10/11 year-old respondents. Drawing on the survey findings, this Research Update explores how access to, and use of, technology has changed, particularly since 2013. It also examines relationships between internet use and children's wellbeing, self-esteem and experiences of bullying. The 2024 KLT survey was completed in school by 4,360 respondents.

Access to technology

According to an Ofcom survey (2024), by the age of 11 years, nine in 10 children had their own mobile phone. In line with these findings, 87 per cent of KLT respondents in 2024 reported that they had their own mobile phone. Interestingly, KLT findings show that mobile phone ownership has fallen slightly over the years, from 93 per cent in 2009 and 90 per cent in 2013. Continuing the trend evident in the earlier KLT surveys, in 2024 slightly more girls (90%) than boys (85%) said they had their own mobile phone. In 2024, nearly all respondents (99%) with a mobile phone used it to access the internet, with

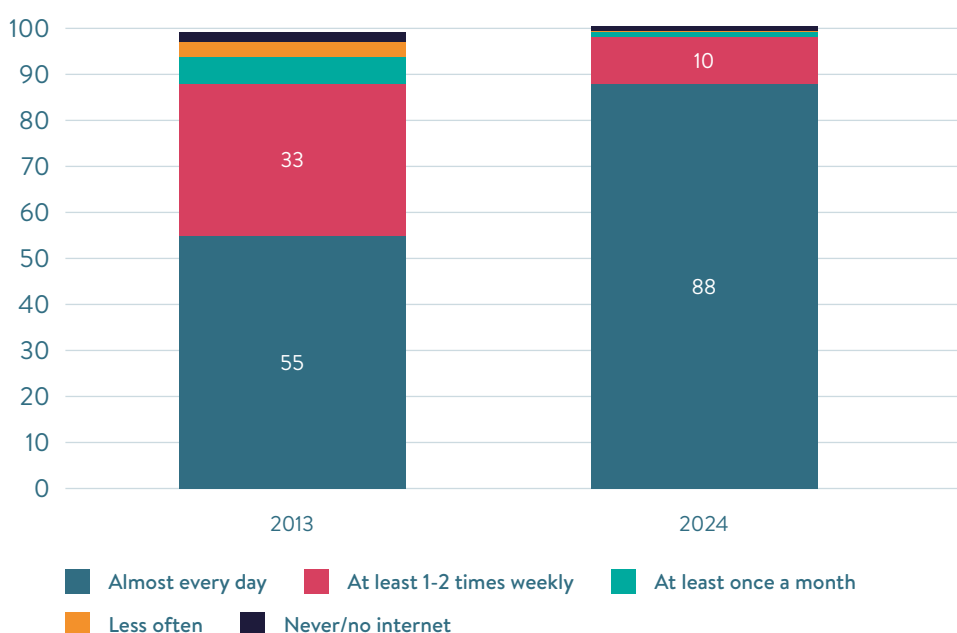
84 per cent doing so every day. Whilst not directly comparable, 82 per cent of children in the 2013 KLT survey said they had a 'smart' phone, defined as allowing access to the internet. This suggests a marked increase in the proportion of children who can access the internet on their phones.

Internet at home

Since its inception in 2008, the vast majority of KLT respondents (around 98%) have reported that their family own at least one computer or laptop. Over the years, findings have indicated a steady increase in the number of computers or laptops owned by respondents' families. For example, in 2008, 62 per cent of respondents said their family owned

two or more computers or laptops while by 2024 this had risen to 72 per cent. Children's access to the internet at home has also increased over time. In 2024, responses showed access to the internet at home was almost universal. While this is similar to the 2013 KLT survey (99%), it has increased somewhat since the 2009 survey (91%). Further, when asked about how often they use the internet at home, more 10/11 year-old children in 2024 (88%) compared to 2013 (55%) said they use the internet at home almost every day (Figure 1). This could reflect the findings of Purdy et al. (2023) whose study showed that 62 per cent of 8-13 year-olds used the internet for homework purposes.

Figure 1: Use of the internet at home % (KLT 2013 and 2024)



Accessing the Internet

While most KLT respondents in 2024 had access to the internet, just over half (51%) said they ‘always’ had access when they want to or need to (Table 1). While

there were no gender differences, there were some slight differences in relation to family financial background, with children from high affluence families

more likely to ‘always’ have access to the internet when they want to or need to (55%).

Table 1: Access to internet when want to or need to, by family affluence (KLT 2024)

| | % | | | |
|------------------------------|---------------|------------------|----------------|-----|
| | Low affluence | Medium affluence | High affluence | All |
| Never | 3 | 2 | 1 | 2 |
| Sometimes | 17 | 16 | 16 | 16 |
| Often | 19 | 21 | 20 | 21 |
| Always | 49 | 50 | 55 | 51 |
| Don’t know/prefer not to say | 12 | 11 | 8 | 10 |

Internet safety

The high level of internet usage, especially on mobile phones, means that children may potentially be accessing content unsupervised. On a positive note, nearly all respondents (98%) taking part in the 2024 KLT survey said they had been taught about staying safe online in the past year, up from 93 per cent in 2013 and 87 per cent in 2009. This reflects a growing awareness of the potential dangers to children of online content as exemplified by a section on the BBC website called ‘Internet Safety’ (BBC, n.d.). The range of topics on the BBC website relating to online dangers to children includes sexual content, scams, and bullying.

However, as Table 2 demonstrates, some respondents to KLT in 2024 reported that their parent/carer had little or no knowledge of what they did on the internet (12%). This finding echoes data from a report by The Children’s Society (2022) showing that 10 per cent of 14-15 year-olds thought their parents knew ‘nothing’ about what they did on the internet. In response to a similar, but slightly differently worded, question asked in KLT 2013 (Do your parents/guardians look at what you are doing on the internet at home?), nearly one fifth of children (19%) said that their parent/guardian never looked at what they were doing online compared to three per cent of children in 2024 who felt that their

parent/carer knew nothing of what they did on the internet. In 2013, boys (23%) were more likely than girls (15%) to say that their parent/carer never looked at what they were doing online. While the figures were significantly lower in 2024, nonetheless, more boys (5%) than girls (2%) felt that their parent/carer knew nothing of their online behaviours. Conversely, in 2024 more girls (49%) than boys (40%) felt that their parent/carer knew ‘a lot’ about what they did online. A similar pattern was evident in 2013 with 37 per cent percent of girls compared to 27 percent of boys saying that their parent/carer looked ‘all of the time’ or ‘most of the time’ at what they were doing online.

Table 2: Children’s perceptions of parental awareness of their internet use, by gender (KLT 2024) ¹

| | % | | |
|------------------------------|------|-------|-----|
| | Boys | Girls | All |
| Nothing | 5 | 2 | 3 |
| Just a little | 10 | 9 | 9 |
| Quite a bit | 27 | 25 | 26 |
| A lot | 40 | 49 | 44 |
| Don’t know/prefer not to say | 19 | 15 | 17 |

¹ Due to rounding, some table columns do not equal 100%

Wellbeing

The increase in technology use and a concomitant rise in the prevalence of mental health issues among children and young people has led to a plethora of research on the relationship between the two issues. Reviewing the evidence, The Children's Society (2022) reported conflicting results with some studies suggesting that higher levels of screen use among children is associated with lower wellbeing, while others report no difference or, indeed, small positive effects between screen use and children's wellbeing. To explore the relationship

between the use of technology and wellbeing among the children taking part in KLT 2024, the KIDSCREEN-10 (Ravens-Sieberer et al., 2010) was included in the survey. This is a measure of wellbeing, with higher mean scores indicating better wellbeing. The results indicated little difference in children's wellbeing and how often they used the internet, either on their mobile phone or at home. However, as Table 3 shows, the highest wellbeing scores were among children who said they 'always' had access to the internet when they wanted to or

needed to (M=49.67) while those who 'never' had internet access when they wanted to or needed to had the lowest wellbeing scores (M=45.96). Similarly, children who felt their parent/carer knew 'a lot' about what they did on the internet had the highest wellbeing (Mean=50.23) particularly when compared to those who felt their parent/carer knew 'nothing' (Mean=43.31). However, these findings may be mediated by family affluence, something that is worth exploring further in future surveys.

Table 3: Wellbeing by access to internet when want to or need to (Mean KIDSCREEN-10 scores) (KLT 2024)

| | KIDSCREEN-10 Mean score |
|-----------|-------------------------|
| | Mean |
| Never | 45.96 |
| Sometimes | 47.31 |
| Often | 47.47 |
| Always | 49.67 |
| All | 48.45 |

Self-esteem

Self-esteem refers to children's sense of worth and confidence in themselves. Research suggests that higher self-esteem is related to resilience, the ability to deal with change, and the development of positive relationships. Interest has been growing in the association between technology use and children's self-esteem and, in its review, The Children's Society (2022) noted conflicting findings. For example, some studies reported poorer self-esteem among children who use technology excessively, especially social media, while others report no link between self-esteem and use of technology. In

the 2024 KLT survey, the social self-esteem sub-scale of the Coopersmith (1967) measure was used. This sub-scale assesses children's perceptions of their social interactions and relationships with peers. Higher mean scores indicate higher levels of social self-esteem.

The findings showed there was no difference in children's social self-esteem and how often they used the internet, either on their phone or at home. However, as with wellbeing, there was a significant difference in social self-esteem depending on access to the internet when the child needed to or

wanted to. The highest mean score was among children who could access the internet when they needed to or wanted to (Mean=13.97) compared to their peers who could 'never' do so (Mean=13.21). There was also a significant difference in mean scores depending on children's perceptions of how much their parent/carer knew about what they did on the internet. As Table 4 shows, those who felt their parent/carer knew 'a lot' about what they did on the internet had the highest social self-esteem (Mean=14.05) especially when compared to those who felt their parent/carer knew 'nothing' (Mean=13.07).

Table 4: Social self-esteem by how much parent/carer knows about internet use (Mean Social Self-esteem scores) (KLT 2024)

| | Social Self-esteem Mean score |
|---------------|-------------------------------|
| | Mean |
| Nothing | 13.07 |
| Just a little | 13.46 |
| Quite a bit | 13.84 |
| A lot | 14.05 |
| All | 13.88 |

Internet bullying

Reflecting a range of research findings (Ofcom, 2024; The Children's Society, 2022; Purdy et al., 2023), data from the KLT surveys consistently show that children are experiencing online bullying. In 2024, of the 33 per cent of KLT respondents who said they had 'ever' experienced bullying in school, around one in five (21%) said this had been online, for example on mobile phones, games, social media etc. Online bullying was reported by more girls than boys (24% and 17% respectively). The wording of the question on online bullying has varied over the years; nonetheless, there is an upward trend with 10 per cent of children in the first KLT survey in 2008

saying they had been bullied by receiving nasty texts or having bad things said about them on the internet. By 2013, 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. Again this was the case for slightly more girls (15%) than boys (11%).

This increasing trend in online bullying is a real cause for concern. In line with other research (The Children's Society, 2022; Przybylski and Bowes, 2017), the findings from KLT 2024 demonstrate a clear link between online bullying and children's wellbeing. Those KLT

respondents who had experienced online bullying had poorer wellbeing (Mean=41.59) than their peers who had not been bullied (Mean=46.10). Children who had experienced online bullying also had poorer social self-esteem (Mean=12.56) than their peers who had not (Mean=13.30). Further analysis indicated that while both boys and girls who had been bullied online had poorer wellbeing and social self-esteem than their peers who had not, the wellbeing of boys appeared to be affected more than the wellbeing of girls. The opposite was true for social self-esteem, where girls appeared to be affected more than boys.

Conclusion

Reflecting previous years, the 2024 KLT data confirm that the use of technology, and almost universal access to the internet, is a fixture in the lives of most 10/11 year-olds in Northern Ireland. However, the survey suggests that not all children have access to the internet when they need to or want to. This is related, to an extent, to family affluence, wellbeing and social self-esteem. While

the vast majority of children have been taught about online safety, some report that their parents know very little about what they are doing on the internet. This is concerning for two reasons. Firstly, the rise in online bullying and its relationship with poorer wellbeing and social self-esteem. Secondly, the dangers that have been widely reported in academic research, the media and by the numerous

groups that are now lobbying for greater legislation around online safety for children and young people. Taken together, the findings from the 2024 KLT survey highlight the continuing challenge of making technology and the online world a safe and appropriate environment for children.

Key Points:

- 87 per cent of 10/11 year-olds in Northern Ireland owned a mobile phone and the majority of these children (84%) used their phone to access the internet every day.
- Access to the internet at home was almost universal among KLT respondents.
- While 98 per cent of respondents have been taught about online safety, 12 per cent say their parent/carer know little or nothing about what they are doing on the internet.
- Children who 'always' had access to the internet when they wanted or needed to had higher wellbeing and social self-esteem scores than their peers who 'never' had access when they wanted to or needed to.
- Of the 33 per cent of KLT respondents who said they had experienced bullying, around one in five (21%) said this had been online, and this was higher for girls than for boys.

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The Kids' Life and Times (KLT) survey is carried out annually and documents children's attitudes to a wide range of social issues. In 2024, the KLT survey was completed in school by 4,360 P7 respondents.

KLT is a joint project of Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University, and provides an independent source of information on what children think. For more information, visit the survey website at www.ark.ac.uk/klt



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