

TOP 10 MYTHS ABOUT CHILDREN'S ONLINE RISKS

1 Digital natives know it all

Children knowing more than their parents has been exaggerated – only 36 per cent of 9-16-year olds say it is very true that “I know more about the internet than my parents” – 31 per cent say “a bit true”, and two in three 9-10 year olds say “not true”. Talk of digital natives obscures children's need for support in developing digital skills.

2 Everyone is creating their own content now

In the past month, only one in five used a file-sharing site or created a pet/avatar and half that number wrote a blog. Creative activities are rarest among younger children. While social networking makes it easier to upload content, most children use the internet for ready-made, mass produced content.

3 Under 13s can't use social networking sites so no worries

With 38 per cent 9-12 year olds having an SNS profile, it is clear that age limits don't work. Since many “under-age” users registered with a false age, even if the provider did tailor privacy and safety settings to suit young children, they couldn't identify them. Some young social networkers have public profiles which display personal information, and some contact people they haven't met. Should providers strengthen their protections? Or get rid of age limits altogether?

4 Everyone is watching porn online

Estimates for exposure to pornography online are lower than many anticipated – a quarter saw sexual images in the past year online or offline, and one in seven saw them online, rising to a quarter of older teens. Even assuming some under-reporting, it seems that media hype over pornography is based on unrepresentative samples or just supposition.

5 Bullies are baddies

Most (60 per cent) of those who bully – online or offline – have themselves been bullied by others, and 40 per cent of those who bully online have been bullied online. Both those who bully and who are bullied online tend to be more psychologically vulnerable, suggesting a vicious cycle of behaviour that damages both victim and perpetrator.

6 People you meet on the internet are strangers

Most (87 per cent) 11-16 year olds are in touch online with people they know face-to-face. Four in ten have online contacts that they met online but who are connected with their friends or family. A quarter are in touch with people unconnected with their social circle, and 9 per cent met offline someone they first met online. Few went unaccompanied or met someone older and only 1 per cent had a negative experience. The challenge is to protect children from rare but harmful occurrences without limiting the opportunities of the majority.

7 Offline risks migrate online

Well, in part, the evidence supports this and it is important – children who report more offline risks of various kinds are more likely to report more risk encounters online and, significantly, more likely to report harm from online experiences. But, offline risk does not predict all online risk encounters, so it should not be assumed that children not already identified as at risk offline are not at risk online. We still don't know all the factors that account for online harm, and it is important to see both online and offline risks in context.

Myths about internet safety tend to exaggerate or over simplify, and they are often out of date

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Putting the PC in the living room will help

53 per cent go online at a friends' house, 49 per cent go online in their bedroom and 33 per cent go online via a mobile phone or handheld device. So this advice is out of date. It would be better to advise parents to talk to their child about the internet or share an online activity with them.

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Teaching digital skills will reduce online risk

More skills are associated with more, not less, risk – because more use leads to more skills, more skills lead to more opportunities, and opportunities are linked to risk. One reason that opportunities and risks are linked is because children must explore and encounter some risk to learn and

gain resilience. Another is that exploring for information or fun leads to unexpected risks because the online environment is not designed with children's interests in mind (too many pop-ups, for instance). But more skills could reduce the harm that some children experience from online risk.

10

Children can get around safety software

In fact, only 28 per cent of 11-16 year olds say they can change filter preferences. And most say what their parents do in relation to their internet use is helpful (27 per cent a lot, 43 per cent a little). However, it is true that nearly half think their parents' actions limit their online activities while a third say they ignore their parents (7 per cent a lot, 29 per cent a little).

