Children's Internet Use and Parents' Perceptions of their Children's Online Experience

# Details

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Report and working paper

## Topics

* Internet usage, practices and engagement
* Risks and harms
* Online safety and policy regulation
* Digital and socio-cultural environment

## Sample

Children between 8 and 15 years of age and their respective parent or guardian

## Implications For Parents About

* Parental practices / parental mediation
* Parental digital literacy
* Parenting guidance / support

## Implications For Policy Makers About

Creating a safe environment for children online

# Abstract

The Malta Communications Authority (MCA) commissioned the University of Malta to carry out a survey on the Use of Information Communication Technology (ICT) by minors.
The aims of this research were:
 To investigate children's access, use and perceptions of the Internet
 To investigate the parents’ perceptions of their children’s Internet use
 To compare parents’ perceptions with patterns reported by children.
The study involved a survey with a representative sample of children between 8 and 15 years of age from all demographic regions of Malta and Gozo, together with a questionnaire to be completed by their respective parent or guardian. Children and parent responses were paired to enable a direct comparison of the children and their parents’ responses. The parent and child questionnaires are based on the previous versions of the studies held by MCA in 2010 and 2012 and on the research carried out by the pan-European research project, EU Kids Online II.

With the knowledge that a good percentage of participants do not return questionnaires, 2000 questionnaires were distributed to children in 23 primary and secondary schools and 2000 to their parents, with the hope of having a 70% response rate. In fact 3137 duly filled up questionnaires were returned thus giving a response rate of 78%. The field work was carried out in November and December 2014.

Salient Findings:
 Two of the most important results of the study are that the internet in general, and
social networks in particular, are very present in the lives of Maltese children between
the ages of 8 and 15. Parents’ perceptions of their children’s internet use is, in several
cases, very different from what internet use actually is.

 The vast majority of Maltese households participating in the survey who have children
between 8 and 15 have internet access so much so that both children and parents said
that the availability of internet access from home is widespread (97.5% for children).

 The devices children used mostly for internet access are computers, laptops, tablets
and mobile phones. Once more the study shows that parents think that their children
use particular technologies to access the internet less than they in fact use them. For
example while 58.9% of children say that they use the mobile and 24.2% say that they
use a game console to access the internet, only 42% of parents think that their children
use the mobile and 11.1% think that their children use a game console to do so.

 The majority of children (59.1%) say that they use the internet daily while 43.5% of
children report that during weekdays they use the internet between 30 minutes to 2
hours daily. Children claim that during the weekend, they use the internet for more
hours when compared to weekdays. There is also a sharp increase in the number of
children who use the internet for 3 to 5 hours.

 The discrepancy between what children actually do and their parents’ perception of
what the children do is shown in their differing answers to a number of questions.
There is, for example, a 20% discrepancy between children’s responses that they access
the internet from their own room and the parents’ perception to this access. Children
also have more internet access from friends’ (24.1%) and relatives’ houses (41.2%), and
shops (26.2%) than their parents are aware of. Internet access from schools registered
a surprisingly low figure of 22%.

 Parents (87.8%) think that their children use the internet for school work much more
than their children (69.9%) actually do. On the other hand children engage in a number
of activities online more than their parents believe they do. Such activities include
chatting, social networking, emailing, video calling, downloading films or music,
watching videos on line, blogging and online shopping. In some cases, for example, in
chatting, video calling and online shopping, the difference between parents’ perception
and children use can be as high as 17%. On the other hand, parents (84.4%) think that
their children play online more than children say they do (80.3%).

 Children seem to put more information online than their parents are aware of, for
example, real date of birth, mobile number and home address.

 Facebook (56.5%), Skype (50.4%) and Google (65.1%) are the sites most popular with
children even though such platforms usually require one to be 13 years of age before
having an account with them. This is probably the reason why 38.6% of the children in
the sample say that they have false date of birth and others say that they even have a
fake name.

 Parents and children also differ in their assessment of risk. Parents (8%) think that the
internet is safe for their children much less than children (26.3%) think it is. The public
posting of things on the Social Networking Sites provides another divide: 11.4% of
children think that it is fine to do so but only 6.2% of parents agree. While 15.7% of
children think that it is safe to meet new people on the internet, only 3.3% of parents
consider such an activity as safe. One area of consensus is the importance of using
privacy setting on Social Networking Sites. Both parents (80.6%) and children (79.8%)
strongly agree.

 Hacking is considered by 34.4% of children to be the most dangerous thing that can
happen to them on the internet. This is followed by 19.6% who mentioned viruses as
the most dangerous online experience. Unpleasant or inappropriate comments (5%) or
pictures (4.2%) are considered less dangerous than unpleasant or inappropriate videos
(15.2%).

 When children were asked to mark whether they had any experiences of risk from a list
provided in the questionnaire, 44.6% of children mentioned that they had a virus and
45.4% encountered pop-ups online whilst 22.1% of children indicated that they never
experienced any of the list of experiences.

 Over half of the children who were contacted by strangers online say that they did not
feel upset about it which is probably why 31.8% said they did nothing about it. A similar
situation is observed for pop ups where fewer children said they spoke to someone
about it. Many said that they tried to solve it on their own or did nothing about it. In
fact the number of children who said they were not upset by pop ups was 61.2%.

 The children’s preferred sources for safety information are mainly their parents (77.9%)
and their school (66.9%). This is possibly due to how children perceive their parents and
schools as being knowledgeable and in a position where they can help them.

 Around half of the parent respondents get safety information from family and friends
(50.5%) and from the media (49.1%). Parents also seem to be getting such information
from their child’s school (46%) and over one-fourth of the parents (30.4%) get this
information from safety websites.

 32.6% of parents think that their children are reasonably able to deal with what
bothers them on the internet, while 21.1% think their child is highly able to do so.
Around one-fifth of parents (22.6%) were not aware of their children’s abilities in this
regard.

 When questioned about their own abilities, 22.2% of parents responded that they
could somewhat help their children while 54.8% said they are able to help them
considerably.

 62.9% of children said they could find information about how to use the internet safely.
Over half of the children said they could block messages and around 46% of children
said they could bookmark a website and change their privacy settings. When asked
about the safety measures taken, 44.9% of children said that they had set privacy
settings. 63.9% of children had protected their devices with a password and 53.3% use
different passwords.

 Very few parents (1.6%) apply a restrictive type of mediation by not allowing their
children to use the internet. The most common practice that parents mentioned was that they spoke to their children about online dangers (67.2%). However, parents still
kept track of the websites their child visited (66%) indicating that although they talk to
their children about online risks, they also monitor their online activity to ensure their
child’s safety. Over 50% of the parents say they talk to their children, help them with
difficulties, explain why some websites are harmful and suggest ways to use the
internet safely. 6.1% of parents do not take any of the following actions.

 One of the scopes of this research was to analyse how much awareness children and
their parents have of Besmartonline!; where this awareness comes from; and whether
what they associate to it is in actual fact related to what it stands for.

 The study shows that 53.8% of the children in the questionnaire had seen the
Besmartonline! logo. The majority of children (71.1%) had seen the logo at school while
close to one third of children (31.8%) had seen it on TV. The majority have a correct
idea of what the logo stands for. Only a minority (39.9%) of parents have seen the logo,
most of them on TV and at the child’s school. Their awareness of what the logo stands
for is high.

# Outcome

 Two of the most important results of the study are that the internet in general, and
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