

# Reflections on the games families play

Is the internet bringing more opportunities to children and young people? Are children encountering new risks online? How are parents responding? Indeed, whose responsibility is children's online safety? These and many other questions arise for academics, policy makers and the public as new forms of media and communication technology become widely available in homes, schools and the workplace.

The 'UK Children Go Online' project, which I directed, surveyed 1,500 children and their parents, together with a series of focus group discussions, paired child-parent interviews and in-home observations of internet use. It emerged that the very rapidity of internet diffusion into the home has left many parents unprepared for their children's enthusiastic and often skilled take-up of this complex technology. The national survey of UK 9- to 19-year-olds in spring 2004, suggested that children and young people lead in the adoption of the internet, outstripping their parents and other adults in access and use – 98 per cent had accessed the internet from somewhere (compared with 63 per cent of adults in other surveys), three quarters from home. 36 per cent had more than one computer at home, and 24 per cent had broadband access. Access is increasingly multi-platform: via PC, digital TV, games console or mobile phone.

These new media pose new challenges for families as they seek to manage their personal relationships and the time-space dimensions of their domestic environments. One may ask *why* many parents are



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creating a media-rich home for their children, and what consequences this has. My previous work argued that, among other reasons, the growing perception that public spaces are unwelcoming or unsafe for children and young people is encouraging the privatisation of children's leisure. In particular children's bedrooms are providing media-rich, personalised opportunities for safe and entertaining identity expression and peer-focused relationship exploration (Livingstone, 2002). The rise of this 'bedroom culture' has consequences for family life, resulting in what Patrice Flichy has termed 'living together separately', associated in turn with the historical shift identified by Anthony Giddens from the 'Victorian' to the 'democratic family'.

Within this broader context, I wish to pinpoint some particular challenges for parents and children in managing the internet at home. This is timely in policy circles, for the apparently private matter of how parents manage their children's access

to the internet is increasingly being built into public policy regarding media regulation and media literacy. As Ofcom, the communications regulator, said in its Media Literacy consultation of 2004,

*With increasing complexity of technology and wider media choice people will have to take more responsibility for what they and their children see and hear on screen and online ... We will all become gatekeepers for content coming into our homes.*

In other words, there are national and international pressures from regulators to ensure that responsibility for children's media use is devolved to parents.

What are parents being asked to be responsible for? I suggest that an array of opportunities and risks (see Table 1) are already evident, though this continues to change. The UKCGO survey shows that some of these risks are already widespread,

## WEBLINKS

UK Children Go Online: [www.children-go-online.net](http://www.children-go-online.net)

UK safety guidance for parents, children and teachers: [www.internetsafetyzone.com](http://www.internetsafetyzone.com)

EC site for internet safety for children: <http://tinyurl.com/7s9vt>

Ofcom on media literacy: [www.ofcom.org.uk/advice/media\\_literacy](http://www.ofcom.org.uk/advice/media_literacy)

Cross-national research on children's online activities and related risks: [www.eukidsonline.net](http://www.eukidsonline.net)

though not always recognised by adults: the left column of Table 2 shows the responses of 9- 19-year-olds who used the internet at least once a week, the right column shows the parent responses about what they thought their child had done. Of course, one must acknowledge the ethical and methodological difficulties in even asking about some of these risks to children, and one must also note the indeterminacy in comparing children's and parents' perceptions – is it that children overestimate risk or parents underestimate risk?

Strikingly, the situation is reversed when we ask about domestic rules. For example, 86 per cent of parents say their children are not allowed to give out personal information online, whereas only 49 per cent of the children say the same. Children and parents may hardly be expected to give the same account, yet the extent of the gap in perceptions occasions concern when policy relies on parents implementing regulation so as to minimise risk. Undoubtedly too, the history of research on parental mediation of previously-new media points to considerable variation in both strategies of regulation – ranging from open/non-directional (e.g. co-viewing, discussion) to evaluative/restrictive (where, when, how much) approaches – and in degree of implementation (depending on a range of demographic and cultural factors, parents vary in how far they are interventionist, laissez-faire or even disengaged).

In any case, parental regulation is far from obediently submitted to by children. Michael Argyle's characterisation of relationships as games seems apt here (Argyle, 1992, p.40):

*In some ways relationships are like games. In order to understand or play a game, one needs to know the goals which are being pursued... and the rules which must be followed to do so... Furthermore, the rules form a system, so that if one rule is changed it is often found that others need to be changed too. Rules define roles which players, or people in relationships, should perform. Games have special moves which are allowed, relationships have activities – both can be regarded as steps towards the goals. Skills are needed for both.*

In seeking to understand the reasons for the gap between parental and children's

**TABLE 1 Opportunities and risks for children online**

Opportunities	Risks
Creative/content production	Illegal content
Civic/political expression	Paedophiles/grooming
Community involvement/activism	Harmful/offensive content
Technological expertise/literacy	Extreme/sexual violence
Career advancement/employment	Racism/hatred
Personal/health/sexual advice	Commercial exploitation
Education/information resources	Misinformation
Specialist/identity/fan forums	Invasion of privacy
Shared experience/common culture	Manipulating the vulnerable

approaches to online risk, several elements of Argyle's approach proved useful to me. First and most obvious, situating people's actions in the context of their relationships flagged up the various and valued goals at stake. Second, the ways in which rules define roles in turn poses problems for the identity of both parents and children, particularly insofar as parents wish to treat their children democratically while children wish to enact their autonomy and privacy. The result, as our qualitative and quantitative research revealed, is a game in which parents seek to 'be responsible', as a 'good parent', while children seek to evade their rules – in short, to be children.

Specifically, parental regulation in relation to the internet is thwarted in several distinct ways. First, in terms of both mutual perceptions and claimed competence on a range of internet-related skills, children are often more expert than their parents. This reverse generation gap in internet expertise is evident across a range of new media forms (computers, music, mobile technology), though it is not typical of those established mass media (television, radio, books, film) in relation to which parents formed their regulatory strategies. For example, 44 per cent of 9-19-year-olds, but only 28 per cent of their parents, claim to be good at sending instant messages. Similarly, 34 per cent of young people, but only 12 per cent of parents, know how to download music (impeding parents' ability to guide their children in the legality of this activity). However, we should not overestimate children's internet literacy. As the UKCGO project found, there are some important ways in which children also struggle with this new and fast changing technology, including some uneven and erratic skills in protecting their privacy, ensuring safe communication, and judging the reliability of online content or contacts.

Second, children and teenagers are not

always obedient. The survey found, for example, that 21 per cent 12-19-year-olds copy school work, 10 per cent seek out porn, eight per cent have hacked another's site/e-mail, five per cent visit dating sites and four per cent have sent a threatening message. The lack of simple compliance with parental regulation has led public policy to advise parents to oversee their children's internet use. However, 19 per cent of 9- 19-year-olds have internet access in their bedroom, making this a difficult requirement. Fewer than half of the computers children use at home are located in a public room and, even when they are, children find ways of using them in private: overall, four out of five mostly use the internet alone.

Indeed, children and young people's privacy emerged as important. As one teen observed, 'You just don't want your mum spying on you'. Another pointed out, 'I wouldn't like it if I came from school and they searched my pockets... Just like I wouldn't search my mum's bedroom'. For teens – who use the internet to conduct their personal relationships, to obtain

**TABLE 2 Online behaviour: child and parent reports**

Have you/has your child done these things on the internet?	Child(%) Parent(%)	
	Child(%)	Parent(%)
Visited a chat room	21	32
Given out information they shouldn't online	46	5
Been bullied online	33	4
Seen violent/gruesome images online	31	8
Received sexual comments online	31	7
Made new friends online	30	15
Been sent unsolicited sexual material online	28	9
Seen racist or hateful material online	11	4
Met someone face to face that you first met online	8	3

advice on health or sexual matters, or who may keep their diary online – online privacy is as important as offline privacy (Livingstone & Bober, 2005). While children hope their parents will trust them and so not pry (perhaps by using software to monitor their children's online activities), they also take evasive action to protect their privacy. Two in three reported minding their parents restricting or monitoring their internet use, and so they say they delete e-mails, clear the history, hide files, and use multiple passwords.

One outcome of this game of attempted regulation and attempted evasion is the difficulty – not only for researchers, but also for families – of discovering what kinds of practices do occur around internet use at home. For example, 81 per cent of parents, but only 25 per cent of children, say that the parent asks the child what they are doing online; 63 per cent of parents, but only 17 per cent of children, say that they keep an eye on the screen when their child is using the computer. Again, one wonders if parents overclaim, to present themselves

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as competent, or whether they are sufficiently discreet in their monitoring for this to escape their child's notice. And, if the latter, is this consistent with a trust relationship between parents and children? Doubts about the latter are raised by the finding that 41 per cent of parents claim to check the computer later and 25 per cent say they check their child's e-mail – activities recognised by only nine per cent and four per cent of children respectively. How, parents ask, should they balance a respect for their child's privacy with a genuine need to check on their safety?

Also troubling is the difficulty in determining what is a risk or an opportunity. Seeking out personal advice online is an opportunity supported by many children's charities and youth support groups, but seeking advice on suicide or anorexia may be risky. Conversely, giving out personal information online has been widely framed as a risk, yet such information as one's name, age and e-mail is routinely asked by reliable sites such as Children's BBC. In focus groups, some children have defended online pornography as providing information otherwise difficult to obtain. Here, society, including parents, has yet to discuss seriously just what is a legitimate activity for children and young people of different ages and experiences: current advice often appears to confuse rather than guide.

Perhaps most concern is attached to the question of making friends online and, especially, meeting them subsequently offline. The UKCGO survey found eight per cent of 9-19-year-olds have attended such a meeting. Follow up questions in the survey showed that such meetings are partly risky because children may not tell friends or family that they are going to such a meeting: 45 per cent told a parent, though 78 per cent told a friend. Further, they rarely go with an adult (11 per cent went with a parent), though 66 per cent did

take a friend with them. Yet most young people reported that these meetings are a positive experience: 58 per cent said that they had a good time, 33 per cent said it was nothing special and only one per cent said they did not enjoy it.

Attending a meeting offline with a friend made online was shown by multiple regression analysis to be more typical of older teens, both boys and girls, who have not been using the internet for very long, though they claim more online skills. They are, interestingly, less shy offline (than those who have not attended a meeting) but they are more likely to be sensation-seekers who are dissatisfied with their lives. Like those who make friends online, those who feel more confident communicating online than offline and value the anonymity of the internet are more likely to go to meet someone offline (Livingstone & Helsper, in press). Further, it turned out that those children and teens who have difficulty discussing personal issues with their parents, or who feel their parents to be conformity-oriented rather than conversation-oriented, take some greater risks online (visiting chat rooms and meeting online friends offline), possibly because they feel more confident communicating online than they do offline.

### Reducing risk not opportunity

A significant challenge for policy in this area is that online opportunities and risks are positively correlated. And they are not equally distributed across the population: in a path analysis, we found that, controlling for demographics, more internet access is associated with more use; this in turn leads to greater online skills and, as a result, greater experience of both risks and

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opportunities (Livingstone *et al.*, 2005). Like riding a bicycle or reading a book, gaining the skill does not mean that one cycles to approved places or reads 'proper' literature. Similarly, online skills are not necessarily used to make judgements that adults approve of, and the more expert users have not found – or choose not to find – a way to avoid the risks.

The challenge for policy makers and parents, clearly, is that increasing young people's online opportunities also increases their risks, while reducing risks restricts opportunities. Moreover, in our survey, we could not find a direct or straightforward link between the amount or nature of parental regulation and the risks (for example, those parents who impose such rules as 'don't give out personal info' do not report having children who avoid this practice).

I suggest that we are now witnessing a new divide in internet use – between skilled users for whom the internet is rich but risky and low users for whom internet use is cautious but narrow. The

challenge for research is to guide policy so as to reduce risks without reducing opportunities. The challenge for parents is to manage domestic regulation in a way that translates into children's practice without undermining trust in the parent-child relationship. And the challenge for children is to gain expertise so as to take up more opportunities while understanding how to avoid – or at least to cope with – the risks when they are encountered.

Having identified some difficulties with a policy that relies substantially on parents' and children's media literacy, especially if there is no fall-back policy as a safety-net, one way forward is to develop more targeted advice for differentiated user groups (expert/novice, cautious/risk-taking, etc). In short, the simple messages, although most readily communicated in public campaigns, are not working well in practice.

This will be an area of interest for psychological research for years to come. We should expect continued and complicated games of parental regulation

and children's evasion. These will be exacerbated by the reverse generation gap in online expertise and by cultural and historical pressures towards the 'democratic family' that prioritise relational trust and negotiation over domestic rules and authority.

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## DISCUSS AND DEBATE

What research priorities should psychologists follow regarding children's use of the internet?

How far can parents be held responsible for their children's internet use?

What kinds of evidence can we advance for online harms to children, if any?

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