Parental support for development of children’s digital skills

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Introduction

The issue of parental support in terms of digital literacy of children, including a child's ability to find and evaluate information using digital technology, poses an interesting problem. Traditionally, adults are the ones who teach their children as they pass their own knowledge about the world and also teach the children how to find and evaluate new information. Now we are in a different situation because in most cases children are not less competent on how to handle digital devices (mostly as users), and sometimes are even more competent than their parents (especially when it comes to children from the age category 15-17 years). Even if this may not always be the case, an important fact is that anyway many parents accept that their children are more skilled in the use of new technologies. Subsequently, many children enter the digital world without parental supervision\(^1\).

Due to the specifics of technical progress each successive generation appears to be quickly adaptable and ultimately more aware of the use of new technical achievements than the previous one. Such a development could be observed from the very beginning of the scientific and technological revolution. But in the digital age technical progress moves at an ever speeding pace. We observe frequent updating of programmes and platforms, the devices are continually being improved. This development, although positive in terms of the overall technical progress of mankind, still contributes to the process of weakening the link between generations in Modernity. Traditionally, there was a transmission of knowledge from older people to the young in the spirit of continuity and enhanced homage to the ancestors. Now we are in a transition to a new situation when sometimes the elder cannot teach their children and the latter are often more competent in handling the new technical means.

Some authors often claim a significant difference in attitude and action between people who

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have grown up with digital technologies (whom Marc Prensky\(^2\) called "digital natives") and people who have not grown up with these technologies, and have entered the digital world at a later stage of their life (which this author calls "digital immigrants").

According to this conception, the problem with the transmission of knowledge from adults to children, which concerns not only parents but also the education system, is that children are “digital natives” while their teachers and instructors are "digital immigrants" who speak an obsolete language (the language of the pre-digital age) but, nevertheless, seek to educate a generation that speaks an entirely new language\(^3\).

However, it could not be denied that today we are already in a situation when an increasing part of adults have also grown up with digital technology even if they are not literally "digital natives". In societies like the Bulgarian one, many parents are already accustomed to the digital environment. It should give them confidence to pursue a more active supportive mediation and intervention to assist the use of technology of their children. But an important negative factor is the uncertainty of parents about their competence. As digital technologies change too fast, the patterns of use of technology change fast as well.

The insufficient parental mediation results in a greater exposure to risks of their children who are often deprived of the necessary support in order to develop their digital skills, even when an intervention is needed. Moreover it outlines a field (of digital media) in which parental involvement is even weaker than in other areas such as online safety. And that field that expands constantly and now occupies a major part of the lives of both children and adults.


About the report

This text is a thematic report on parental support and mediation based on a nationally representative survey of online use and behaviour among Bulgarian children aged 9-17 and their parents. The survey was conducted in 2016 by MarketLinks agency and was commissioned by the Applied Research and Communication Fund, coordinator of the Bulgarian Safer Internet Centre (Methodology, p.24).

This report is one of three thematic reports based on the national survey findings from the perspective of three different thematic focuses (Annexes. Methodology, p.25). This report presents an analysis of the empirical data from the quantitative research and contains also comparative analysis of emerging trends by comparing with nationally representative data from a previous survey on online behaviour of children EU Kids Online conducted in 2010 (Methodology, p.24).

The main focus of the report is the parental support for the development of digital skills by their children and refers to the definitions of digital and media literacy of DigComp (Digital Competence Framework) as well as the framework for media literacy EAVI (European Association for Viewer’s Interests, 2010). Both conceptual frameworks largely overlap and include five main digital competences, namely: the ability to find and evaluate information, the ability to communicate through digital channels, skills for digital content creation, online safety, and the ability to solve problems. Within this report we focus on the extent to which parents actively support their children so that they can develop their digital media literacy skills (Methodology, p.25).
The study divided the children into three age categories based on the assumption of differences in habitual use and skills: children aged 9-11, the children aged 12-14 years and children aged 15-17. Since adults were interviewed in their capacity of parents they are also divided into categories according to the age of their children. The method applied was personal interviews using questionnaires developed initially by the EU Kids Online research network and updated by the Global Kids Online network among 1000 children and 1000 parents. The parents were interviewed about their own internet use and about the online behaviour and habitual use of internet by their children too. The base of the survey includes parents of children aged 9-11 (400), parents of children aged 12-14 (277) and parents of children aged 15-17 (323). Additionally 130 families with children under 9 years were also interviewed in order to get some insights about what parents of children under 9 years of age allow them to do online (Methodology, p.25).

The design of the sample is multistage cluster random sample stratified by region and place of residence (capital, city, medium-sized city and small town), combined with quota of ethnicity. The parents’ questionnaire takes about 15-20 min. It includes both issues associated with the use of the internet by the interviewee and by the child. Among 1.000 parents/caregivers interviewed 79.4% were women (72% were mothers) and 20.6% were men (18.2% fathers). The disproportion could be interpreted as a lower father involvement (Methodology, p.24).

**Information literacy**

The list of basic skills for handling information includes both the ability to search and filter the information and the evaluation of information that has been already found, the latter involving the ability for critical thinking as well. The issue examined was to what extent parents feel confident and actually manage to support their children to develop their skills for finding and evaluation of information. It is useful to compare the reported level of competency of parents regarding search and evaluation of information with competency reported by children.
Most parents in Bulgaria use internet regularly (69.9%) - both in their free time and at the workplace. Around one third of the respondents (30.1%) use internet once a week or less frequently.

(Figure 1). *Figure 1. Q: How often you use the Internet?*

Despite the active presence of parents online, it is important to note that, on the other hand, 65.2% of children said they know more about internet than their parents (Figure 2). At the same time 77.5% of children believe they know much about the internet (Figure 2). But it is interesting to examine whether this self-declared knowledge actually transfers into higher competency of children in terms of specific digital skills.

When speaking about parental support in terms of development of the ability to search and evaluate information on the internet, it would be appropriate to compare data about parents with data about children in order to find the extent to which parents accept that they are able to provide support to their children. This shows their subjective self-assessment (whether parents responded that they have the relevant skills). Of course, it can be assumed that there are parents (and children) who believe that they are competent enough but in reality they are not, which would make these data inadequate in terms of measuring the real digital and media literacy. But for the purposes of this study, the subjective self-assessment is important because the subjective feeling of the parents about their level of competency in relation to a particular digital skill directly affects the level of support they could provide to their children. Even if the parent has sufficient competency (or at least greater than that of the child), when he/she feels not competent enough, the parent is less likely to provide supportive
intervention.

Interestingly, relatively close values can be noticed when comparing the data about children’s skills with the data for the parents. Most parents (82.5% - Figure 2) claim that they can easily choose the most appropriate key words to search information in internet. Children who claim that they can easily do that are only slightly fewer (78.3%) than parents. Though the share of parents is larger, the difference is only of 4%. And when it comes to finding practical information such as checking the price of mobile applications, the proportion of children who said that they can easily do this is slightly higher (66.8%) than the proportion of parents who claim the same (64.4%).

*Figure 2. Q: To what extent each of the following applies to you?*
There is a relatively low portion of respondents (in comparison with the share of respondents who claim that they have the other digital skills), both children and parents, who stated that they can verify the truthfulness of information published online. As expected, the proportion of parents is higher, but the difference with the children is only 5% (Parents: 57%. Children: 52%). This skill is directly related to the ability for critical thinking and evaluation of data. However, it comes closer to the bottom of the list of digital skills than to the top. So, regarding the issue of parental support for developing children’s skills to find and evaluate information, we can suppose that low confidence of parents in their ability to determine the truthfulness of the information is related to decreased mediation.

One plausible explanation is connected to the specifics of the transmission of information in
the digital age. As said in the introduction, in traditional society the elderly were the ones who taught their children as they passed their information about the world and they taught children how to find and evaluate new information. In the context of today's digital environment, we are already in a new situation in which the changes are much quicker than in previous times. Children are faster to adapt to them. But it does not necessarily mean that parents are incompetent, as suggested by the opposition of “digital natives” and “digital immigrants”. However information environment has changed and the established ways of transmitting information becomes obsolete. This discredits to some extent parents as a source of relevant information in the eyes of children, and may affect the self-confidence of adults in terms of their competence.

Communication and cooperation

Another major feature of the digital technology besides the informative one, is communication. It includes interaction through technology, sharing information and content, but also civic activity and online collaboration via digital channels, as well as topics related to the etiquette online (also popular as "netiquette"). It is important to see: 1) Do parents control the online communication of their children? 2) Do parents proactively support the development of children’s communication and collaboration skills (e.g. do they engage to do thing together online)?

The findings about the parental support regarding the online communication of their
children present some interesting insights. The data shows fairly liberal attitude of the parents towards the activity of their children on the internet even of the children under 9 years of age.

Figure 3. Q: For each of these things, please tell me if your child is CURRENTLY allowed to do them all of the time, allowed to do them but only with your (or your partner’s/other carers’) permission or supervision, or never allowed to do them.

- To use a web camera (e.g. for a Skype conversation or video chat)
- To download music or movies
- To visit social networks (e.g. Facebook)
- To watch videos online (e.g. in YouTube)
- To play games with other people online
- To visit chat rooms
- To use programs for real time conversation (Skype, Messenger, WhatsApp)
- To read/watch news online
- To use the Internet for school
- To spend time in virtual worlds (e.g. Habbo, Club Penguin, Minecraft, Pokemon Go)
- To share pictures, videos, music with other people online (in social network, real time conversation programs etc.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Can do this anytime</th>
<th>Can do this only with permission or supervision</th>
<th>Can never do this</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To use a web camera</td>
<td>68.4%</td>
<td>24.2%</td>
<td>17.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To download music or movies</td>
<td>68.0%</td>
<td>20.9%</td>
<td>11.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To visit social networks (e.g. Facebook)</td>
<td>66.8%</td>
<td>18.1%</td>
<td>15.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To watch videos online (e.g. in YouTube)</td>
<td>75.0%</td>
<td>19.2%</td>
<td>5.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To play games with other people online</td>
<td>61.2%</td>
<td>21.1%</td>
<td>17.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To visit chat rooms</td>
<td>40.0%</td>
<td>18.5%</td>
<td>40.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To use programs for real time conversation (Skype, Messenger, WhatsApp)</td>
<td>68.0%</td>
<td>19.7%</td>
<td>13.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To read/watch news online</td>
<td>65.6%</td>
<td>16.1%</td>
<td>18.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To use the Internet for school</td>
<td>91.6%</td>
<td>12.4%</td>
<td>8.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To spend time in virtual worlds (e.g. Habbo, Club Penguin, Minecraft, Pokemon Go)</td>
<td>46.8%</td>
<td>20.3%</td>
<td>32.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To share pictures, videos, music with other people online (in social network, real time conversation programs etc.)</td>
<td>69.9%</td>
<td>22.9%</td>
<td>16.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This should be expected when it comes to older children (15-17 years), who naturally seek and acquire more independence from their parents, although the share of 82% of these children who can use web camera anytime without supervision is still very large (Figure 4). However we can see a large share of children 12-14 years old or even 9-11 years old, who can perform various activities online anytime without parental supervision (although the percentage among younger children is lower than in the higher age groups). On the average more than a third of children who are 9-11 years old can use anytime web camera without supervision and even 14% of those under 9 years of age (Figure 4).
Figure 4. Q: For each of these things, please tell me if your child is CURRENTLY allowed to do them all of the time, allowed to do them but only with your (or your partner’s/other carers’) permission or supervision, or never allowed to do them.

To use web camera [e.g. for Skype meeting or video chat]

To download music and movies

To visit pages in social networks [e.g. Facebook]

To watch videos [e.g. in YouTube]
When this data is compared with data for Bulgaria from the survey conducted by EUKO in 2010, we can see a clear decrease of parental control for most of the online activities of children. For instance, we can see increasing share of children who are allowed to watch video online anytime – from 61.5% in 2010 to 75% in 2016 (Figure 5). We can see even higher increase of the share of children who can use social networks – from 49.8% to 66.8% (Figure 5). The percentage of children who can upload pictures, videos and music without parental supervision increases form 36.4% to 60.9% (Figure 5). At the same time the percentage of children who can download music and movies has not changed but still remains high (68% - Figure 5).
Figure 5. Q: Do you allow your child to do the following online anytime?

Two alternative hypotheses are possible to explain this data:

a) parents underestimate the risk of giving too much independence of children;

b) parents have higher confidence that children can solve any problem alone (especially elder children but also children who are 12-14 years old and even children who are 9-11 years old one third of whom can use web camera anytime.

Parental support concerns not only control of children's online communication (which apparently decreases). Development of communication skills includes also cooperation skills. This is why it is important for parents to talk to their children about internet issues and especially how often they do things online together in order to support the development of cooperation skills.

When it comes to this kind of parental support we observe relatively low percentage of parents who actively support their children. Higher percentage (about a half of parents) can be seen when it comes to conversation with children. The largest share is that of parents who encourage their children to do research and learn through the internet – 61.5% (Figure 6).
More than a half of parents (58.6%) had conversations with their children about their online activities (Figure 6). At the same time the percentage of parents who had conversations with their children about what to do if something bothers them online is lower – 39.8% (Figure 6).

**Figure 6. Q: When your child uses the Internet, you...**

- Encourage them to study in the Internet
- **Talk to them about their activity online**
- **Talk to them about what to do if something bothers them**
- Show them how to use the Internet safely
- Engaged in activities online together
- Explain them why some web sites are appropriate but others are not
- You are around when your child uses the Internet
- Help your child with Internet-related problems
- **Help your child if something bothers them in the Internet**
- Talk to your child about the advertising which they see online
- Sit with your child when they use the Internet

Only 36.1% of all parents sit together with their child to conduct common activities online (Figure 7). Not unexpectedly, the percentage of parents of children under 9 years old is higher – 40.8% (Figure 6) but we can still observe that 59.2% of the parents prefer to let their child to do things online alone. 44% of parents of children aged 9-11 sit to do things together with them online (Figure 7). This percentage is also higher than the percentage in the other
categories but it is important to notice that more than a half of parents do not do common things online with their children. The share of parents of children who are 12-14 years old who are engaged in online activities together with their children is only 30.3% (Figure 7). The percentage of parents of children who are 15-17 years old is 31.3% (Figure 7).

Figure 7. Q: To which extend each of the following applies to you?

It is very important to notice that the percentage of children who helped their parents with Internet-related problems is more than twice higher (66.0%) than the share of parents who helped their children – 29.5% (Figure 7). Expectedly, the share of children aged 15-17 who help their parents for internet-related problems is higher (75%) but even the percentage of children aged 9-11 is larger (57%) than the share of parents who helped these children – 41.5% (Figure 7). This data demonstrates that children actually would readily collaborate with their parents.

When it comes to parental support for development of communication and collaboration skills we can see the same phenomenon which was described in the introduction - weakening of support with the age of the child. Parents are not necessarily unfit to support children. However they may hesitate because they do not feel competent enough to control the process. The point here is that many parents assume that their children are more knowledgeable about new technologies and that is the reason to leave more autonomy to them (as we shall see, the same can be observed in relation to other digital skills of children).
To sum up, when it comes to parental support for development of children’s communication and collaboration skills the data show that: parental control on children’s communication is relatively low: parents underestimate the risk of giving too much independence to children and they have higher confidence that children can solve the problems alone. At the same time the percentage of children who helped their parents with internet-related problems is more than twice higher (66.0%) than the share of parents who helped their children (Figure 7). When it comes to support for the development of children’s cooperation skill the data show that two-thirds of parents (63.9%) do not engage in activities online together with their children (Figure 7).

Safety

In relation to online safety two main aspects mentioned in Information and Communication sections should be considered again. Firstly, the natural development of children which requires more independence for older children. Secondly, parents seem to hesitate about their own competency in digital environment which changes too rapidly for them to grasp. This is the cause of decreasing parental control and ultimately increases the risks for children.

Is this confirmed by the survey data? The data show that the average percentage of parents who use parental control programs remains relatively low – 21.6%, although there is a significant growth since 2010 when it was only 12% (according to the EUKO survey). It is still relatively low even when it comes to younger children: only 19.2% of parents of children who are 9-11 years old and 26.8% of parents who have children 9-11 years old use parental control software.

*Figure 8. Q: Do you use any of the following?*

- [ ] No  [ ] Yes
On one hand, most parents (73.6%) claim that they can help their child to handle something which bothered them in the internet (26.8% believe that they are entirely able to help and another 46.8% claim that they can help to a great extent).

On the other hand, almost the same large share of parents (72.4%) believe that their children are able to handle things which bother them in the internet alone (27.8% consider that children are entirely able to manage alone and another 44.6% think that children can handle to a great extent). At the same time a half of the children (52.1%) responded that they had arguments with their parents about their time spent online.

There is an interesting mismatch between the percentage of children who claim to trust their parents and the share of children who actually asked their parents for help when they faced a problem online. A large share of children (86%) respond that they could easily talk to their parents when they are bothered by something online (57.1% consider it very easy and another 28.9% consider it is rather easy - Figure 9). Only 12.5% of children consider that it is difficult and only 1.5% consider this to be very difficult. Most of the children (78.6%) believe that their family is willing to help. Only 2.4% of children consider this as rather incorrect and only 1.7% answer that this is not correct at all.

*Figure 9.* Q: Is it easy for you to talk to your parents when something bothers you?

- This is very difficult
- This is rather difficult
- This is rather easy
- This is very easy
It is also important to notice that the majority of children respond that when something bothered them online they talked to their mother – 47% (Figure 10). The percentage of children who talked to a friend who is the same age is the second largest – 36%. The share of children who talked to their father comes third – 23% (these children are twice fewer than the children who talked to their mother) (Figure 10). This big difference can signify that fathers are not engaged enough with their children’s online experiences. It is also very important to notice that nearly one of five children (18%) did not talk to anyone.

**Figure 10. Q: Did you talk to somebody the last time when something bothered you online?**
Most of the children report that the family supports them – 82.7% said that their parents very often praise them when they do well and another (52.9% – parents very often praise them, 29.8% claimed that this happens often). A significant part of children claim that their parents talk with them about internet safety and how to protect themselves online – 43.1% (17.9% claim that parents do that frequently and 25.2% share that parents do that often – Figure 11).

At the same time, there is a large share of children who respond that they have never (or almost never) told their parents that something bothered them online – 62.9% (Figure 12: 43.7% never told this; 19.2% – almost never). This is confirmed by the parents’ responses where the corresponding share is even larger – 73.2% (56.7% of parents respond that their children have never told them that they were bothered by something online and another
16.5% reported that their children have almost never said this).

**Figure 12.**

Have your child ever told you about something that bothered them in the Internet?

Have you ever told your parents that something in the Internet bothered you?

- Never
- Almost never
- Sometimes
- Often
- Very often
- Prefer not to say

When it comes to parents of children who are 9-17 years old, the percentage is around 50% while for children under 9 years old the share is much larger – 92% (probably it is more difficult for them to articulate the problem or even to identify it or this is because, normally, the parental control for younger kids is higher). The probability that a large share of children have never had problems online that were serious enough to talk to their parents for help and support is quite low.

**Figure 13. Q Have your child...?**

- Have told you about something that bothered them online
- Helped you when you had difficulties in using the Internet
- Started a conversation about his/her activity online
- Asked you for advice how to behave online
- Asked you about products/services advertised online
- Asked you for help for a situation which cannot handle with

A possible explanation of the data is that children have been in worrying situations online
but despite the declared trust in their parent they preferred not to talk to them. Possibly, children did not believe that the problems could seem really serious to their parents or although they believe that their parents want to help, they are still reluctant to talk to them about their problems online or do not consider that sharing with parents could help.

The percentage of parents who share that online communication of their child with a stranger is their greatest fear is 39.7% (it is in the middle of the list of parental fears – Figure 13). In comparison 70% of parents respond that their greatest anxiety is how their child is doing at school (Figure 14).

*Figure 14. Q: Thinking about your child, which of the following worries you most?*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concern</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How the child is doing at school</td>
<td>70.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To be a victim of a crime</td>
<td>69.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child’s health condition</td>
<td>68.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To be a victim of a car accident</td>
<td>44.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bulling/bad attitude from other children</td>
<td>39.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online contact with a stranger</td>
<td>32.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To see inappropriate content online</td>
<td>30.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsufficient money for child care</td>
<td>27.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol abuse/drug addiction</td>
<td>21.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To disclose personal information</td>
<td>19.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To get in trouble with the police</td>
<td>11.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>His/her sexual life</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prefer not to answer</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The survey did find that more than a third (33.8%) of children’s Facebook accounts are public, which poses higher level of risk for these children (public are also 35% of children’s YouTube accounts). It can be considered as a low level of parental control (one third of parents seem to underestimate the problem). If parents are not competent enough, which sources of information about internet safety do they prefer then? Parents have high expectations for school as a source of information for safer internet but it seems that these expectations are not properly met. The parents who respond that they really receive information about online safety from school are less than a
half (22.5%) of parents who respond that want the school to be a source of information – 46.4% (Figure 15).

Figure 15. Q1: In general where do you get information and advice on safety tools and safe use of the internet from?

Q2: And where would you like to get information and advice from in the future?

- Family and friends
- Television, radio, newspapers, magazines
- My child's school
- Other web sites containing information for children’s safety online
- My child
- State institutions
- ISPs
- The web site of Bulgarian Safer Internet Center safenet.bg
- Non-government organizations
- Manufacturers and retailers of digital devices
- Other sources
- I do not receive (I do not want to receive) information

The percentage of parents who want the Bulgarian Safer Internet Centre’s site Safenet.bg to be their source of information is 17.5%, while the share of parents who respond that they really use the site as a source is only 6.5% (Figure 15).

A relatively large share of 22% of respondents declared that they do not receive information about online safety and 8.7% declared that do not want to receive such information which is a worrying trend (Figure 15).
Conclusions

Parenthood in the digital age is a challenging task because children are not less competent about using new technology and digital devices, and sometimes are even more competent than their parents. Even if this may not always be necessarily true, the important fact is that many parents accept that their children are more competent in the field of new technologies. Thus, children often enter the digital world without adequate parental supervision and support. It leads to a worrisome trend of decreasing age at which children receive more autonomy in the digital environment.

This trend is not just a reflection of a natural process of parents gradually giving more freedom to their children. It happens in the traditional model of transmission of knowledge between generations too. This is a natural process but additional factors connected to the digital era affect the attitudes of parents towards the online activities of their children. Most important among the others is the fact that parents do not always feel (and sometimes they really are not) more competent than their children to handle the fast developing digital technology. As technology progresses too rapidly, it turns out that even parents who already navigate the digital environment, have mastered a pattern of use of technology that is already outdated. This discourages them to mediate and support their children’s experiences online and could lead to the absence of parental supportive intervention in occurrences when it is definitely needed. On the other hand, even while some of the parents are digitally confident, their supportive intervention often is not quite adequate. So this is not just about natural process of gradually giving more freedom to children. This is a problem within the parenting model itself. Moreover, it seems that the trend is to give more autonomy to children in digital
environment earlier than they receive it for their activities offline. Due to this trend, besides a greater exposure of children to risks, they are often deprived of the support needed to develop their digital and media literacy, even in cases when parental intervention is necessary. Moreover it outlines a field (the field of digital media) in which parental involvement is significantly weaker than in other areas. And this is a field that expands constantly and occupies an even larger part of the lives of both children and adults.

- Two of three children (65.2%) believe that they know more about internet than their parents (Figure 2). When comparing children who are confident about their digital skills with the share of confident parents, the values appear to be very close. For instance, most of the children (78.3%) and slightly more parents (82.5%) respond that they can easily choose appropriate key words to search needed information online (Figure 2). The percentage of parents is only 4% larger than percentage of children. The percentage of children who can find useful information such as the price of a mobile application is even slightly larger (66.8%) than the percentage of parents who can do this (64.4% - Figure 2).

- The data demonstrate quite liberal attitude on the part of parents to the online activity of their children (58.4% of children are allowed to use web camera anytime; most of the children are allowed to download music and video anytime without supervision (Figure 3).

- Parental control over most of the children’s online activities decreased from 2010 (when comparing with data from the EUKO survey from 2010) – e.g. the share of children who are allowed to watch video online anytime increased from 61.5% in 2010 to 75% in 2016; there is also a significant growth of the share of children who are allowed to use social networks anytime – from 49.8% to 66.8%, as well as of children who can upload pictures, videos and music anytime without asking permission – from 36.4% to 60.9%
● The percentage of children who helped their parents with Internet-related problems is more than twice higher (66.0%) than the share of parents who helped their children – 29.5% (Figure 7).

● Only 36.1% of parents sit with their children to do something online together which could support development of child’s collaboration skills (Figure 7).

● Many children share that they have never told their parents that something bothered them online (43.7% - have never told this, 19.2% - almost never). This is confirmed by parents’ responses – 56.7% of parents said that their children have never told them that something bothered them in internet (Figure 12).

● The data also show a lower level of involvement of fathers compared to mothers and peers – children who talked to their fathers when something bothered them in internet, are only a half (23%) of those who talked to their mothers – 47% (Figure 10). Although it is natural for younger kids it is not quite expected for older children.

● Parents have high expectations of school as a source of information on internet safety, but they are not adequately met. Parents who (say that) actually received information from school are less than half (22.5%) of those who want school to be a source of information – 46.4% (Figure 14).

Recommendations

Seeking information and support. Parents do not feel as digitally competent as their children, especially when the latter get older. Ironically, the risk increases when children get older. However parents could handle their feeling of uncertainty and insufficient competency. They should search proactively information about digital literacy and advice about internet safety from valid sources and experts such as the Bulgarian Safer Internet...
Centre. They should also require support from state institutions, including schools and Ministry of Education.

**Parental control and giving independence.** Parents should keep more control on their children’s online activity, especially activities which involve possibility for communication with strangers such as using social networks or a web camera. They can use more parental control software particularly when it comes to younger children.

**Encourage learning. Ask for advice.** The same level of control is not recommended for older children. Instead, they should be encouraged to think by themselves and to learn more about safety. In addition parents can ask their children for advice too, which could stimulate a child to learn more.

**Encourage children to share.** Although many parents and children report that they often have conversations about internet safety, at the same time lots of children have never told their parents that something bothered them online. Parents should encourage their children to share more about their online experience.

**Fathers’ involvement.** Though it is natural for younger children to turn for support to their mother, the data clearly demonstrates that fathers are not involved enough in their children’s development of digital skills. As mentioned above, children who talk to their fathers when something bothers them in internet, are only a half (23%) of those who talk to their mothers - 47% (Figure 11).

**Do online activities together with the children.** This can be fulfilled easier if parents sit more often with their children to do things together online. Thus they could support development of cooperation skills and also have more control on children’s online activity in a more delicate way. As mentioned above, only one 36.1% of parents sit with their children to do something online together which could support the development of a child’s cooperation skill.

This report reveals that parental control in Bulgaria decreases and parental support intervention is absent in many cases when it is needed. Parents are not confident enough that they have adequate level of digital competencies than their children and actually adults are not always more competent. At the same time children are not necessary digital literate and
still need support and advice from their parents. And the absence of parental support exposes children to higher levels of risk.

Annex I: Methodology

In September 2016, the Applied Research and Communication Fund, coordinator of the Bulgarian Safer Internet Centre in cooperation with the MarketLinks agency conducted a national representative survey titled “Online Conduct of Children in Bulgaria.” The survey, which is a part of the larger European-wide research “EU Kids Online 2016-2017,” examined how children and young people engage with the internet and digital technologies in their everyday lives.

In the 2016 national representative survey a total of 1000 Bulgarian children and 1000 parents were interviewed across Bulgaria. The researchers visited families in their homes and conducted two comprehensive face-to-face interviews – with one child and one parent.

The design of the sample is multistage cluster random sample stratified by region and place of residence (capital, city, medium-sized city and small town), combined with quota of ethnicity. It includes both issues associated with the use of the internet by the interviewee and by the child.
The study divided the children into three age categories based on the assumption of differences in habitual use and skills: children aged 9-11, the children aged 12-14 years and children aged 15-17. The demographic data of the children is presented in Figure 16.

*Figure 16: Demographic data of children (number of interviewed children = 1,000)*

Since adults were interviewed in their capacity of parents they are also divided into categories according to the age of their children. The method applied was personal interviews using questionnaires developed initially by the *EU Kids Online* research network and updated by the *Global Kids Online* network among 1000 children and 1000 parents. The parents were interviewed about their own internet use and about the online behaviour and habitual use of internet by their children too. Among 1,000 parents interviewed 79.4% were women (72% were mothers) and 20.6% were men (18.2% fathers).

The base of the survey includes parents of children aged 9-11 (400), parents of children aged 12-14 (277) and parents of children aged 15-17 (323). Additionally 130 families with children under 9 years were also interviewed in order to get some insights about what parents of children under 9 years of age allow them to do online.

The child surveys took about 45-60 minutes to complete, and the parent surveys took about 15-20 minutes to complete. The surveys queried about both parent and child internet activities and ICT use, as well as about the online risks faced by the children and the mediation / control practiced by the parents.
The survey covered several important themes: children’s access to internet and their online practice; their online skills and abilities; their digital environment; parental support and mediation; and issues dealing with risks and safety. Different demographic data and information on family and social surroundings were also gathered. The Bulgarian Safer Internet Centre used the results from the survey to produce three reports. The first report focuses on the online risks the children and young people are exposed to in the digital world. The second paper cover the topics of parental mediation. The third report focuses on children’s digital and media literacy skills.

Where appropriate and where comparable data were available, these reports juxtaposes the results from the 2016 survey with the research, conducted by the EU Kids Online during spring and summer 2010 in 25 European countries, including Bulgaria.

References


