



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Research and Library Service Briefing Note

Paper 132/10

1 September 2010

NIAR 402-10

Internet Safety for Children and Young People: Concerns and Policies

'Parents will want to help their children get the most from new technology while at the same time helping them to avoid potential pitfalls.'

Ofcom report. *Protecting Your Children in a Digital World*. 2009¹.

1 Safety Concerns

Even as long ago as 2003, a survey highlighted the fact that 87% of pupils in Northern Ireland have access to a personal computer, and 77% have access to the internet². Since that time, the range of content and opportunities for interaction on the internet has expanded rapidly, with online social networking becoming a common activity for many children. A survey published by Ofcom in 2008 found that 99% of children across the UK have access to the internet, while 86% have access at home³. Concerns associated with children using the internet can be summarised as: accessing inappropriate content, forming online relationships which may be exploitative, identity theft, and cyberbullying.

¹ Ofcom. 2009. *Protecting Your Children in a Digital World*.

² NISRA (2004) *Young Persons Behaviour and Attitude Survey October 2003-November 2003*.
<http://www.csu.nisra.gov.uk/surveys/survey.asp?id=11&details=3>

³ Cited in Byron, T. 2008. *Safer Children in a Digital World: The Report of the Byron Review*:p102

General concerns

In 2009, the UK Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) published a report on *Young People and Parents' Attitudes around Internet Safety* as part of the 'Every Child Matters: Change for Children' policy programme⁴. On the basis of a series of face-to-face interviews with 1,433 parents of children aged 0-17 across the UK and 833 children, the research found the following:

- Internet safety is apparently not a major concern for parents of children aged 5 to 17 until they are prompted to think about it. 'Dangers with using the internet' is a concern for 9% of parents unprompted, and 24% after prompting. 5% (unprompted) say they are concerned about cyberbullying/bullying on the internet'.
- Children aged 12 to 17 have fewer concerns in relation to internet safety than parents. Only 2% of children say 'dangers with using the internet' is a concern unprompted, and 7% say this is a concern after prompting.
- When parents and children focus specifically on internet safety, more say that they have concerns. **The level of parental concern about material on the internet appears to be significantly higher than the perceived risks around using the internet.** 74% of parents agree that they have concerns about the content and material on the internet, while 43% agree that their children are potentially at risk from inappropriate content on the internet, and 12% say that their children have seen or done something inappropriate online.
- 39% of parents say they are concerned about their children making some kind of inappropriate contact on the internet (39%).
- Parents are more controlling of children's internet use than children are aware of (or admit to). 67% of parents of children aged 12 to 17 say they have rules for their children about using the internet, compared with 50% of children aged 12 to 17 saying their parents have rules or controls in this area.
- Most parents (91%) say they would take action in the event of their children experiencing harmful content on the internet. Both parents and children say they would be confident in knowing what to do (80% of parents, 87% of children).
- Most parents and children would take 'personal action', ie talk to their children/parents, and/or limit or modify their children's/their internet activities. 'Outside' or 'official' actions are less likely to be taken (less than one fifth would report the experience to any kind of authority).
- Of the 18% of children who experienced inappropriate or harmful content on the internet, only 55% did 'something' about it. More specifically, 34% avoided or blocked the website themselves, 12% spoke to someone (mostly parents), and 4% reported it to an authority (police, website or Internet Service Provider).

⁴ Synovate UK Ltd. 2009. *Staying Safe Survey 2009: Young People and Parents' Attitudes around Internet Safety*. Department for Children, Schools and Families: Research Report No DCSF-RR183.

- 75% of parents say they would seek help or advice if their child saw or did something inappropriate online. Family and friends are the most likely sources of advice in the event of a problem, although schools are important educators of safe internet use. 74% of parents and 82% of children say that their school has taught their children/them to use the internet safely.
- An estimated 25% of parents of children aged 5 to 11 and 22% of parents of children aged 12 to 17 would be likely to register for free official internet safety training if offered in their local area.

The following table summarises the results of the research published by DCSF:

	Parents of children aged 5-11	Parents of children aged 12-17	Children aged 12-17
Any concerns	86%	83%	61%
Inappropriate contact	44%	47%	30%
Being in contact with inappropriate people	38%	41%	18%
Giving details to inappropriate people	19%	25%	13%
People getting my personal details	-	-	14%
Inappropriate / harmful content	52%	42%	9%
Websites with sexual content	45%	36%	-
Websites with violent content	30%	25%	-
Websites showing abuse / cruelty	17%	15%	-
Websites / content with bad language	23%	13%	-
Websites about self-harm / suicide	12%	11%	-
Websites with extreme / racist content	10%	10%	-
Websites with inappropriate content	-	-	6%
(Getting caught) looking at websites	-	-	3%
Computer security	12%	14%	24%
Downloading viruses / harmful software	10%	10%	15%
People hacking into computer	8%	10%	13%
Illegal downloading / copyright material	7%	9%	3%
Cyber-bullying / being bullied online	14%	13%	8%

Table 1: Summary of DCSF survey, Young People and Parents' Attitudes around Internet Safety

Social networking

Social networking websites such as Facebook and Bebo, where users create their own profiles, add photos, join groups and post frequent, short updates of their activities, have been a particular focus for concern in recent years. An Ofcom report of August

2010 shows that across the UK, 40% of adults live in a household that has used social networking sites, with 32% using them on a weekly basis.

Use of social networking sites has increased in Northern Ireland since 2009 (by nine percentage points) and is on a level similar to the UK as a whole (36% compared to the 40% UK average). Use of social networking sites is more common in Northern Ireland (36%) than in Scotland (27%) and is similar to Wales (37%). Use of social networking sites is slightly more common in the Belfast metropolitan area (39%) than in the rest of Northern Ireland (35%).

Facebook is the most popular social networking site, with Bebo, MySpace and others proving popular. All major social networking sites have now been optimised for mobile phones, and it is likely that this will be an area of future growth. This category can also include 'virtual worlds' like Habbo, World of Warcraft, Second Life and Stardoll.

In Northern Ireland, the 2009 Kids Life and Times Survey found that almost half (48%) of the participants aged 10 and 11 years said they are on social networking sites. Of those that said they were using the sites, 29% said they use them a lot. Approximately one third (35%) of the children that took part in the survey said they had friends that they talk to online but don't meet face-to-face.⁵

Concerns have been expressed that in Northern Ireland sites such as Bebo are being used to organise sectarian violence. A BBC report on this issue stated that 'the police say they don't monitor internet sites on a day-to-day basis but say they'll take action if they're made aware of a crime'⁶.

Cyberbullying has also been identified as an issue by news reports in recent years⁷, with fears expressed that social networking sites, instant messaging services and text messages could be used to communicate 24 hours a day, making victims feel trapped.

Nevertheless, a study in 2008 revealed that many young people who maintain cross-community relationships do so through texting and social networking websites which allow them to chat freely with friends from other areas. The study recommends that the friendship-building potential of this technology should be harnessed to promote integration⁸.

Social networking also holds the potential for a range of learning and personal development opportunities. Childnet International has highlighted some of the

⁵ Lloyd, K & Devine, P (2009) The Net Generation ARK Research Update No.62 October 2009 accessed at <http://www.ark.ac.uk>

⁶ BBC News website. 26.1.10. 'NI violence 'organised on social networking sites': <http://www.bbc.co.uk/newsbeat/10005113>; *Belfast Telegraph*. 3.8.09.

⁷ For example, see: 'Suicide fears over teenage websites': <http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/local-national/suicide-fears-over-teenage-websites-14441706.html>; *The Telegraph*. 22.6.08. 'Teenager Sam Leeson hanged himself over 'Emo' taunts': <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/2176009/Teenager-Sam-Leeson-hanged-himself-over-Emo-taunts.html>

⁸ Queen's University Belfast press release. 25.6.08. 'Sectarianism still present in segregated communities': <http://www.qub.ac.uk/home/TheUniversity/GeneralServices/News/ArchivesPressReleases-CampusNews/2008PressReleases/06-2008PressReleases/#d.en.107666> Accessed 26.8.10

educational benefits of social networking⁹. It suggests that regular use of social networking and blogging sites can encourage young people to become active, vocal and articulate citizens with independent views, also helping them to build skills as writers, content managers and team players.

2 Legislation

The *Sexual Offences Act 2003* deals with the issue of grooming (section 15), and explicitly prevents an adult from communicating with a young person and subsequently meeting them to engage in a sexual act. For England and Wales, the act refers to those under the age of 16. For Northern Ireland, it applies to those under the age of 17. Section 46 deals specifically with the issue of indecent images of children.

Media and internet legislation is conducted at a UK-wide level and is not devolved. There is currently no legislation which deals specifically with the issue of internet safety for children. The *Digital Economy Act 2010*, for example, makes no specific reference to internet safety for young people, though the *Digital Britain* report which set out the intentions of the Act does make some statements about the opportunities presented by the internet for young people in terms of learning and enhancement, and the importance of equipping schools and families with the knowledge to guide young people in using the internet¹⁰.

In the United States, an *Internet Protection Act* was enacted in 2001 to address concerns about access to offensive content over the internet on school and library computers¹¹. Schools and libraries must certify that they have an internet safety policy which addresses:

- access by minors to inappropriate matter on the internet
- the safety and security of minors when using electronic mail, chat rooms, and other forms of direct electronic communications
- unauthorised access, including so-called 'hacking', and other unlawful activities by minors online
- unauthorised disclosure, use, and dissemination of personal information regarding minors
- measures restricting minors' access to materials harmful to them.

⁹ Childnet International. 2009. *Young People and Social Networking Services: A Childnet International Research Report*. <http://www.digizen.org/downloads/fullReport.pdf>

¹⁰ *Digital Britain*. 2009. Department for Business, Innovation and Skills.

¹¹ *Federal Communications Commission* website. 'Children's Internet Protection Act': <http://www.fcc.gov/cgb/consumerfacts/cipa.html> Accessed 27.8.10.

The Act also states that schools and libraries must use 'technology protection measures' to block or filter internet inappropriate content.

In 2008, the UK Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) commissioned Professor Tanya Byron to review the risks to children from exposure to potentially harmful material on the internet and in video games, and to assess the effectiveness and adequacy of existing measures to help protect children from being exposed to such material.

The *Byron Review* did not recommend legislation as a method of tackling the risks posed to children using the internet, citing the likelihood of discouraging children and parents from taking an informed approach to managing their own risks, and lulling parents into a false sense of security. The review instead proposed the creation of,

'...a shared culture of responsibility with families, industry, government and others in the public and third sectors all playing their part to reduce the availability of potentially harmful material, restrict access to it by children and to increase children's resilience.'¹²

The review proposed that instead of legislation, the method of achieving this shared culture is a national strategy for child internet safety. This strategy is now in existence, and is described further under 'policies and guidance', below.

NI Safeguarding Board Bill

In Northern Ireland, a *Safeguarding Board Bill* has been proposed which is intended to improve interagency co-operation on child protection through the establishment of a regional Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland¹³. This measure is designed to ensure co-operation at the highest level within government departments, the health and social care system, local government, and in the voluntary and community sectors.

The bill has completed its second stage and is at present being considered by the Health, Social Services and Safety Committee. Further details of both the board and the bill are given below.

3 Policies and Guidance: UK

The *Byron Review* made a series of recommendations to the UK government including the creation of a UK Council on Child Internet Safety (UKCCIS), which was launched in September 2008. UKCCIS is made up of over 140 organisations, companies, government departments and agencies (including the devolved governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland), law enforcement, charities, parenting groups, academic experts and others (including Google, Microsoft, Bebo and the NSPCC). The

¹² Byron, T. 2008. *Safer Children in a Digital World: The Report of the Byron Review*. pp2,81

¹³ NIA Bill 25/09 *Safeguarding Board Bill*: http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/legislation/primary/2009/nia25_09.htm
Accessed on 27.8.10.

UKCCIS developed *Click Clever Click Safe: The First UK Child Internet Safety Strategy*. It was launched in December 2009, and sets out:

- work carried out so far to keep children safe online
- commitments to parents, children and young people and the work UKCCIS is planning to do to make these happen
- how the public can monitor their level of success in making children and young people safer.

4 Policies and Guidance: Northern Ireland

Cross-departmental statement on the protection of children and young people

A ten year strategy for children and young people in Northern Ireland was created in 2006 by OFMDFM. This does not contain any specific mentions of internet safety concerns¹⁴. However, a cross-departmental statement on the protection of children and young people by the Northern Ireland Executive, published by OFMDFM in June 2009, contains a section (paragraphs 3.21 – 3.30, under ‘Safeguarding across jurisdictions’) on ‘Safeguarding in the online world’¹⁵. This statement refers to the extent to which young people use the internet, and highlights the significant role to be played by the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP) in policing the virtual environment and producing a set of resources guiding children and adults in safe use of the internet.

The Department of Finance and Personnel, in partnership with the Department of Communication, Energy and National Resources in the Republic of Ireland, has jointly launched the *makeltsecure* campaign in conjunction with a range of private sector organisations, part-funded by the EU. This campaign, which is being communicated through media advertising, is targeted at both young people and adults with a view to enabling them to protect themselves when using the internet.

The Health Minister Michael McGimpsey represents the NI Executive on UKCCIS. The NI Executive is taking forward the *Child Internet Safety Strategy* through a DHSSPS-led group which includes representatives from DE, DCAL, DETI, DFP, OFMDFM and key voluntary sector groups. This group is developing a communications plan which will ensure that key messages from the UKCCIS strategy are targeted at audiences here, and to help co-ordinate cross-Departmental activity¹⁶.

¹⁴ OFMDFM (2006) *Our Children and Young People – Our Pledge – A Ten Year Strategy for Children and Young People in Northern Ireland 2006-2016*. OFMDFM.

¹⁵ OFMDFM (2009) *Safeguarding Children – A cross-departmental statement on the protection of children and young people by the Northern Ireland Executive*. OFMDFM

¹⁶ Northern Ireland Executive news release. 9.3.10. ‘McGimpsey launches new campaign to support ‘digital green cross code’’: <http://www.northernireland.gov.uk/news-dhssps-09022010-mcgimpsey-launches-new>

Department of Education

The Department of Education is also active on the issue of child safety on the internet. The Classroom 2000 (C2k) network provides schools with access to the internet. This access is fully monitored and subject to a detailed filtering policy, which categorises websites into groups which are allowed or not allowed. The filtering process is updated several times each day because of requests from schools or as new sites appear on the internet.

Schools are also required to have a policy on the safe and effective use of the internet and other digital technology tools. *DE Circular 2007/1*¹⁷ of June 2007 drew attention to the wide range of issues which schools' policies should address and directed schools to advice on what is currently regarded as best practice. Access to the guidance, which is regularly updated, is available on the DE website. ICT Coordinators in the Education and Library Boards have provided training on internet safety and have hosted conferences addressed by CEOP, Childnet International and the PSNI. The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) monitors approaches to child protection, and in pre-inspection questionnaires parents are asked if they have been made aware of the schools' Internet Safety Policy.

Internet safety in the revised curriculum/training

Using ICT is one of three cross-curricular skills to be developed through the revised curriculum, from Foundation Stage to Key Stage 4. Teachers have received support and guidance on integrating internet safety into the curriculum which contributes to the areas of Personal Development and Mutual Understanding in primary schools and Learning for Life and Work in post-primary schools. The guidance looks at developing a proactive and responsible approach by pupils to safety, including internet safety. In addition, the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) runs a voluntary ICT Accreditation scheme for schools, which includes the area of e-safety in terms of supporting teachers and educating pupils. The Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre also provides Ambassador training to teachers and Education and Library Board officers which they are able to cascade to pupils and colleagues.

The Department of Education is currently drafting guidance to schools to address recommendations contained in a recent Western Education and Library Board (WELB) report which was produced at the request of the Minister. The report investigated C2k's handling of a situation involving the Sparklebox teaching resources website which was brought to the attention of MLAs by way of a Ministerial Statement on 8 February 2010. The guidance to schools, which the Department intends to issue in the autumn, will address recommendations contained in the WELB report.

¹⁷ DE Circular 2007/1. 18.6.07. 'Acceptable use of the internet and digital technologies in schools': http://www.deni.gov.uk/22-acceptable_use_of_the_internet_de_circular.pdf Accessed 27.8.10

Safeguarding Board Bill

New safeguarding structures have been proposed for Northern Ireland, and to this end the DHSSPS has drafted a policy paper, *Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland*. A Safeguarding Board Bill has been proposed which will place such a board and its remit on a statutory footing. This bill has completed its second stage and is being considered by the Health, Social Services and Safety Committee at present. Though this bill contains no specific mention of internet safety, it does state that it will be the role of the Safeguarding Board to 'develop policies and procedures for safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children' and to 'provide advice or information on any matter concerning safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children'. It is proposed that a number of committees and sub-committees be established by the Board, and although no committee dealing explicitly with internet safety is prescribed, the Bill does state that 'one or more sub-committees' may be established.

In the 2009 cross-departmental statement published by OFMDFM, it is stated that the Board would be asked 'to seek to develop improved and more formalised linkages with these bodies; and as part of its strategic objectives develop an 'e safety strategy' to protect children and young people on line which will include measures for parents.'¹⁸

A Research and Library Services paper written in 2009 summarises some of the context for the Safeguarding Bill and outlines the policy background¹⁹. Within Northern Ireland, it has been recognised that certain aspects of child safety range across jurisdictions, and the virtual environment is one of those areas where close collaboration with other regions and countries is necessary to ensure that safeguarding measures are in place. Coordination arrangements have been put in place across jurisdictions through the work of the North-South Ministerial Council and the British-Irish Council. For example, following an initial meeting of the North-South Ministerial Council on 20 June 2008, five work streams were established to oversee various developments in the area of safeguarding and child protection including: information sharing – children and families; media awareness – child protection; internet safety; vetting and barring; and research. The internet safety element is being led by the Republic of Ireland.

¹⁸ *Safeguarding Children: A cross-departmental statement on the protection of children and young people*. OFMDFM: p24

¹⁹ Research and Library Services. 2009. *Developing New Child Protection Safeguarding Structures in Northern Ireland*. Briefing Notes: 43/10.

5 Guidance

The following organisations and campaigns have created guidelines and other awareness-raising resources.

Click Clever Click Safe campaign

The Click Clever Click Safe Campaign is focusing on a new digital ‘green cross code’ – ‘Zip it, Block it, Flag it’. Specific, tailored advice is offered for both young people and parents. The Click Clever Click Safe campaign has been adopted by social networking sites, industry, schools and charities and promoted through radio and press advertising. Local information can be obtained on www.nidirect.gov.uk/clicksafe. The public awareness campaign for Click Clever Click Safe started on Safer Internet Day in February 2010.

Department of Education

DE provides access to a range of information and communications resources on the DE website, and updates its online information as new resources become available. Access to this list of resources can be found [here](#)²⁰.

[BBC](#)²¹

The Children’s BBC (CBBC) website has a ‘Stay Safe’ section, including Dongle’s How to be Smart quiz and animated video.

[Childline](#)²²

Childline has some advice on its website dealing with online safety, including dedicated sections on social networking, use of mobile phones and cyberbullying.

[Ofcom](#)²³

Ofcom has produced some brief, general guidance on how parents and carers can work with their children to help them access the internet safely. The guide is entitled ‘Protecting your children in a digital world’, and is available as a PDF.

[Internet Watch Foundation](#)²⁴

The Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) is a self-regulatory UK Charity funded by the EU and wider online industry to minimise the availability of potentially illegal internet content. IWF work in partnership with UK and devolved government departments to influence initiatives and programmes developed to combat online abuse and are the

²⁰ DE list of resources can be found here: <http://bit.ly/bHdGRY>

²¹ Website can be found at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/cbbc/help/web/besmart.shtml>

²² Website can be found at: <http://www.childline.org.uk/Explore/OnlineSafety/Pages/OnlineSafety.aspx>

²³ Website can be found at: <http://consumers.ofcom.org.uk/files/2009/09/managemedia.pdf>

²⁴ Website can be found at: <http://www.iwf.org.uk>

only recognised 'hotline' in the UK for the public to report their inadvertent exposure to potentially illegal online content.

NSPCC²⁵

The NSPCC has created some guidance for parents and carers on how to monitor their child's internet use, including sites where they will have the opportunity to meet others. A summary of this guidance is as follows:

- Familiarise yourself with the sites your children are using
Your child should understand the importance of protecting their privacy online
- Your child should be careful about who they add to their 'friends list'
- Photos and descriptions on their profile should be suitable
- They must know to seek your agreement before meeting with a stranger
- Talk to your child about online bullying and the importance of acting responsibly
- Report concerns of a sexual nature to CEOP

Child Exploitation and Online Protection (CEOP) Centre²⁶

CEOP is a UK cross agency and cross business department of the Serious Organised Crime Agency, and is dedicated to eradicating the sexual abuse of children. It has produced a website about online safety, with different sections containing advice for 5-7, 8-10, and 11-16 year olds, as well as parents and teachers. This website is at:

www.thinkuknow.co.uk

CEOP is promoting a new animated film, Lee and Kim's Adventures, which aims to help children aged from 5-7 to understand 'the concepts of personal information and trust' and thus stay safer online.

Teachernet²⁷

This resource is run by the Department for Children, Families and Schools. It includes a section dealing specifically with the issue of cyberbullying.

Google: tips for online safety²⁸

The web company Google has created some brief tips on how children can remain safe online.

²⁵ Website can be found at: <http://bit.ly/aWG87P>

²⁶ Website can be found at: <http://www.ceop.gov.uk>

²⁷ Website can be found at: <http://bit.ly/1wJhZF>

²⁸ Website can be found at: <http://www.google.com/intl/en/landing/familysafety/>

Cyber Mentors²⁹

The CyberMentors website aims to tackle cyberbullying by using a social networking model to allow young people at different levels to mentor each other. Young people with concerns can talk online to a highly-trained young CyberMentor and get help straightaway. In serious cases, CyberMentors can refer people directly to an experienced counsellor to provide specialist support.

6 Recommendations

- The Safeguarding Board Bill as it stands does not specify a committee specifically to deal with matters of internet safety. Further scrutiny could be brought to the bill and its associated arrangements to ensure that sufficient resources and expertise are employed to implement an internet safety committee.
- The DHSSPS-led group responsible for implementing the Child Internet Safety Strategy in Northern Ireland could ensure that any guidance produced is kept up-to-date, and that in particular it addresses local issues regarding the use of social networking sites for sectarian recruitment.
- The *Byron Review* highlighted how important it is that parents and carers understand the risks of their children using the internet, and what measures can be used to mitigate and avoid such risks. Training for parents will help with awareness and confidence in tackling these issues in the home. Ensuring that such training is made widely available, is sustained, and is kept up-to-date, will be important.

²⁹ Website can be found at <http://cybermentors.org.uk>