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Zero to eight: young children and their internet use

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Childhood in the Digital Age

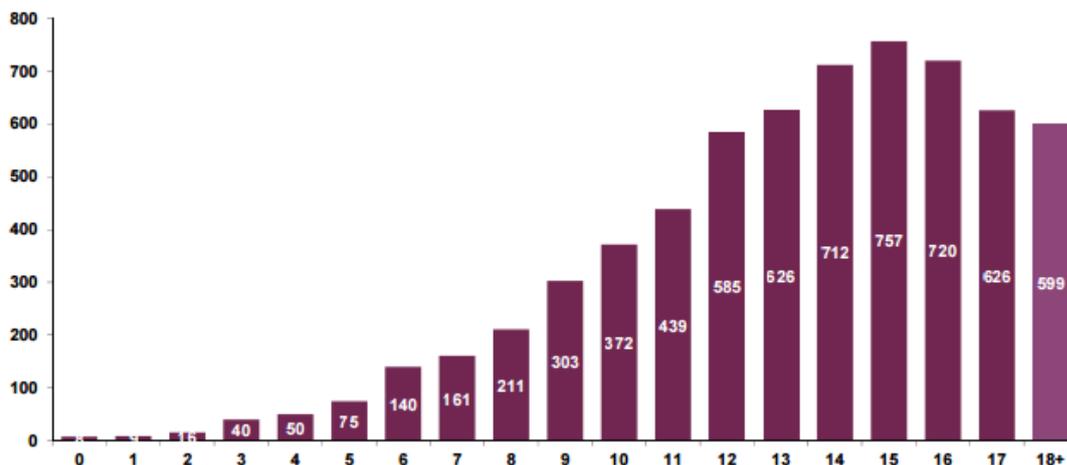
Zero to Eight: Young children and their internet use (extract)

D. Holloway, L. Green and S. Livingstone

What research evidence exists?

Very young children are ‘growing up at ease with digital devices that are rapidly becoming the tools of the culture at home, at school, at work, and in the community’ (NAEYC, 2012, p. 2). Digital and media literacy has been a curriculum focus in the early childhood classroom in many European countries for at least a decade. As such, educational institutions seem better prepared to integrate new technologies within educational settings. On the other hand, the domestic consumption of the internet by very young children has had little research attention.

Figure 1: Number of studies per age in Europe (Source: Ólafsson et al., 2013). EU Kids Online’s European Evidence



Note: The studies are multi coded and most studies cover more than one age group. Even though a particular age group has been included in a study it does not necessarily mean that individuals from that group have been interviewed in person.

Over the past ten years or so there have been a growing number of research projects in Europe regarding children’s online access, internet use and behaviours. EU Kids Online’s European Evidence Database shows that the bulk of this research focuses on older children and teens (Figure 1). Indeed, in our review of some 1200 studies, only one in five included

any children under nine years old, and only 4% included children aged birth to four years old. Nonetheless, this means that over two hundred studies included children aged from birth to eight, and in the present report we draw selectively upon these.

The research focus upon older children and teens reflects the fact that there is some correlation between the number of teenagers using the internet and the number of studies of their internet use. However, many younger children are now going online and there is not, at this stage, an equivalent increase in studies of children in this age group (Ólafsson et al., 2013).

The lack of studies focusing on very young children may reflect the difficulties of involving this age group in research projects. Their lack of reading and writing skills make them less able to engage in traditional survey-based data collection, either online or via pencil and paper. It is understandable, therefore, that the research that does involve pre-schoolers and other young children is mostly qualitative and explorative in nature. Although this qualitative research is more time consuming, it does enable the voices of very young children to be heard. Even so, the need for more research involving younger children raises extra challenges regarding methodology, research ethics and funding (Livingstone & Haddon, 2008).

The rise in internet uptake by children aged between 0 and 8 is not uniform. Considerable differences exist between EU countries as well as within these countries, so it is not always possible to generalise across countries. For example, in 2010 internet access for households with children in the EU ranged between 50% in Romania to 99% in the Netherlands and Finland (Eurostats, 2010). Of the 70 per cent of 7–8 year-olds who used the internet weekly in Finland in 2009, a majority preferred gaming-oriented sites. Gender differences exist, however. For instance, girls ‘preferred sites that fall between children- and youth-oriented social networks and gaming sites, such as panfu.fi, littlepetshop.com, and gosupermodel.com.’ (Suoninen, 2010, p. 14). Finnish boys had different gaming preferences. Research which differentiates and explains differences between and within EU countries is needed in order to maximise support for all children to negotiate the internet in safe and beneficial ways.

What do 0–8 year olds do on the internet?

Research regarding exactly what European children aged under 9 are doing on the internet is somewhat sketchy. Some countries have begun to track what very young children do on the internet while others are yet to do so.

Children in this age group treat the internet as a source of entertainment. Those under the age of 3 or 4 are more likely to spend their time watching video clips (Childwise, 2012; Findahl, 2012; Teuwen et al., 2012). For instance, YouTube is the second favourite site for children under 5 in the UK (Childwise, 2012). When they reach 3 or 4 they also become interested in playing games online (Childwise, 2012; Teuwen et al, 2012). As these young children get older they widen their internet usage to include information seeking, completing homework and socialising (Ofcom, 2012; Childwise, 2012, Guðmundsdóttir & Hardersen, 2011; Findahl, 2012).

Virtual worlds

Children’s virtual worlds are simulated internet environments in which children play and interact with each other via avatars. The number of children accessing virtual worlds is on the increase with the most significant growth expected in pre-teen users aged 3–11 (‘Teen, Preteen’, 2009). Security software company AVG’s digital diaries research project, conducted in 2011 with 6–9 year-olds, found that 64% of UK children, 55% of Spanish children, 46% of German children, 38% of Italian children and 37% of French children are

using the social network functions on sites such as Club Penguin, Minecraft, Moshie Monsters and Webkinz ('Young Children', 2011).

Data collection in this area is sometimes difficult to interpret because there is no accepted definition concerning what a virtual world is – and little differentiation between 'playing games online' and visiting 'virtual worlds'. Virtual worlds merge social network functions with game playing and as such need separate research attention regarding the benefits and risks of going online to interact with others.

Underage social networkers

Research regarding under-age access to social networking sites provided for teenagers and adults (such as Facebook) can be problematic due to underreporting. However, the UK Safer Internet Centre's recent survey found that 30% of 7–11 year-olds reported having their own Facebook profiles before they are 13: the minimum age specified for membership (Broadbent, Green & Gardner, 2013). In Finland also, children under 13 frequently mention Facebook as a favourite site (Pääjärvi, 2012). In 2010 the AVG digital diaries study indicated that some children aged between 6 and 9 have their own Facebook accounts (Table 1). They found that 10% of UK children, 11% of Spanish children, 6% of German children, 22% of Italian children and 15% of French children between the ages of 6 and 9 use Facebook ('Young Children', 2011).

Table 1. Percentage of European children aged 6–9 using SNS sites in 2010 (Source: 'Young children', 2011)

	Virtual worlds	Facebook
UK	23	56
Spain	37	61
Germany	5	12
Italy	0	3
France	3	14

A detailed study carried out in Germany found that 44% of children under 13 use social network sites aimed at teenagers and adults. The most visited sites were Facebook (13+) and schülerVZ4 (12+). More specifically, 5% of 6–7 year-olds and 18% of 8–9 year olds used these sites in 2012. These percentages are expected to rise in the next few years (Medienpädagogischer Forschungsverbund Südwest, 2012a). The expected rise in underage usage signposts a critical need to investigate young children's ability to negotiate these sites in a safe and beneficial manner as well as indicating the value in exploring parental attitudes to this trend.

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The full report is available at: http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/52630/1/Zero_to_eight.pdf