



Resilience for the Digital World

Research into children and young people's social and emotional wellbeing online

YOUNGMINDS
The voice for young people's mental health and wellbeing

ECORYS 

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Foreword

Over the past two decades, there has been a sharp increase in children's use of digital media. The wide availability of mobile phones, tablets and gaming has fundamentally reshaped young people's relationships with the online world. We know that children are now spending more time in front of screens; messaging on Apps, creating their own blogs, consuming the content of their peers who are broadcasting their own YouTube channels.

The evidence outlined in this important review by Ecorys demonstrates the very real impact that the digital world can have on young people's mental health and wellbeing. The heightened anxiety that social media use can bring is affecting the mood and sleep of many children. The widened and more immediate access to age-inappropriate and/or distressing content is also having a knock-on impact on young people's self-esteem and perceptions about their bodies.

Similarly, bullying has followed many young people from the playground and classroom to their online profiles. This means that not only can the perpetrators continue their harassment online, but also this behaviour can attract additional bullying from strangers.

That said, the review also highlights the important role that the web plays in supporting young people to share their concerns about the stresses they face in the everyday life, as a distraction from traumatic events, and a space to explore their identity and network with others managing a mental health condition. Young people tell us that digital media can result in positive benefits, such as building a sense of belonging, keeping in touch with a group of friends that share similar values and providing comfort and support to their peers.

To date, we have seen welcome changes in child protection to better respond to new and emerging digital risks. Similarly, industry is now taking more responsibility for the platforms they create, and maintain, through the introduction of filtering and reporting mechanisms. We believe, however, that the findings of the review should make us reconsider traditional responses from Government and industry to these challenges.

Existing approaches fail to adequately understand how children and young people consume social media, and the ways in which they actively create and curate content online. The analysis demonstrates that many parents, teachers and responsible adults do not have the skills and knowledge necessary to support young people to navigate their use of social media or transmit positive values about how to safely contribute online.

Importantly, this evidence review makes a compelling case for an equal focus to be given to building children's and young people's digital resilience - the social, emotional literacy and digital competency required to positively respond to, and deal with, any risks they might be exposed to online.

I would use this opportunity to thank the team at Ecorys for conducting the evidence review, generating these insights and enabling us to work through how we can better advocate for the digital needs of children and young people.

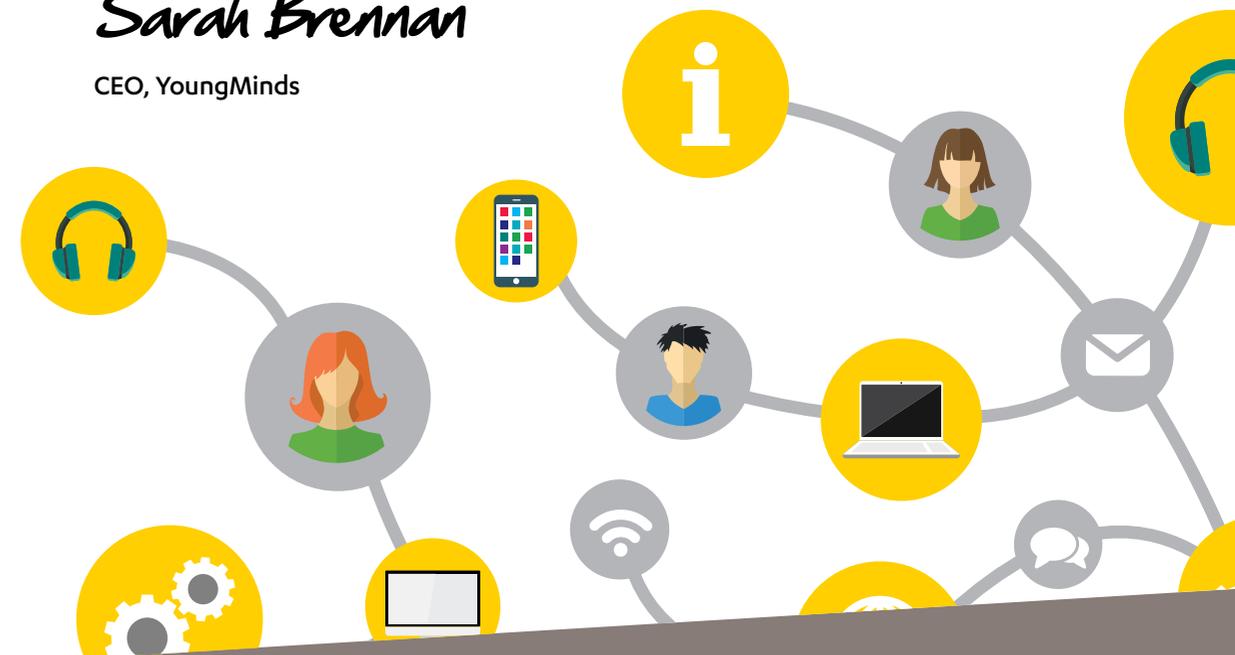
Further details of our specific policy recommendations can be found in our YoungMinds positioning paper which has been created alongside this full review.

We hope that this work catalyses a greater focus on building digital resilience alongside protecting children online. YoungMinds will be using it, alongside our engagement work with parents and young people, to shape and inform our approach going forwards.

Sarah Brennan

Sarah Brennan

CEO, YoungMinds





Executive Summary

Ecorys carried out a scoping review of the literature on children and young people's social and emotional wellbeing online, as part of a collaborative research project with YoungMinds. The research aimed to inform the development of more effective online resources. The work was carried out between July and August 2015, following the Government Social Research (GSR) guidelines¹.

YoungMinds and Ecorys have also produced a positioning paper, including further policy recommendations for action. This is available online at: http://www.youngminds.org.uk/assets/0002/6859/Resilience_for_the_Digital_World_YM_Positioning.pdf

Children and young people's changing internet use

- Children and young people's use of the internet has undergone rapid expansion over the past decade, with growing membership of social networking sites, and increased use of mobile technologies. By 2010, the vast majority of 9-16 year olds in the UK (96 per cent) reported going online at least weekly². Smart phone and tablet ownership has also risen sharply.
- Changing modes of social interaction online present both opportunities and risks. Many young people have greater autonomy than ever to explore their online worlds in their own time and space. At the same time, greater unmediated contact implies reduced levels of protection, whilst online forums can reinforce unhealthy behaviours such as self harm or suicide ideation.
- When asked, children and young people have been found to consistently rate the social benefits of the internet over almost everything else. Online networks often play a central role in honing social and communication skills, facilitated by the sharing of music, apps and games. Many children and young people perceive that digital technology is beneficial to their relationships, whilst acknowledging the heightened anxiety arising from the need to be constantly reachable.

¹ Civil Service website (2010)

² Livingstone, et. al. (2010a, p.12)

- The internet also offers a potential source of advice and emotional support, whether peer-to-peer or accessing information, and represents a powerful awareness-raising tool for health promotion. Moderated social media sites enable children and young people to test and learn their online skills in a controlled environment.

Acquiring skills for the digital world

- Although frequently portrayed as being uniquely equipped to engage with the digital world, research has shown the wide variations in children's internet access and use. These variations broadly reflect age and maturity, gender, and socio-economic background.
- Children's digital literacy is strongly correlated with parental internet use, although adults often underestimate the extent to which children learn by modelling their parents' online behaviours. Older siblings are a potential source of internet know-how, and sometimes offer 'protective' oversight, whilst also widening access to age inappropriate material for younger children.
- Children and young people have an active role to play as online content creators and curators, as well as being consumers of online material generated by adults. The literature points towards the need to move away from a narrow debate about parental guardianship over online content, towards a wider recognition of children's agency in managing online opportunities and risks.
- The concept of 'digital skills' extends beyond technical know-how, with implications for children and young people's social and emotional development. Increased time spent online means that children and young people are routinely presented with moral and ethical choices, and take responsibility for their own social conduct. At the same time, online social networks are challenging accepted social norms for relationship formation and management – concepts of 'trust', 'friendship' and 'intimacy', and decisions about the disclosure of personal information.

The nature of risks encountered online

- There is an established literature on the subject of internet safety, which has evolved in recent years, corresponding with the changing nature of the risks encountered by children and young people online. A broad distinction emerges between specific harmful online activities or behaviours such as grooming or cyberbullying, and children and young people's everyday online social interactions, which may also include an element of risk. The latter has arguably been overlooked within the literature, as the nature of these risks is less clearly defined.

- Cyberbullying has grown in tandem with the increased availability of digital technologies. One third of 11-16 year olds report having been targeted, threatened or humiliated online, with the effects sometimes experienced over a period of months or even years. Children and young people with disabilities and Special Educational Needs (SEN) are sixteen times more likely than their peers to be subjected to persistent bullying, and young carers thirteen times more likely.
- Despite these trends, research has found that young people often display a low level of concern about the dangers posed to their personal safety by "the internet". The digital world is not generally perceived as presenting unique threats, although young people more readily identify with the underlying issues that might be played out online, such as bullying, or peer violence.

Who is vulnerable, and in which contexts

- Research shows that children and young people become vulnerable online through the interaction between opportunity and personal decision-making. The degree of exposure to the online world is one of the few common factors in the accumulation of risks – the more time spent online, the greater the likelihood that the individual will be subject to potential harm.
- It is apparent that digital technologies have a role to play in shaping how and when young people become vulnerable. The "24/7" nature of the internet offers a platform for the escalation of conflicts originating offline, taking them into a more public domain. Vulnerability also arises through the instant sharing of personal content, the difficulties with retracting personal information, and the potential for misreading social situations and causing unintentional distress.
- Children and young people's online lives often bypass the professional support available to them offline. Research suggests that child and youth professionals rarely hold the knowledge or skills to engage effectively with children and young people in their online social spaces. This represents something of a 'blind spot' with regard to safeguarding practices.
- Online vulnerability often mirrors the wider causes and consequences of social exclusion. This is particularly apparent where online behaviours are influenced by the psychological effects of abusive relationships, childhood trauma or family breakdown; manifesting in low self-confidence, impulsivity, and a propensity to seek out risky scenarios. The onset of adolescence at around the age of 11 or 12 is often when these behaviours become more apparent.
- Despite these risk factors, not all young people who are vulnerable online appear so in other aspects of their lives. This suggests that online risks can manifest in unexpected ways.

Towards a resilience-based approach

- Children and young people's resilience is strongly implicated in how online risks are experienced, and their ability to cope when problems arise. There is considerable variation in the extent to which young people report being upset or traumatised by online encounters, and their duration.
- There is a compelling argument for creating opportunities that allow young people to take appropriate controlled risks within safe limits, whilst recognising that some young people are likely to require more targeted support to navigate the risk pathways that they encounter online.

The relationship between online behaviours and mental health

- The relationship between the online world and clinical mental health problems is a complex one, with no simple causality. Research has shown that young people with mental health problems are potentially more likely to turn to the internet and social media for social interaction, whilst excessive use seems to be a factor exacerbating these problems.
- The literature points towards the need to take into account both the quality and context for young people's online interactions when understanding the relationship with their mental health. There are potential benefits from higher levels of internet use amongst some young people with mental health problems, where it provides a gateway to social and psychological support.
- The concept of 'excessive' internet use is also widely documented within the literature, although evidence of the psychological effects is mainly anecdotal. Nearly one in five of the participants in a major UK survey (2014) held some concerns that they were spending too much time on social networking sites³, whilst one quarter of UK children participating in a further (pan-European) survey reported skipping meals or sleep because of the internet⁴. Elsewhere, concerns have been raised about the potential impact on school work and peer friendships⁵.

3 Lilley, et. al. (2014, p.11)

4 Livingstone 2014, Mascheroni (2014, p.5).

5 UK Council for Child Internet Safety (2015)

- The use of mobile technologies such as smartphones is associated with anxieties relating to conformity with social conventions⁶, and the need for validation from peers for personal content posted online⁷. Children and young people's online monitoring of physical appearance has been cited as a contributory factor in body dissatisfaction, anxiety, and low self-esteem⁸.
- As might be expected, there is stronger evidence for the psychological ill-effects experienced as a direct consequence of online abuse or harassment. Cyberbullying has been linked with depression, stress, anxiety and other psychological problems in numerous studies, including from the UK, USA and Canada⁹.

Conclusions and recommendations

- In summary, the review underlines the clear social and informational benefits of the internet for many different aspects of children and young people's lives. Children and young people have a central role to play in regulating their own behaviour and that of their peers, beyond the use of parental controls and the vetting of online content by adults.
- Although the amount of time spent online is a good proxy for the level of risk to which children and young people are exposed, a degree of controlled risk taking is essential for developing resilience. Nonetheless, there is evidence that the internet is shaping the contexts in which young people become vulnerable, with a real risk that some young people's online lives are becoming polarised from the support that is available to them offline.
- The report concludes that there is an important distinction to be made between the psychological ill effects of 'excessive' internet use, and those incurred as a direct consequence of abuse or exploitation online; whether through cyberbullying, sexual exploitation or subtler forms of psychological pressure. The review points towards the need for a greater range of developmentally appropriate resources to foster children and young people's resilience, across the diverse range of digital media and platforms that they use. The meaningful participation of children and young people in design and development of such tools is a high priority.

6 Ibid. (2014)

7 Lenhart (2015b, p.7)

8 Tolman, et. al. (2006)

9 Ybarra, et. al. (2006), Smith, et. al., (2008), and Munro, 2011

Recommendations

1 **Recommendation 1**
To develop structured opportunities for debate and discussion between adults and young people regarding the risks and opportunities presented by the internet.

2 **Recommendation 2**
To examine the ways in which professional support might be extended online to engage with young people at the points where they need it most. Consider the skills that might be needed by practitioners and how these could be built into CPD programmes.

3 **Recommendation 3**
To consider the potential for developing family learning materials geared towards exploring the social and emotional aspects of the digital world.

4 **Recommendation 4**
To conduct further research with young people who have restricted digital rights and access (e.g. in youth justice settings), to better understand how this impacts on their social and emotional wellbeing.

5 **Recommendation 5**
To ensure that young people actively participate in the design and development of resources intended to provide them with emotional support online.

6 **Recommendation 6**
To explore the potential for extending and improving young people's access to peer support online, through the creation of new resources, user groups, and / or access points.

7 **Recommendation 7**
To identify opportunities to engage with established youth forums and groups (e.g. youth councils or ambassadors), to raise the profile of digital issues within their work.

8 **Recommendation 8**
To conduct further research, to understand how skills for resilience are developed and tested out online, and the coping strategies that young people use when their online social interactions become stressful or problematic. Consider the merits of using an ethnographic approach.

9 **Recommendation 9**
To consider the potential for developing targeted resources for young people whose behaviour put them at greater risk online, and identify how and where these are best positioned.

Part 1

Background

This paper presents the findings from a scoping review of the literature on children and young people's social and emotional wellbeing online, which was carried out by Ecorys between July and August 2015. It forms the first output from a collaborative research project between YoungMinds and Ecorys, which set out to examine the mental health dimensions of children and young people's use of the internet, and to consider the implications for developing effective tools and resources.

Date: January 2016

Author(s): Laurie Day (Ecorys)

1.1 Terms of reference

The review was structured around six broad research questions:

1. What do we know about trends in young people's internet use?
2. What risks are encountered by young people online?
3. Who is 'vulnerable' online, and in which contexts?
4. What are the consequences for young people's social and emotional wellbeing?
5. What is the nature of the relationship between online activities and mental health?
6. What might help to build young people's resilience online?

The review was conducted according to the Government Social Research (GSR) guidelines for a quick scoping review¹. The main focus was on electronically available published academic research literature, policy studies, and evaluations. A framework was devised for searching and screening and to produce a “map” of the literature, prior to data extraction, analysis and reporting.

The review was conducted with the express purpose of identifying key themes for the wider research study, and does not claim to be exhaustive.

1.2 Study context

The evidence base for children and young people’s safe use of the internet has expanded considerably over the past decade, benefiting from heightened interest at a policy level and improved mechanisms for monitoring and reporting on e-safety issues.

Published on the 27 March 2008, Dr Tanya Byron’s 2008 review of internet safety² shined a spotlight on the nature of the risks and opportunities encountered by children and young people online, and the widening gap in levels of internet use and competency between children and their parents or carers. It also highlighted the multi-dimensional nature of the issue, which concerns individual behaviours; family factors; education, and the influence of industry standards and technology.

The review concluded that, whilst children and young people’s digital literacy has expanded in many ways, this has been a largely uneven process, and that fundamentally “... children are often not being prepared for the online world”. The report set out a series of recommendations organised in terms of regulating availability and access, whilst building children and young people’s resilience.

The Byron review resulted in the establishment of the UK Council for Child Internet Safety (UKCCIS) - a cross-sectoral forum of over 200 organisations tasked with overseeing stakeholder engagement in the issue of child internet safety and implementing the report recommendations. The UKCCIS Evidence Group has played a key role in centralising this issue, alongside parallel independent reviews on the commercialisation of childhood³ and the sexualisation of young people⁴, and a burgeoning UK and international evidence base assisted by longitudinal research projects such as the *EU Kids Online*⁵ study of children and young people’s internet behaviours across Europe.

1 Civil Service website (2010)

2 DCSF (2008b)

3 Bailey (2011)

4 Papadopoulos (2010)

5 Livingstone, et. al. (2011)

With the launch of the *iRights* movement⁶, the focus has turned more towards a fundamental rights-based approach to children and young people’s protection and empowerment online underpinned by the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC⁷). The five *iRights* set out a clear mandate for change, based around children’s right to ownership of the content they create online (and its deletion); knowledge regarding the commercial use of their information; protection from illegal and harmful content or contact online; the capacity to navigate knowingly both in and out of online places and spaces; and the skills to thrive in the online world and to “*negotiate changing social norms*”.

Whilst the *iRights* movement was conceived from the ‘bottom-up’ as a civil rights initiative, the impetus has been felt in policy circles and the *iRights* agenda forms the main point of reference for the *Growing Up Digital Taskforce*⁸ - the forum tasked by the Children’s Commissioner for England to gather independent evidence to review the case for policy and legislative reform.

The turn towards a rights-based approach brings the question of children and young people’s social and emotional wellbeing into focus. As noted in the *Growing-up Digital* positioning paper, in order for children to fully exercise their rights in a digital world, it is necessary to understand the social and emotional dimensions of their online behaviours and how these might be positively reinforced:

“ **Young people may appear to have the technical skills to negotiate the internet but increasingly, it is becoming clear that they do not have the social skills because information technology may be having a deep impact on their cognitive and social development.**”

(Children’s Commissioner for England, 2015, p.1)

This scoping paper seeks to explore these issues further; drawing upon the available research literature to better understand the role of children and young people’s resilience in the digital world and to consider what types of support or intervention might be needed.

6 *iRights* (2015)

7 UN General Assembly (1989)

8 Children’s Commissioner for England (2015)

Part 2

What do we know about young people's internet use?

Children and young people's **use of the internet has undergone rapid expansion over the past decade**. By 2010, the vast majority of 9-16 year olds in the UK (96 per cent) reported going online at least weekly, with most doing so on a daily basis⁹. The **membership of social networking sites has also seen a sharp increase over the same period**, with two thirds of 9-16 year internet users holding at least one account; rising to 92 per cent of 15-16 year olds¹⁰. With this expansion has come greater autonomy for children and young people to explore their online worlds on their own terms, and the more routine use of the internet to form and conduct relationships.

Just over half of teenagers surveyed for a pan-EU study reported using the internet without parental supervision¹¹, whilst 84 per cent of girls aged 12-15 in the UK reported using the internet to contact other people¹².

More recent data attests to the **growth in mobile technologies such as smart phones and tablets, and the widespread use of Apps to access online content**. In 2014, half of 9-16 year olds in Europe owned a smart phone, whilst mobile phone ownership had risen to 95 per cent amongst 15 year olds¹³. These trends are also evident within the UK, alongside widening access to games consoles that are internet enabled¹⁴. Children and young people have been able to access ever more diverse formats for social networking, with Instagram and Snapchat use catching Facebook over the past few years¹⁵.

⁹ Livingstone, et. al. (2010a, p.12)

¹⁰ Ibid. (2010a, p.21)

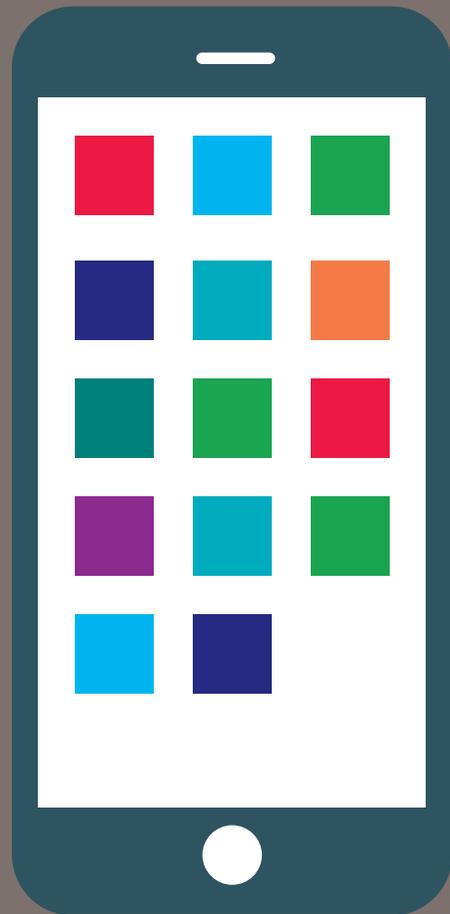
¹¹ Spielhofer (2009)

¹² Ofcom (2008, p.5)

¹³ Livingstone, et. al. (2011)

¹⁴ Ofcom (2010)

¹⁵ Childwise (2015)



The rise of mobile technologies means that the internet is more portable, assisted by location tracking and tagging services, although the home remains the main point of access¹⁶.

When asked; young people have been found to consistently rate the social benefits of the internet over everything else. For many young people, online social networks play a central role in the honing of their social and communication skills - often facilitated by the sharing of music, apps and games - and as a source of advice and emotional support¹⁷. Eight in ten 16-24 year olds responding to a large scale online survey in the UK believed that digital technology played a positive role in their relationships, whilst approaching half found online interactions more straightforward than those conducted face-to-face¹⁸.

Feeling part of an online community was also a highly valued aspect of 11-16 year olds use of social networking sites, as reported through one UK study by the NSPCC¹⁹. Furthermore, well over half (57 per cent) of 13-17 year olds responding to a large-scale national survey in the USA reported having made new friends online²⁰, whilst approaching three quarters said that they felt *“better connected to their friends feelings”* through the use of social media²¹.

There are also promising results where social networking sites have been utilized to promote health behaviours and as an awareness-raising tool²², and where moderated sites have been offered as a platform for young people to acquire online social networking skills within a controlled environment²³.

The following table presents some key facts and statistics regarding internet access and use according to age and maturity, gender, and socio-demographic status (Table 1).

Table 1. Socio-demographic variations in internet access and use (summary)

Age and maturity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • According to 2013-14 survey data, the average age at which children in the UK first use mobile technologies is eight years old²⁴. Many children have internet access from a younger age, however, and access amongst 5-11 year olds has increased over time. • Membership of social networking sites is fairly high amongst children and young people in the UK, but levels fell overall during the period 2010-2014. The age limits for individual sites vary considerably, and there is evidence to suggest that these are not always effectively enforced²⁵.
Gender	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Boys are more likely than girls to access the internet within the home, and to go online via a games console²⁶. Research from the USA particularly underlines the importance of online gaming to boy’s friendships, with estimates from one national survey indicating that around one third of 13 to 17 year old boys have made new friends through online gaming. Video games also ranked the highest as boys’ preferred mode of communication with friends, whereas text messaging was afforded the equivalent status amongst girls of the same age group²⁷. • A 2014 survey of UK 11-16 year olds identified a number of gender differences in children’s use of social networking sites. A higher proportion of girls than boys reported using sites for photo sharing, and girls made greater use of sites marketed at younger children²⁸.
Socio-demographic factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Various studies have shown that socio-economically disadvantaged children and young people in the UK are less likely to have home-based internet access than other groups²⁹. There is some evidence that this gap is closing, however, with mobile technologies likely to have a role. • Chat room membership in the UK has traditionally been highest amongst older adolescents and children from lower income families³⁰.

16 Livingstone (2014b, p.3)

17 O’Keeffe, et. al., (2011)

18 Livingstone, et. al. (2012c)

19 Lilley et. al. (2014)

20 Lenhart (2015b, p.2)

21 Ibid. (2015b, p.6)

22 Laranjo, et. al. (2015)

23 Webb, et. Al. (2008)

24 Livingstone (2014b, p.3)

25 Papadopoulos. (2010, p.8)

26 Livingstone, et. al. (2012c, p.12)

27 Lenhart (2015b, p.10)

28 Lilley, et. al. (2014)

29 Ofcom (2008)

30 Munro (2011)

Inevitably, **these changing modes of online interaction present both opportunities and risks**. The integration of online gaming with social networking provides more fluid social interactions between peers, irrespective of location or geographical distance, but it also removes the layers of ‘protection’ afforded by more traditional gaming formats³¹. Similarly, smart phones offer greater utility for managing social networks and accessing online content, but have also become the principal medium for distributing pornography and for bullying or controlling a partner³².

Smart phone and tablet users are also more likely to receive sexual messages; possibly reflecting their greater privacy. The more recent availability of location tagging services brings with it the risks that are inherent to the ‘real time’ disclosure of young people’s whereabouts offline³³.

Notwithstanding these issues, there would seem to be a **low level of concern amongst the general population of children and young people, regarding their vulnerability online**. Young people do not necessarily see the internet per se as a source of risk, but rather one of a number of channels through which day-to-day personal dramas are initiated or continued. For example, a 2009 survey of 5-17 year olds’ attitudes towards internet safety in the UK found that ‘*dangers with using the internet*’ ranked some considerable way down a list of potential risks, and posed a concern (unprompted) for just 2% of young people in the 12-17 years sub-group³⁴.

As we go on to consider later in this review, it is feasible that there is some under-reporting of concerns about online activity, when the question is posed in terms of dangers pertaining to *use of the internet* rather than the underlying social contexts that might result in harm (i.e. those relating to bullying, partner or peer violence, or illegal activities).

2.1 Children and young people’s competences online

The question of **children and young people’s competency in the digital world is fraught with apparent tensions and contradictions**. Young people are simultaneously portrayed as “*digital natives*”³⁵; seamlessly adapting to online environments; and as marginalised and excluded by adult decision-makers. In practice, however, the research points towards young people varying widely in their competency online, according to age and maturity, and along socio-demographic lines³⁶.

31 Childnet (2015)

32 Ibid. (2010)

33 Ibid. (2012c)

34 DCSF (2009, p.5)

35 DCSF (2008b)

36 Livingstone, et. al. (2011)

Children **acquire digital skills from an increasingly early age**, with much earlier access to the internet, and a range of age and developmentally appropriate tools and products available to them. As young children first gain access to the internet through shared devices, parental controls and regulation are more prominent at this stage³⁷.

Family dynamics are also believed to play a key role in how and when digital literacy skills are acquired. Research has shown that parents are often unaware of the extent to which younger children learn through observation and model their behaviours on parental use of digital technologies³⁸. The EU Kids Online study found that children of parents with lower internet use and experience were less confident about staying safe online and were afforded lower levels of protection³⁹, although there is some evidence to suggest that excessive parental controls can inhibit the acquisition of internet safety skills – especially in older children⁴⁰.

Sibling relationships also have a role to play. A number of qualitative studies have documented **the role of adolescents keeping a watchful eye on the online habits of their younger siblings**; playing “*the role of tutor or controller*”, whilst also sometimes introducing younger siblings to content, with a corresponding risk of access to age inappropriate material⁴¹.

A further important theme to emerge from the literature is **the role of children and young people as content creators, and not just passive consumers of online material generated by adults**. Whilst debates about child protection have tended to frame young people’s internet use from a standpoint of adult guardianship over inappropriate content, young people themselves have been central in “*...adopting, creating and transforming new cultural forms in the online environment*”⁴².

This is particularly apparent in relation to online gaming, where newer technologies allow users to create and share their own content, and to switch more easily between platforms. The rising popularity of Minecraft is one such example of a “*collaborative and user-directed*” game aimed at both girls and boys, which combines creativity with social interaction⁴³.

37 Livingstone, et. al. (2012c)

38 Chaudron (2015)

39 Livingstone, et. al., (2012a)

40 Ofcom (2015)

41 Chaudron, 2015, p. 11)

42 Livingstone, et. al. (2012a, p.14)

43 Childwise (2015, p.8)

2.2 Social and emotional literacy

Whilst there is clearly a need for young people to gain the *functional* skills required to navigate the digital world, **the concept of ‘digital literacy’ also implicates young people’s social and emotional development.** As young people access an increasingly wide range of information online and via mobile technologies, so their moral compass must also adjust to the online world and to the shorthand and decontextualized forms in which information is received.

Qualitative research has shown that children and young people are often acutely aware of the social, moral and ethical dilemmas posed by online communication, and that they exercise discernment regarding the quality of content shared by peers. Implicit codes of conduct online also emerge from a number of these studies, with young people expressing a clear sense of proper and improper uses of personal information - disapproval at the level of unnecessary “noise” generated on social networking sites⁴⁴, and rejection of the practice of ‘forwarding’ photographs without their permission⁴⁵.

The literature underlines some **marked differences in the perspectives of adults and children regarding the social impacts of an expanding digital world.** Whilst there is a tendency for adults to adopt a reflective view of childhood as experienced pre / post a new ‘digital age’⁴⁶, these distinctions are rarely perceived by children and young people – especially so younger children.

At times this has problematized the efforts of researchers to explore children’s views of the internet, because the terms of reference posed by adults have lacked relevance amongst the groups they were studying⁴⁷ and because for many children and young people, “*the environment distinction is inconsequential*” between online and offline activities⁴⁸.

Indeed, numerous authors have concluded upon the importance of children and young people’s active participation in the design and implementation of research on this topic⁴⁹.

Nonetheless, there is considerable evidence that young people’s online lives are challenging the social norms for relationship formation and management. This is particularly apparent with regard to the concepts of familiarity, trust, and ‘friendship’.

An evaluation of the ThinkUKnow (TUK) programme in schools found that children and young people aged 11-16 generally did not consider contacts whom they knew exclusively from their online interactions and whom they had never met to be “strangers” (with the transition from online “stranger” to “friend” defined primarily in terms of having interacted over a period of time). More than one in five young people had shared their full name, information about their school and photographs of themselves with someone they only knew online⁵⁰. A second study of the same age group, again within the UK, elicited similar findings regarding children’s organisation of friendships on and offline:

“ **The nature of the online world is blurring the boundaries between friends and strangers. Twenty-three per cent of the people held responsible by children and young people for their upsetting experience were only known to the children online. However, children may still have counted these people as someone they knew, even if the relationship had developed online, but never face to face.**”

(Lilley, 2014, p.17)

44 UK Council for Child Internet Safety (2015)

45 Ibid. (2012c)

46 Children’s Commissioner for England (2015, p.3)

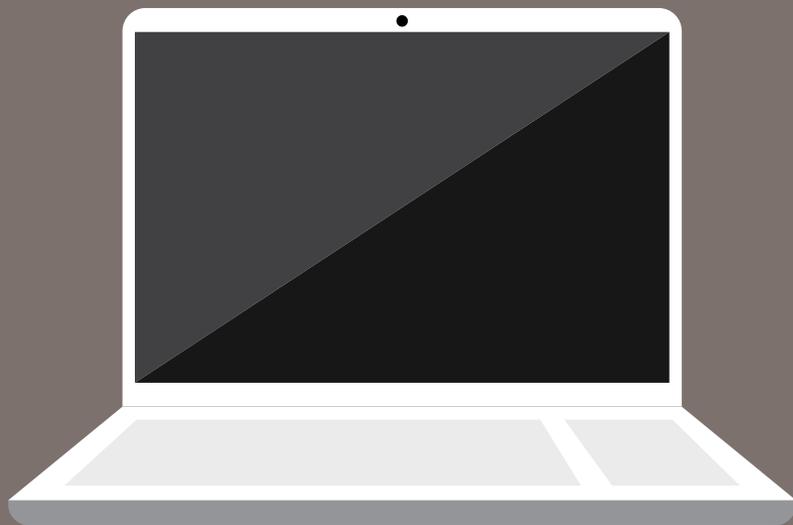
47 Chaudron, S. (2015)

48 Whittall, et. al. (2013, p.17)

49 UNICEF (2011), Carrick-Davies (2011), DCSF (2010), Livingstone, et. al. (2012a)

50 Livingstone, et. al. (2012c, p.32)

Part 3



What risks are encountered by young people online?

There is a wealth of literature examining the nature and prevalence of the risks posed to children and young people online. The **evidence base varies considerably between the different risk 'types'**, with less known about phenomena that have only been identified and / or researched more recently such as 'sexting' and websites promoting self-harm or suicide. Moreover, **the picture is a far from static one, and the nature of these risks would appear to have evolved** over the period during which the body of research on this subject has been produced.

Broadly speaking, it is possible to distinguish between the following:

- specific online activities or behaviours that are potentially harmful; and
- the function of the internet and mobile technologies in relation to children and young people's changing "*pathways to risk*⁵¹", and the contexts in which young people are vulnerable.

We now consider each of these in turn in the remainder of this section.

3.1 Types of online risks; their characteristics and prevalence

In seeking to develop an underpinning framework for the *EU Kids Online* study⁵², the study researchers adopted a classification grouping the online risks encountered by children and young people into three principal types, according to their form and context⁵³.

⁵¹ Cabinet Office (2014, p.13)

⁵² EU Kids Online was established as a multinational research network, using funding from the European Commission's Better Internet for Kids programme.

⁵³ Hasebrink, et. al. (2009)

These include:

- 1. content risks**, relating to mass-produced or user-generated content likely to cause distress;
- 2. contact risks**, where the child or young person participates in adult-initiated activities (whether voluntary or not); and
- 3. conduct risks**, where the child or young person is a victim and / or perpetrator of peer-led online activities.

Table 3.1 shows how these definitions can be used to form the basis of a matrix, also taking into account the nature of the risk posed (aggressive; sexual, values or commercial).

Table 3.1. Typology of risks associated with children’s internet use

	Content Receiving mass-produced content	Contact Participating in (adult-oriented) online activity	Conduct Perpetrator or victim in peer-to-peer exchange
Aggressive	Violent /gory content	Harassment, stalking	Bullying, hostile peer activity
Sexual	Pornographic content	‘Grooming’, sexual abuse or exploitation	Sexual harassment, sexting
Values	Racist / hateful content	Ideological persuasion	Potentially harmful user-generated content
Commercial	Embedded marketing	Personal data misuse	Gambling, copyright infringement

Source: adapted from Livingstone, et. al. (2012b, p.8)

As the matrix serves to illustrate, there are a myriad of risks posed online, all of which have potential consequences for children and young people’s social and emotional wellbeing. We now go on to consider the nature and prevalence of some of these risks in further detail.

Table 3.2. Overview of the main risks encountered online

Risk	Description
Cyberbullying	<p>A working definition is as follows: “Cyberbullying involves the use of information and communication technologies to support deliberate, repeated, and hostile behaviour by an individual or group, which is intended to harm others”⁵⁴.</p> <p>The increased availability of new technologies has seen an overall rise in the reported incidence of bullying online. Data from 2014 shows a marked increase in prevalence amongst 9-16 year olds in Europe across all age groups over the preceding four year period, with a narrowing of the gap between girls and boys⁵⁵.</p> <p>According to research on cyberbullying in the UK, one third of 11-16 year olds had been targeted, threatened or humiliated online, with the highest rates reported amongst 9-12 year olds⁵⁶. Children with special educational needs were 16 times more likely to be the subjects of persistent bullying, whilst children who looked after a family member who has a disability or illness were 13 per cent more likely⁵⁷. Prevalence is known to be significantly higher amongst girls than boys.</p> <p>Research by the NSPCC with 11-16 year olds provides further insights to the forms of online emotional abuse experienced by children and young people. Their study found that this principally took the form of include ‘unkind, sarcastic or negative comments or rumours circulated online’ (40 per cent) aggressive and violent language (18 per cent), and cyber-stalking (12 per cent). In rarer cases, young people were encouraged to hurt themselves⁵⁸.</p> <p>A number of separate studies have found that cyberbullying can be an ongoing experience; continuing over a period of years in a minority of cases and occasionally culminating in suicide⁵⁹. However, comparatively little is understood about factors affecting the relative success of young people in resolving these issues; the skills and qualities that are needed, and how these are acquired.</p>

54 Belsey (2005, p.1)

55 Rising from 8 per cent in 2010 to 22 per cent in 2014 amongst girls, and from 6 per cent in 2010 to 21 per cent in 2014 amongst boys (Mascheroni, et. al. 2014, p.28)

56 Cross, et. al. (2009)

57 Douglas, et. al. 2012, p. 22)

58 Lilley, et. al., (2014, p.13)

59 Smith, et. al., 2008, Cross, et. al. (2009)

Risk	Description
Online grooming	<p>Grooming has been defined as: “A process by which a person prepares a child, significant adults and the environment for the abuse of this child. Specific goals include gaining access to the child, gaining the child’s compliance and maintaining the child’s secrecy to avoid disclosure⁶⁰.” The definition applies to both online and offline contexts.</p> <p>There are few reliable estimates for levels of online grooming in the UK, with most research concentrating on offline abuse⁶¹. However, the expansion of the internet creates new opportunities for perpetrators, in terms of access and the ability to act anonymously over a sustained period of time. It also provides opportunities for perpetrators who might lack the means or confidence to initiate contact offline, to behave in ways online that are uncharacteristic of their offline behaviours⁶².</p> <p>Contrary to popular perceptions of online risk, only a small proportion of would-be perpetrators pose as young people when making contact online. The significant majority of perpetrators interviewed in one 2004 study made the young person aware that they were an adult and that they were seeking a sexual encounter⁶³.</p> <p>The European Online Grooming Project⁶⁴ identified three risk categories, with most children falling into the first two categories of being unlikely to interact and at a low risk of meeting, or willing to interact but unlikely to meet. A minority of children fell into the third category of being willing to interact, seeking relationships, and at a high risk of meeting. A separate study found that one quarter of children aged 14 have arranged to meet an online contact face to face while 15% of those aged between eight and 12 have done so⁶⁵.</p> <p>The European Online Grooming Project found that girls aged 13-14 years were most likely to be victims of online grooming. A report by the NSPCC on partner exploitation and sexual violence points towards the trend of older adolescent males grooming younger teenage girls through the ‘gifting’ of expensive mobile phones, which are subsequently used as a tool in their surveillance; a practice which is also implicated in recruitment to gangs. The same study also found a comparatively high occurrence of verbally aggressive or controlling behaviour within teenage relationships involving mobile phones and internet amongst 13 to 16 year olds in the wider school population⁶⁶.</p>

60 Craven et al. (2006, p.297)

61 Whittall, et. al. (2013, p.5)

62 Whittall, et. al. (2013, p. 18)

63 Wolak, et. al. (2004)

64 European Online Grooming Project (2015)

65 Spielhofer (2009, p.9)

66 Within a sample of 1,353 young people aged 13 of 16, 12 per cent of girls and 4 per cent of boys said that their partners had used mobile phones or the internet to humiliate and threaten them. (Barter, et. al., 2009, p., 59)

Risk	Description
Sexual harassment, sexting	<p>Sexting has been defined as: “sexually explicit content communicated via text messages, smart phones, or visual and web 2.0 activities such as social networking sites”⁶⁷. The one-to-one sharing of sexually explicit material and messages online is believed to be “unwanted” and a cause of distress in the majority of cases – especially where young people are personally singled out for harassment, and for young people who are clinically depressed. In contrast, “wanted” exposure to such material is more strongly associated with those seeking sexually explicit conversations online⁶⁸.</p> <p>One of the main studies on sexting showed a propensity for young people to exhibit rule-breaking tendencies with regard to sexual contact; indicating their potential vulnerability to other forms of exploitation. Approaching half had met a stranger offline after an online introduction, whilst approaching one third had engaged in explicit online activities below the age of consent. Almost nine in ten of those surveyed (85%) considered online promiscuity to be easier and more socially acceptable than offline⁶⁹. Sexting also includes culture, class, and race-specific constructs of ideal masculinities and femininities⁷⁰.</p>
Websites and groups promoting self-harm or suicide	<p>Despite a number of high profile cases of ‘suicide contagion’ where social media appeared to play a central role; comparatively little is known about the extent and nature of online risk from websites or groups promoting self-harm or suicide⁷¹. Research on this subject shows that online peer groups can increase the risk, by normalizing self-harm and dissuading young people from seeking professional help⁷². These influences share many characteristics with cyber-bullying.</p>

67 Ringrose, et. al. (2012, p.10)

68 Munro, (2011)

69 Livingstone (2012a, p. 25)

70 Ibid., (2012a)

71 Spielhofer, 2009, Munro, 2011

72 Daine, et. al. (2013)

As Table 3.2 identifies, online risks can often be associated with offline patterns of risk-taking behaviour – drugs and alcohol, offending behaviour, and interpersonal violence, and therefore with a range of other mental health problems such as depression and self-harming.

A number of studies conclude that school-based safety education has been unable to keep pace with these risks. Although children’s online safety has been a feature of some school initiatives, it has not yet been adopted more systematically on a cross-curricular basis⁷³, and indeed schools are criticised in the 2010 Ofsted report on the use of technologies for too often adopting a singular approach of “locking down” the internet as a safeguarding response; with the result of restricting children and young people’s access to the benefits that the internet has to offer, and stifling opportunities for teachers and students to engage in dialogue around internet safety⁷⁴.

The UK Sexualisation of young people review also pointed towards the slow response of the education system to the growing influence of the internet over body images and cultural norms amongst young people⁷⁵.

3.2 The function of the internet in exposure to risk

Whilst avoiding an overly technologically deterministic view on the subject, it is possible to identify a number of **specific ways in which the internet and mobile technologies can serve to exacerbate young people’s vulnerabilities**. These risks derive from the forms of social interaction that are made possible by digital technologies, so in this respect they are not inherently negative or harmful (and indeed the same opportunities are exploited for social benefit by many other young people).

This second set of risk factors includes the following:

- **The potential for unmediated social contact** – although the internet is an inherently ‘social’ space, its potential for anonymity can contribute towards the further isolation of young people who are seeking-out risky scenarios; bypassing the support networks that protect them in the offline world. Carrick-Davies identifies the low levels of engagement of professionals in young people’s online lives as a potential blind-spot with regard to safeguarding in this respect⁷⁶. The anonymity afforded by the internet also heightens the risk of coercion and exploitation.

73 DCSF (2010)

74 Ofsted (2010)

75 Papadopoulos (2010)

76 Carrick-Davies (2011)

“ For most young people, the primary gateway to the internet is now their mobile phone... Because young people can access, update and interact with their social networking service easily, on the move and ever more privately, this creates particular risks for those who are already vulnerable.”

(Carrick Davies, 2011, p.6)

- **The potential for instant sharing of personal content** - young people have access when they are at their lowest and most vulnerable; whether under the influence of drugs or alcohol, or experiencing strong negative emotions⁷⁷. The consequences can be far-reaching, and often without recourse to a means of deleting their digital past. As noted within the UNICEF report on children’s online safety; “...once created, identities exist in perpetuity”⁷⁸. This concern is also articulated within the UK iRights framework, and embodied within the “Right to Remove”⁷⁹. Online disputes can result in a heightened sense of anxiety due to the lack of closure, and inability to ‘walk away’ as might be the case in an offline altercation. Some accounts by young people point towards the role of the internet as a platform for “playing out conflicts” originating offline, potentially resulting in their escalation in a more public setting.
- **The potential for miscommunication** – virtual communication presents a heightened risk of misreading social situations. The issue of distress caused unintentionally by comments posted online is a recurring one within the literature⁸⁰. For example, seventeen per cent of children responding to the NSPCC study of 11-16 year olds in the UK said that the thing they most disliked about social networking sites was that people could be rude and hurtful without realizing it⁸¹. This suggests a greater degree of fragility to some online relationships. The scope for asynchronous communication online can also have a disarming (or “disinhibiting”⁸²) effect in the context of online grooming, where exchanges take place over a protracted period.
- **The blurring of boundaries for ‘privacy’** – the ‘forwarding’ of messages or photographs and instant mass communication via channels such as Twitter or BlackBerry Messenger each pose risks where young people share personal or sensitive information about themselves online.

77 Ibid., (2011)

78 UNICEF (2011, p. 11)

79 iRights (2015)

80 Munro, (2011), Lilley, et. al., (2014)

81 Ibid. (2014)

82 Suler (2004)

Part 4

Who is 'vulnerable' online, and in which contexts?

The research evidence indicates that **there are no simple determinants of children and young people's online vulnerability**. Whilst the internet provides a medium through which risks can arise, young people's online decision-making is subject to a range of personal, social and cultural influences⁸³. The *degree of exposure to the online world* would appear to be one of the few common factors in the accumulation of risk – namely, the more time young people spend online and the wider the range of channels used, the greater the likelihood that they will encounter risks.

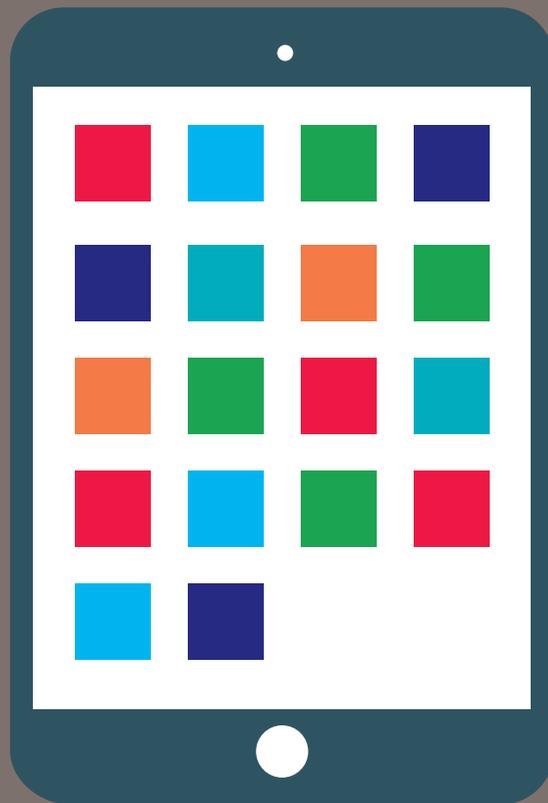
“ **Complex interdependencies between the institutions and structures that enable or constrain children's opportunities and their agency in choosing how to act online while negotiating these possibilities and constraints.**”

(Livingstone 2012 – Theoretical framework, p.8)

There are some indications that **online vulnerability can mirror the wider effects of social exclusion; especially so for young people who have more complex needs**. A participatory research study undertaken in alternative education settings within the UK identified a number of factors that young people believed to contribute towards their vulnerability online⁸⁴.

⁸³ Livingstone, et. al,(2012, p.3).

⁸⁴ Carrick-Davies (2011, p.5)



The study found that for the target group in question, the challenges they encountered were strongly associated with the psychological effects and circumstances surrounding their exclusion from mainstream education. These risk factors would seem to have a good level of transferability, and include the following:

- Low self-confidence
- An 'outsider' identity – heightened need for peer group recognition
- Offline experience of abusive relationships and violence
- Impulsiveness and propensity for rule-breaking
- In the case of young people who are Not in Education, Training or Employment (NEET) – longer periods of unsupervised time, fewer structures and boundaries; and,
- Lacking the positive influence of supportive adults in their lives

Nonetheless, it is clear that **whilst some young people are vulnerable both online and offline, others who otherwise show no signs of being vulnerable are more susceptible to online risks**. This suggests that there are potentially specific circumstances in which the digital world can expose young people to new risks, or expose latent vulnerabilities⁸⁵. This is also evident in relation to online bullying – evidence from some studies to support the assertion that some online perpetrators have prior experience of being bullied offline, but are able to utilize the anonymity afforded by the digital world to switch from victim to perpetrator mode, fitting a “bully-victim” profile⁸⁶.

The **resilience of young people is quite strongly implicated in how online risks are perceived, and their ability to cope with incidents when these occur**. We know from a number of previous studies that there is considerable variation in how young people cope with the effects of upsetting online encounters, and the extent to which lasting effects are experienced. Research conducted by the NSPCC with 11-16 year olds on social networking sites found that most incidences caused upset for no longer than a day or less (55 per cent)⁸⁷. However, one in ten young people had experienced an incident that continued to affect them emotionally for a month or longer. This says something both about the nature and severity of the incidents, and individual young people’s ability to ‘bounce-back’.

85 Livingstone, et. al. (2012b)

86 Smith, et. al. (2008)

87 Lilley, et. al. (2014, p. 16)

4.1 Vulnerability of specific groups

Whilst there are no certainties regarding who is vulnerable online, it is apparent from the literature that **certain risk patterns or behaviours are more strongly associated with groups of children and young people with shared characteristics**. Table 4.1 below gives a summary of what we know from previous work. This summary should not be understood as an attempt to pigeonhole children and young people but rather to highlight some of the key socio-demographic considerations.

Table 4.1 Vulnerability of specific groups of children and young people

- Children and young people with **disabilities** are sixteen times more likely than their peers to be subjected to persistent bullying⁸⁸, and **young carers** thirteen times more likely⁸⁹. Although ICTs are often associated with overcoming barriers to service access; mobile technologies have not always been readily accessible to children and with disabilities, and some studies have pointed towards their further marginalisation as a result⁹⁰. Lower access to peer support is another risk factor for children with disabilities and Special Educational Needs (SEN)⁹¹.
- Children and young people from **minority ethnic groups**⁹² typically encounter more online risks than their peers, but often demonstrate better digital skills and awareness. There is also evidence that Black Minority Ethnic (BME) children and young people specifically are likely to have higher levels of parental protection. Beyond these broad trends, however, the ways in which cultural factors affect online vulnerability are comparatively under-researched.
- Young people with **lower levels of literacy** are often less able to seek out or understand available online channels for help, and are less likely to receive safety messages. This problem has been exacerbated by the (reported) lack of relevant digital literacy skills amongst youth workers and social workers, and a lack of knowledge and awareness amongst teachers of how to engage young people in discussion relating to the digital world⁹³.
- Children and young people in certain **institutional settings**, such as care and custody, where issues of access are mediated in specific ways, and where the relationship between online and offline behaviours is influenced by young people’s immediate environments.
- There are also a number of **gender differences**, with girls twice as likely to be persistently cyberbullied as boys⁹⁴, and more likely than boys to report upsetting experiences on social networking sites. The NSPCC study also found that girls are more likely to be upset by peer group or friendship group exclusion and pressures to change their appearance, whereas boys are more upset by violence or aggressive content, and unwanted sexual messages⁹⁵.

88 Cross, et. al. (2009)

89 Douglas, et. al. (2012)

90 Soderstrom (2009)

91 Livingstone, et. al. (2012b).

92 These other groups include: children of Gypsy-Roma, Traveler of Irish Heritage, European and East European groups, children from Chinese groups and children of mixed ethnicity (Munro, 2011)

93 UNICEF (2011)

94 Munro (2011, p.8)

95 Lilley, et. al. (2014)

4.2 A developmental view – adolescent risk

Several authoritative studies on children and young people’s online safety have pointed towards the need to adopt a developmental view, oriented around age and maturity⁹⁶. Specifically, **the transition to adolescence is now widely understood to be a stage when young people’s digital lives undergo rapid changes**⁹⁷. Heightened impulsivity, attention seeking and sexual interest are a normal feature of this period, but these behaviours also bring new risks, and young people who have experienced adversity have a higher propensity towards risk-taking. Adolescence is also a time when undiagnosed or untreated mental health problems in young people are most likely to be displayed⁹⁸.

As this period also often corresponds with increased levels of internet access, the digital world has the potential to exacerbate these existing vulnerabilities:

“ **Vulnerability to grooming, impacts of adult pornography and displaying risky and/or harmful behaviours online currently appears to be less about being seen as a vulnerable child offline and more about the stage of development of the child – namely pubescent – starting around 11 to 12 years of age**”

(Livingstone, 2012a, p. 9)

Recent research has challenged traditional views on the causes of adolescent risk, and how vulnerable young people are best supported. In their 2014 evidence review, Hanson and Holmes argue that policy and practice development has been hindered by a lack of understanding about adolescent development, with worrying consequences for how interventions have been designed for the most vulnerable young people⁹⁹. The review highlights the tendency to view adolescents through the same lens as younger children, with a corresponding misperception that the main risks derive from adults rather than peer group. It also challenges the view that risk-taking should be treated as “*adult lifestyle choices*”, instead pointing towards the influence of childhood trauma over adolescent decision-making and the propensity to externalise the effects through their behaviour¹⁰⁰.

96 For example: Livingstone, et. al. (2012a), UNICEF (2011)

97 ‘Early adolescence’ is understood as covering period between 10 and 13 years of age; ‘mid-adolescence’ between 13 and 16 years; and ‘late adolescence’ from 16 into the final teen years. (Hanson, et. al., 2014)

98 World Health Organisation (2015)

99 Hanson and Holmes (2014)

100 Ibid. (2014, p.4)

The question of resilience is also an important one. The term is understood to denote an individual’s ability to ‘bounce back’ when faced with difficulties within their lives, or more specifically their capacity for “...*positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity*”¹⁰¹. Resilience is a dynamic process rather than a static set of personal qualities, and even individuals with higher levels of resilience may vary in their capacity to cope over a given period of time.

Various theories exist regarding how resilience is structured, ranging from the positive influence of “resilience factors”¹⁰² (which include structural factors such as having strong social networks in place, and a dedicated adult role model), to a competency-based approach. Karen Reivich¹⁰³ highlights seven learnable “*skills of resilience*” from her research, which include the following:

1. Emotional awareness or regulation
2. Impulse control
3. Optimism
4. Causal analysis
5. Empathy
6. Self-efficacy, and
7. Reaching out

These theories are pertinent to understanding young people’s online decision-making, and underline the importance of **creating opportunities for young people to take appropriate controlled risks within safe limits** so that they can “...*learn by transgressing as well as adhering to social norms, thereby building resilience*”¹⁰⁴. Indeed, a research study undertaken with 14-17 year olds in the UK provided a strong indication that young people’s resilience online was correlated with having opportunities to learn by experimentation and to develop the skills they need to self-regulate their internet use¹⁰⁵.

At the same time there is a need to recognise that young people’s online decision-making is likely to be influenced by other vulnerabilities, and that some young people are likely to require more targeted support to navigate the risk pathways that they encounter online.

101 Luthar, et. al. (2000, p.1)

102 Newman, et. al. (2004)

103 Reivich (2008)

104 Livingstone (2012b, p.7)

105 Przybylski, et. al. (2014)

Part 5

From risks to 'harm' – what are the consequences?

We know from previous research that the stressful or upsetting situations reported by young people online vary widely in their duration and intensity, but beyond this **there is more limited evidence regarding the nature of any psychological (or physical) ill effects**. As has been identified: *“Not only is the nature of harm associated with certain online risks often unclear, but... [this] is difficult empirically and also in theoretical terms”* (Livingstone, et. al. 2012, p.4).

In this section, we consider the nature of the associations between internet use and mental health problems. We then go on to consider some of the reported psychological effects of “excessive” internet use, of upsetting or worrying experiences online, and of online abuse or harassment.

5.1 Associations between the internet and mental health problems

The relationship between the online world and clinical mental health problems is a complex one, with no simple causality. The potential link between use of online platforms (especially social networking sites) and mental health problems has been explored directly through a number of studies, which have been largely inconclusive in their findings¹⁰⁶. Moreover, efforts to interpret trend data for risk behaviours amongst young people with reference to trends within the digital world remain largely conjectural¹⁰⁷.

¹⁰⁶ Jelenchick, et. al., (2013), Toseeb and Inkster, (2015)

¹⁰⁷ Cabinet Office (2014)

These efforts are hampered both by the lack of access to reliable impact data, and the problematic nature of seeking to isolate the ‘effects of the internet’ from their social context.

A reasonably large Canadian study of 700 students found that students who identified an unmet mental health support need were more likely to spend more than two hours per day on social networking sites than those who did not, whilst daily use of social networking sites for more than two hours was also associated with a poorer self-rating of mental health, higher levels of psychological distress, and suicidal ideation¹⁰⁸.

The authors conclude that the relationship is likely to run both ways, in that **young people with mental health problems are potentially more likely to turn to the internet and social media for social interaction, whilst excessive use seems to be a factor exacerbating these problems**. This is supported by evidence from other studies, which conclude that children with psychological difficulties tend to encounter a higher level of online risk, and to be more upset by it, compared with children in the general population¹⁰⁹.

The potential benefits of the internet as a gateway to social and psychological support cannot be overlooked, however, and **other studies have identified potential benefits from higher levels of internet use amongst some young people with mental health problems**. Research from the USA¹¹⁰ presents a complex picture with regard to the association between Facebook use and depressive symptomology in a large scale quantitative study; concluding from the results that Facebook use might have a protective function for young women with higher levels of neuroticism.

These findings point towards the need to take into account both the *quality* and context for young people’s online interactions when understanding the relationship with their mental health.

5.2 Psychological effects of excessive internet use

The concept of ‘excessive’ internet use is widely documented within the literature, although evidence of the psychological effects is mainly anecdotal. Overall, there would seem to be a good level of self-awareness and self-management of internet use by children and young people, notwithstanding that the amounts of time spent online are frequently found to be underestimated by parents and young people alike¹¹¹.

Nearly one in five of the participants in the NSPCC survey (18 per cent) held some concerns that they were spending too much time on social networking sites (although the consequences of this were not explored)¹¹², and one quarter of UK children participating in the 2013-14 *Net Children Go Mobile* survey reported skipping meals or sleep because of the internet, whilst two thirds thought that their internet use displaced time that should be spent with family, friends or doing schoolwork¹¹³.

Research with parents for the same pan-EU study indicated that **parents often held concerns about young people’s reduced sociability in the offline world, with a potential impact on school work and peer friendships**¹¹⁴.

Young people responding to a further UK study on e-safety reported a heightened awareness of the potentially “addictive” nature of using instant social media channels, reporting that they often “...*only fell asleep at night when the last person stopped pinging [on BlackBerry Messenger]*”¹¹⁵.

108 Sampasa-Kanyinga, et. al. (2015)

109 Livingstone (2012a)

110 Simonic et. al. (2014)

111 UKCCIS (2014).

112 Lilley, et. al. (2014, p.11)

113 Livingstone 2014, Mascheroni (2014, p.5).

114 UK Council for Child Internet Safety (2015)

115 Carrick-Davies (2011, p.16)

5.3 Online stress and anxiety

The internet also features prominently as a potential source of stress and anxiety. Again, the evidence is largely based on self-reporting by young people. The constant demand for young people's attention is a particularly recurrent theme. One UK study found that one in three UK children owning a smartphone reported feeling the need to "always be available for contact", implying a degree of coercive social pressure.

This theme was also apparent in the NSPCC study, where one in five young people using social networking sites reported having fears of social isolation or exclusion¹¹⁶. Research from the USA also found that young people often felt under pressure to actively manage their identity online, and to seek validation from peers and adults for content posted online¹¹⁷.

Concern about **body image and appearance** is another potential source of stress and anxiety. The *Sexualisation of Young People Review* underlined concerns around 'body surveillance' amongst children online, arising from the "...constant monitoring of personal appearance"¹¹⁸. Other studies concur **that the online aspect of social networking has the potential to intensify these effects; contributing towards body dissatisfaction, anxiety, and low self-esteem**¹¹⁹. There is some evidence to suggest that these issues have become more pronounced with the emergence of picture-sharing media such as Instagram and Snapchat.

UK internet research from 2010 found that over **one in ten children and young people aged 9-16 encountered something on the internet that had upset or worried them during the past year**¹²⁰. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the incidence would seem to be greater on social networking sites, where young people are interacting with others rather than passively viewing content.

116 Ibid. (2014)

117 Lenhart (2015b, p.7)

118 Papadopoulos (2010, p.6)

119 Tolman, et. al. (2006)

120 Livingstone, et. al., (2010)

Research by the NSPCC with 1,024 11-16 year olds who had at least one profile on a social networking site found that over a quarter (28 per cent) had one of more "upsetting encounters", with one in ten of these young people reporting having to deal with potentially stressful interactions on a daily basis¹²¹.

5.4 Psychological effects of online abuse or harassment

As might be expected, there is stronger evidence for the **psychological ill-effects experienced by children and young people as a consequence of direct online abuse or harassment**. Cyber-bullying has been linked with depression, stress, anxiety and other psychological problems in numerous studies, including from the UK, USA and Canada¹²².

There is some evidence that the distress caused can be greater than for traditional forms of bullying, as the encounters can extend into the home and occur when the young person is alone¹²³. The two reports from BeatBullying's Virtual Violence series underline a range of negative outcomes from cyberbullying. Of those who responded to a large scale survey of 11-16 year old secondary school pupils in the UK (4,605): approaching one in five reported a negative impact on their confidence and self-esteem, whilst one in ten reported feelings of depression. A small proportion had either self-harmed or attempted suicide as a result of the abuse they experienced¹²⁴.

121 Lilley, et. al. (2014, p.5)

122 Ybarra, et. al. (2006), Smith, et. al., (2008), and Munro, 2011

123 Juvonen, et. al. (2008)

124 Douglas, et. al. (2012)

Part 6



What might help to build young people's resilience online?

We have considered a range of possible risks for young people online and the harms that may occur. However, the research also provides some valuable indications of how young people might be better supported to acquire the social and emotional skills to manage these risks, and the actions that might be required by families, schools, youth professionals, and the digital media sector. It seems important in this respect to pose the question: *"What might effective resilience interventions look like, in the context of the digital world?"* We now go on to draw out some of the key messages from the review.

There is a consistent message from the literature that **young people are often best placed to offer solutions for how best adults can support them in managing risk and staying emotionally resilient online**. We have seen that young people's immersion in the online world and their unique understanding of the social contexts that arise provides a valuable source of know-how when developing solutions. When asked, young people have often provided simple and workable solutions for tackling unhealthy online behaviours, such as tools and timers built into social networking platforms, and have clearly articulated the ways in which these might be designed and implemented¹²⁵.

As the authors of the UNICEF study on young people's e-safety concluded:

“By and large children and young people are often the best experts in relation to their own ICT usage... effective protection strategies require children's participation; particularly that of adolescents, in both their design and implementation, as well as the empowerment of parents and other adults who work closely with young people, such as teachers, to enable them to support and understand children's use of ICT and the risks and hazards they may encounter.”

(UNICEF, 2011, p.9)

¹²⁵ Rights (2015)

The *Munch, Poke, Ping* e-safety project is one of a number of examples of young people's participation in researching and raising awareness of social issues encountered online and how to deal with them. By engaging young people from Pupil Referral Units in the medium of film-making, the project underlined young people's competency in "*modelling a positive use of technology*"¹²⁶ and their eloquence in describing what types of professional support would help. The young people gave a strong message about the need for key workers to better understand the risks presented by the online world, and called for the more widespread training and opportunities for young people to act as "*as co-researchers and peer-teachers, to help other young people understand the risks*"¹²⁷.

This peer education message is an important one that might be taken on board by established young people's participatory structures and forums, who already act as peer advocates in the offline world, but who perhaps require additional up-skilling with regard to their digital literacy. There are also merits in examining how peer education might be embedded within school-based e-safety programmes, and whether such programmes might benefit from greater participation of young people in their design and delivery.

A further key finding warranting closer examination is that **young people would appear to have a range of potential roles to play in supporting their younger siblings within the family**. We have seen that older siblings frequently provide a source of knowledge and advice about the digital world for younger children; exercising a degree of protective oversight. There could be mileage in further exploring how these roles might be supported and strengthened – for example through digital literacy resources that engage multiple family members and have an "intergenerational" element¹²⁸.

Furthermore, we have seen that **young people demand greater levels of support and protection from digital media companies who host and manage the technologies that they use**. Approaching half of 11-16 year olds who were surveyed for the Virtual Violence II study (45 per cent) felt that websites do not do enough to protect children from cyberbullying¹²⁹. The same proportion of young people from the NSPCC study did not consider that social networking sites take their safety seriously (45 per cent)¹³⁰. Whilst this suggests a need for action by the sector, young people are clear that any such action should be taken with their participation in shaping this process.

A further key finding in this respect is that **there are potentially greater benefits from increasing the "emotional availability"¹³¹ of appropriate adults to young people online, rather than seeing reduced access as means of risk avoidance**. The literature underlines that parents and carers and professionals alike have too often viewed retreatment from the digital world as a means of protecting young people from harm. In his UK online safety study with young people in alternative education settings, Carrick-Davies identifies the risks posed to vulnerable young people as a result of schools commonly viewing young people's online social encounters as an 'out of school problem'. He contrasts this with effective practices from the field of detached youth work, where engagement with young people on their own terms and in their 'space' is highly valued¹³².

The ability for adults to offer meaningful support to young people online has a training and professional development dimension. There are well documented concerns about levels of digital literacy amongst teachers and educationalists, and of their competences to engage with young people meaningfully about their online lives. Some steps have been taken in this area, including through the development of schools-based programmes. The health sector has also taken steps to boost professional skills and knowledge through initiatives such as the NHS Code4Health Programme¹³³.

There is some evidence, however, that the need for up-skilling might be the greatest amongst those professionals who routinely engage with young people with higher levels of risk taking behaviours (e.g. CAMHS workers, and Youth Offending Teams).

Other studies have similarly framed solutions in terms of **widening access to mental health resources online, in more diverse formats that better reflect young people's online behaviours and patterns of internet use**¹³⁴. A growing number and range of these tools and resources have emerged in recent years.

126 Carrick-Davies (2011, p. 2)

127 Ibid. (2011, p. 2)

128 Percy-Smith and Thomas, eds. (2010)

129 Douglas, et. al. (2012, p.37)

130 Lilley, et. al. (2014, p.20)

131 Livingstone and Palmer (2012a, p.42)

132 Carrick-Davies (2011)

133 The NHS Code4Health Programme was launched in March 2015 with the aim of raising levels of confidence and competence in using digital tools amongst healthcare professionals and other frontline staff. The Programme includes an emphasis on establishing peer user groups to share digital knowledge. (Salus Digital, 2015a)

134 Sampasa-Kanyinga, et. al. (2015)

The following are three such examples:

- The **Silent Secret app** was developed as a tool to help 11-19 year olds to manage and reduce stress and anxiety levels, and to strengthen emotional wellbeing¹³⁵. The app provides young people with a safe online space where they can share thoughts and feelings anonymously. It also includes a ‘get support’ button, linking young people to support organisations. Young people were actively involved in the tools’ design and own a share of the company.
- The **HeadMeds** website, developed and hosted by YoungMinds, provides general information to young people about medications that are prescribed for mental health conditions. It includes practical advice and information (including about common side effects), resources, and contributions by young people documenting their experiences of using medication¹³⁶.
- The **Reach Out! Online Community Forum** is managed by the California Mental Health Services Authority (CalMHSA) in California (USA), and facilitated by 16-25 year olds who are supported by trained adult moderators. It covers a range of user-defined topics relating to social and emotional wellbeing and mental health conditions¹³⁷.

It can be surmised that more targeted specialist resources might also be beneficial, including those designed to support young people who are more vulnerable online as a result of their risk taking behaviours (e.g. sexual risk-taking, involvement in gangs, drugs or alcohol misuse).

A final issue warranting further action is that of **tackling inertia amongst young people who experience traumatic experiences online, or who are exposed to potentially harmful content or contacts**. The research appears to show that young people often have a seemingly high threshold before they will raise concerns.

The 2009 DCSF survey showed that, of those (18 per cent) of children who experienced inappropriate or harmful content on the internet, just over half (55 per cent) “*did something about it*”. Specifically, around one third avoided or blocked the website themselves, just over one in ten spoke to someone (mostly parents), and a small minority reported it to an authority¹³⁸.

The proportion of young people seeking help face-to-face following an upsetting incident online was lower still for the NSPCC study of 11-16 year olds on social networking sites, at one in five (22 per cent). This study also found that boys less likely than girls to seek help face-to-face following an upsetting incident online¹³⁹.

The findings suggest a need to better understand the barriers to reporting, and to gather additional evidence on young people’s coping strategies when crises occur in their online relationships, and how they bounce back. They would also appear to indicate a need for more effective and anonymous channels for young people to report confidentially without a fear of stigma, alongside awareness-raising measures to challenge social norms amongst young people on this subject.

¹³⁵ Salus Digital, (2015b)

¹³⁶ Young Minds (2015)

¹³⁷ California Mental Health Services Authority (2015)

¹³⁸ DCSF (2009, p.6)

¹³⁹ Lilley, et. al. (2014)

Part 7

Concluding thoughts

This evidence review set out to explore the ways in which children and young people's interactions with the digital world are influenced by, and impact upon, their social and emotional wellbeing. It also sought to examine young people's support needs, and to identify any areas where new or additional resources might be beneficial. Finally, it aimed to identify any potential research gaps.

In this final chapter, we draw together the key messages from the research, and consider what actions might be needed.

7.1 Young people's relationships with the digital world

The review has underlined the fundamentally *social* nature of children and young people's interactions with the digital world. The research has consistently shown that young people value the social and informational benefits of the internet and the opportunities it provides for managing different aspects of their lives – both on and offline. Many young people consider that the internet and mobile technologies have a positive role in their relationships, and feel part of an online community.

We have seen how adult constructs of young people's digital lives can sometimes be unhelpful – imposing distinctions between on and offline social contexts that are not viewed as such by young people. This suggests a need to create more opportunities for dialogue between adults and young people, to find common ground and to develop a mutual understanding.

Action point 1:

Develop structured opportunities for debate and discussion between adults and young people regarding the risks and opportunities presented by the internet.

Examples might include:

- Large-scale debates (e.g. televised / online)
- Family learning materials (home)
- Social norms projects (school)

7.2 Navigating risks and opportunities

The research has underlined that young people often exhibit a high level of self-awareness regarding time spent online, and have an active role to play in regulating their own behaviour and that of their peers. However, the reliance on individual coping and adjustment poses questions about the sufficiency of the resources that are available to young people online, and the extent to which young people's vulnerability can be made visible before harm occurs. A reliance on individual coping also carries a risk of reinforcing wider inequalities in digital access and inclusion¹⁴⁰.

A key distinction emerges between the very specific risks encountered online (e.g. cyber-bullying, or exposure to harmful content), and the role of the internet as a medium through which young people conduct their everyday social interactions, which may also include an element of risk. The literature certainly indicates that the internet has the capacity to remove many of the barriers and inhibitions of the offline world, and that the contexts in which young people become vulnerable – the “*pathways to risk*”¹⁴¹ – are shaped in different ways.

The implication is that, for some children and young people, the reinforcement of social norms and values online is out-pacing other channels through which these might traditionally be acquired. In particular, it would appear that some young people's online lives have become increasingly polarised from the support that is available to them within schools and within the communities where they live.

140 Eynon and Geniets (2015)

141 Cabinet Office (2014, p.13)

Action point 2:

Examine ways in which professional support might be extended online to engage with young people at the points where they need it most. Consider the skills that might be needed by practitioners and how these could be built into CPD programmes.

Action point 3:

Consider the potential for developing family learning materials geared towards exploring the social and emotional aspects of the digital world.

The evidence also indicates that certain shared characteristics are likely to influence the ways in which young people become vulnerable online, whether this arises from their socio-demographic status, ethnicity, disability, or caring responsibilities. The restrictions posed to children's digital lives within certain institutional settings (e.g. in care or youth justice settings) and the potential consequences for their access to the benefits of the internet also warrant further consideration.

Action point 4:

Conduct further research with young people who have restricted digital rights and access (e.g. in youth justice settings), to better understand how this impacts on their social and emotional wellbeing.

7.3 The nature of young people's mental health needs online

Based on the evidence considered for this review, the link between young people's online activities and their mental health is an ambiguous one. Whilst a number of studies have established a correlation between young people's online behaviours and their mental health, direct causality cannot be inferred. Online stressors would seem to be a contributory factor in the worsening of certain conditions, but it would also appear that young people with these conditions are more likely to go online for support.

There is an important distinction to be made between the psychological ill effects associated with 'excessive' internet use, and those incurred as a direct consequence of abuse or exploitation online (whether through cyberbullying, sexual exploitation or subtler forms of psychological pressure from peers or adults). The amount of time spent online and the range of channels used provide a good proxy for the level of risk to which young people are exposed, but we have seen that risks do not necessarily translate into harms, and that a degree of controlled risk taking is essential for developing resilience.

The internet can also be an important source of psychological support for young people with prior mental health problems, although this potential has arguably not yet been fully exploited. It is essential to ensure the participation of young people in developing a wider range of resources to foster resilience across the diverse range of digital media and platforms that they use.

Action point 5:

Ensure that young people actively participate in the design and development of resources intended to provide them with emotional support online.

7.4 Towards a resilience-based model

Questions of competence are also posed in relation to young people's social and emotional functioning online. The review has highlighted the importance of developing emotional literacy alongside the more technical aspects of digital literacy. It has also outlined concerns that the digital literacy of parents, carers and professionals who work with young people often lag behind that of young people, and the extent to which this has restricted the availability of timely emotional support.

At the same time, peer support emerges as having a significant role to play in enabling young people to benefit from the advice and expertise of others who routinely access the same digital places and spaces that they do. This would seem to be a relatively untapped resource, despite the existence of a number of well-established online support groups and forums outside of the UK.

Action point 6:

Explore the potential for extending and improving young people's access to peer support online, through the creation of new resources, user groups, and / or access points.

Action point 7:

Identify opportunities to engage with established youth forums and groups (e.g. youth councils or ambassadors), to raise the profile of digital issues within their work.

We have also argued that a shift in emphasis is needed away from risk avoidance towards a more sophisticated understanding of what "*skills for resilience*"¹⁴² look like online, and how these are acquired and tested within safe limits. Further evidence would be beneficial documenting how young people manage their on-and-offline social relationships, and the coping strategies that are deployed when these break down. This indicates the potential benefits of an ethnographic approach.

Action point 8:

Conduct further research, to understand how skills for resilience are developed and tested out online, and the coping strategies that young people use when their online social interactions become stressful or problematic.

Consider the merits of using an ethnographic approach.

The review has further highlighted the need for developmentally appropriate resources to equip young people with the skills that they need for the digital world. We have considered how the increased propensity for risk-taking during adolescence shapes young people's online lives in quite specific ways; and how a sole focus on restricting access is potentially counter-productive for this age group.

We have also considered how adolescent risk-taking can be more problematic for young people with traumatic childhood experiences, and that there is a need to consider how best to manage online risks for young people exhibiting high levels of impulsivity and violent or disruptive behaviours for whom access to online social networks risks compound their existing vulnerabilities.

Action point 9:

Consider the potential for developing targeted resources for young people whose behaviour put them at greater risk online, and identify how and where these are best positioned.

7.5 Next steps – building on the scoping research

Building on what we have found through the scoping study, the suggested action points fall into two main areas – those relating to **practice development** and those relating to **further research**. The study also points towards a number of key principles, which cut across both of these areas:

- The meaningful **participation of young people**
- An **inter-generational dimension** – allowing for structured discussion and debate between young people and adults; and,
- A **transformative approach** – using the findings to test and challenge social norms

Practice development

Whilst the research questions for the next phase will be developed consultatively with young people, the following sets of key questions are posed, based on the evidence from the review thus far.

At an immediate level, it is clear that there are potential benefits from developing new resources and peer support to strengthen young people’s social and emotional wellbeing online. There are also priorities around getting additional professional support online in more diverse ways and formats, and breaking down the barriers and taboos surrounding young people’s digital lives.

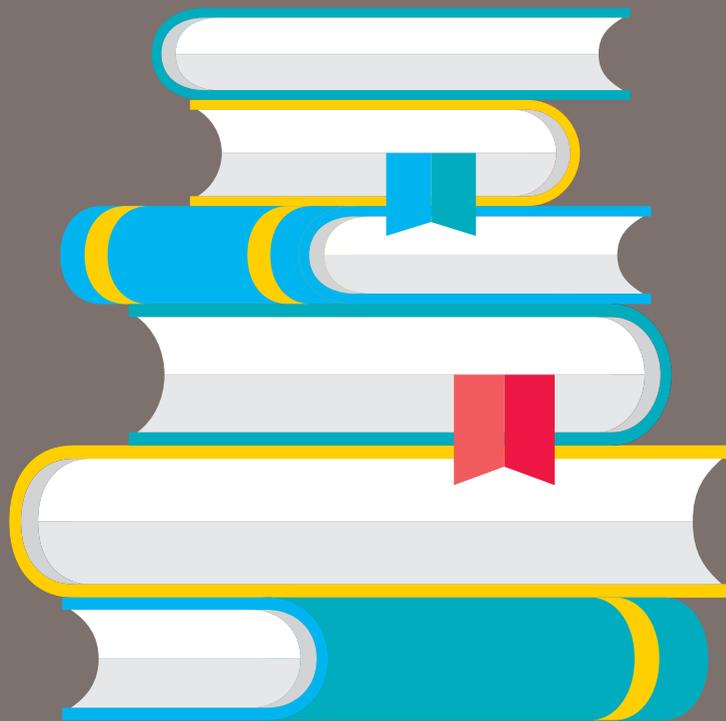
Further research

A number of research questions can be identified warranting more in-depth exploration with children and young people. These are summarised in Table 7.1 overleaf, and might form the basis of future work.

Table 7.1 Research questions for phase two (qualitative research)

Competences	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What skills do young people consider they need for managing their social networks online? 2. How are these acquired (e.g. through individual experimentation, peers, family, other sources)? 3. What is the relationship between young peoples online and offline relationships, and how are these organised and maintained? 4. In what ways do young people’s online lives benefit them socially and emotionally?
Conduct	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What do healthy and unhealthy online behaviours look like, and how are they defined and experienced by young people? 2. What kinds of risks do young people consider that their peers are taking online? 3. What influence does this exert over their behaviour? 4. In what situations do young people intervene when they consider that the conduct of their peers is inappropriate or harmful?
Coping and resilience	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What kinds of stresses and pressures do young people associate with the online world? 2. Which of these pressures worry them the most / least? 3. How do they cope with these? 4. In what ways do these pressures affect their social and emotional wellbeing? 5. How does this manifest itself (e.g. whether low mood, stress levels, school work)? 6. What makes some young people more resilient to the risks they encounter online? 7. Can these skills or qualities be learned?
Support and resources	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What might encourage young people to more routinely talk about things that they find upsetting online (with peer and with adults)? 2. What kinds of support mechanisms or awareness-raising tools would help? 3. How might young people get involved in developing these (e.g. peer education)? 4. How might adults engage more effectively with young people’s digital lives? 5. What support might they offer, and how might this be provided?

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