Children’s Views on Internet Safety

BCS, The Chartered Institute for IT
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BCS results from school children survey

BCS, The Chartered Institute for IT recently conducted a survey to seek the views of school children on online safety, to coincide with the Government’s consultation on its Internet Safety Strategy.

The survey was sent to teachers in the Computing at Schools network, which includes those teaching at some 1,700+ primary and secondary schools in England, and asked them to get their school pupils to fill in the survey. The CAS network has been established for almost 10 years. It is a free to join, closed group, consisting mainly of primary and secondary state school teachers who teach computing, and who use the group for peer-to-peer advice, support and resources.

The survey was open from 27 November 2017 – 1 January 2018, and received 6,505 responses.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS

FINDING ONE – DIGITAL RESILIENCE EDUCATION

Children are eager to have more information on the extent to which bullying is happening online, and younger children (those who identify throughout this report as being aged 12 or below) particularly would welcome increased online education in schools.

**BCS response**

Children do not view the online and offline world as separate; they have grown up with technology surrounding them, and view socialising digitally and face-to-face as two sides of the same coin. This was a key finding from BCS’s involvement in the PEEL programme, which worked with young people to explore the impacts social media was having on their self-expression and self-identity.

Great progress has been made in educating children in computational thinking, which can help them understand how the algorithms that run the systems they interact with work. We need to do more to link that algorithmic understanding with a broad social and technological understanding, and how they can shape that aspect of their world. This was a point made by the Children’s Commissioner in her report, *Life in ‘likes’*, published 4 January 2018.

This survey suggests children themselves recognise there is a gap in their digital resilience education, which they need filling from trusted sources.

FINDING TWO – PLATFORM CONSIDERATIONS FOR CHILD PROTECTION

Children are realistic about the fact that, even with more information on the extent of antisocial content on social media, they would be unlikely to reduce their use of it. This is despite the fact that children don’t tend to think companies give any consideration to the needs of children when developing the websites or apps that they will end up using.

**BCS response**

Young people appear to be devaluing their privacy, safety and security by consenting to use social media platforms which they do not believe necessarily have their best interests at heart. The survey suggests children have low expectations for how social media platforms treat them as users, which is an unhealthy mindset for them to have.

Whilst we may want children to be more discerning when it comes to consenting to the platforms, we need to recognise that they have become a de facto necessity for social involvement – particularly as children get older. All of those involved, including the platforms, have a duty of care towards their younger users and should not be encouraging them to think they must inevitably relinquish their privacy, safety and security in order to participate in society.

The Government’s new amendments to the Data Protection Bill, which will see the introduction of a statutory code of practice on age-appropriate website design, are therefore to be welcomed. It is incumbent on everyone working in technology to understand not only how children are using what they create, but to recognise their own role and responsibility in ensuring those products and services are the best they can be for those children. The proposed new statutory code of practice for age-appropriate design is an important step in this.
FINDING THREE – ABUSIVE OR OFFENSIVE CONTENT

Children, and younger children particularly, are in favour of social media platforms removing offensive or abusive content or direct messages automatically, without the need for a user complaint to be made first, and for this to be a default setting. As might be expected, the older the children become, the less sure they are that they want to be shielded from offensive or abusive content.

**BCS response**

The issue of curation and censorship of online content is complex and evolving, but with regard to younger children lacks some of the dilemmas from the more general case, such as conflicts with free speech.

*It is an established principle that young children are shielded from inappropriate content. The principles set out in the United Nation’s Convention on the Rights of the Child need to be interpreted into this context, which means a designed environment that is safe and appropriate, online or offline. This is a clearly-established set of principles, and the voice of children coming from these results reinforces those principles. Platforms need to be designed and operated to meet these needs.*
RESULTS

QUESTION 1: Information on social media bullying

There is widespread agreement that the ability to view how much bullying happens on social media platforms would be useful, and this consensus is strongest between 9-14 year olds (averaging 72% agreement in that age bracket).

QUESTION 2: Consequences of social media bullying
Despite Q1 indicating a strong desire to be able to see how much bullying occurs online, the vast majority of children do not think having that information would alter their use of social media, with this opinion getting firmer as the children get older (with 80% of 17 year olds and 85% of 18 year olds believing this).

**QUESTION 3: Pre-emptive deletion of abusive/offensive posts**

Sometimes social media websites or apps like Snapchat, Facebook or Instagram delete things people have posted because other people have complained that the post is bullying or shouldn’t be allowed. Do you think the websites should be able to delete things like that before anyone complains that they don’t like it?

In general, children are keen for offensive or abusive to be removed by platforms without the need for a complaint to be made about them, though the strength of this opinion becomes progressively weaker as the children get older (from 68% consensus at ages 12 and 13, to 46% at age 18).

**QUESTION 4: Automated deletion of abusive/offensive posts**

Some social media websites or apps can stop rude and abusive posts from showing up. Do you think they should automatically be set to do that?
There is a strong consensus among most children (up to 83% among 11-12 year olds) that social media platforms should be automatically removing abusive or offensive posts. However, this consensus gradually reduces as the children get older, and those under 7 years old are less clear.

QUESTION 5: Corporate consideration given to child safety online

A plurality of respondents does not believe their online safety is considered by the companies developing online services or products. Though the results are close, this is the case in all but one age group.

QUESTION 6: Viewing abusive/offensive messages
A clear majority of 8-13 year olds (72% on average) believe websites or platforms should be able to stop them from viewing abusive or offensive messages that are sent to them. This consensus decreases steadily as children get older, with 18 year olds being almost evenly split on the issue.

**QUESTION 7: Increased digital resilience education**

Children aged 8-13 are clear that they would welcome more education in schools about online safety (with an average of 72% believing this, including 87% of 9 year olds). This consensus drops off sharply with 14-18 year olds, however, with a narrow majority of 15 and 16 year olds (42% and 47% respectively) believing additional education from schools would be of no help.