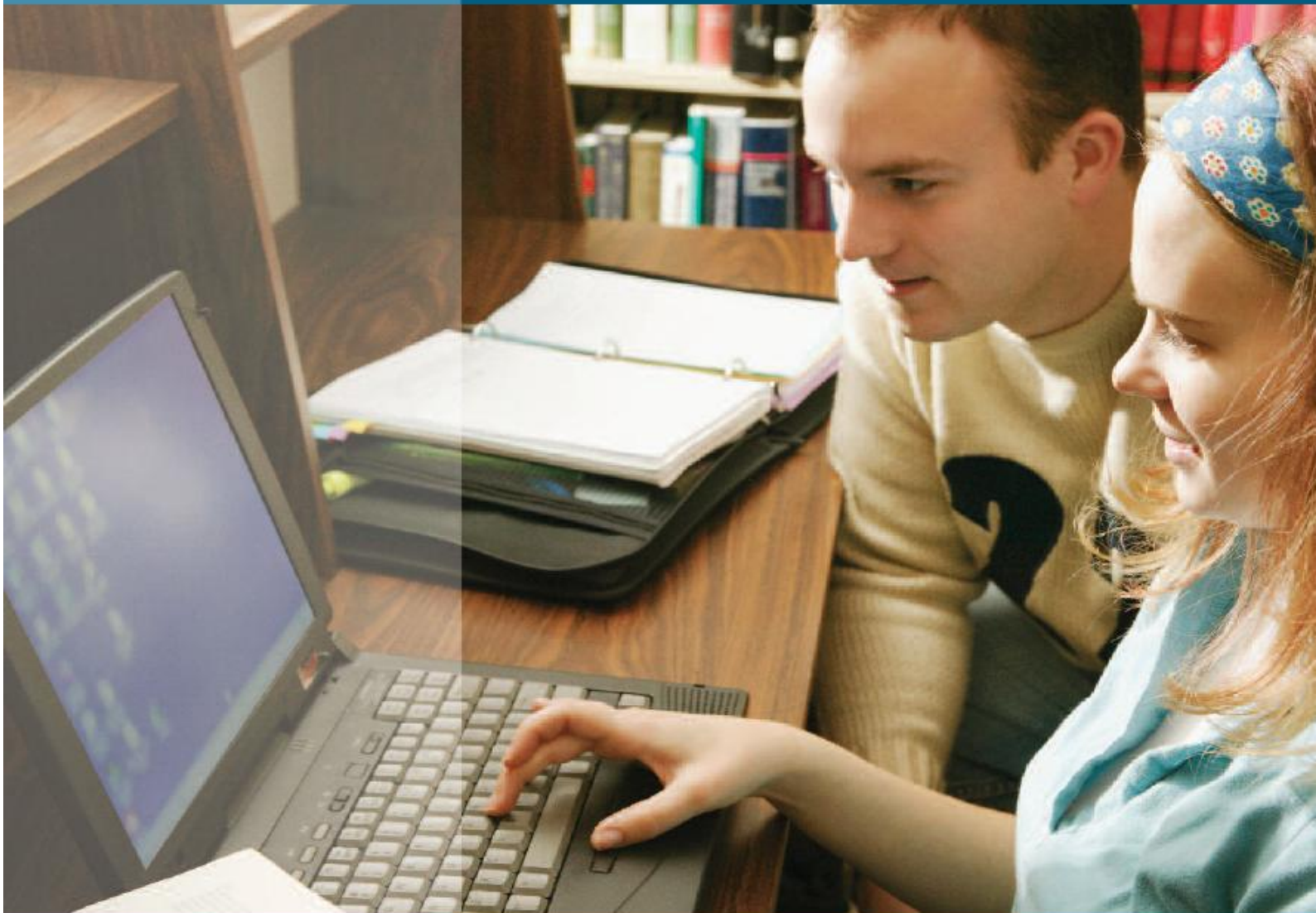




National Foundation for Educational Research



Children's online risks and safety

A review of the available evidence

Report prepared for



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Preface

I am delighted to introduce this first report commissioned by the UK Council for Child Internet Safety's Expert Research Panel. The Expert Research Panel was established following the recommendation of the Byron Review that

"there be a Research Sub-Group of the Council to establish a rolling programme for research and to ensure that robust evidence informs the Council's work."

The Panel includes researchers representing key stakeholder groups across academia, government, regulation, child protection and industry, with expertise in children's online activities and risks, safeguarding initiatives, offender behaviour and the latest technological trends. Its terms of reference are to

- Set a research strategy for the Council and advise on priorities
- Establish an evidence base for the Council
- Take forward, as appropriate, proposals from the Executive Board and the Working Groups
- Keep a watching brief on ongoing research in the UK and internationally

This report provides a timely mapping of the existing evidence relating to the indicators, prevalence and consequences of online risks to children as well as effective safeguarding measures and regulation across platforms. We are grateful to NFER for undertaking this scoping task, following a public tender process, in time for the UKCCIS Summit in December 2009.

Although the internet brings many benefits to children and families, the report pinpoints some key findings emerging from the fast-growing evidence base concerning the risks that some children encounter online. It also notes some pressing gaps in our knowledge, and thus a more detailed review of the evidence will be published in spring 2010, with regular updates to follow thereafter.

We thank the UKCCIS members who pointed us to recent research reports, and all those aware of additional and upcoming findings to let us know about them. These may be added to our newly-created research database, publicly available via the UKCCIS website.



Professor Sonia Livingstone
Chair, Expert Research Panel
UK Council for Child Internet Safety

1. Introduction

This review presents findings from the mapping study carried out by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) on behalf of the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), under the auspices of the UK Council for Child Internet Safety (UKCISS).

This report **maps the latest relevant evidence** on the main topics related to the online risks to children, draws out **some of the key findings** from the evidence, and indicates where there are currently **gaps where future research may be needed**.

Research evidence has been collected from a variety of sources, including via:

- **Literature searches** of relevant library databases (including the Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts (ASSIA), the British Education Index (BEI), the British Education Index Free Collections and ChildData)
- **Web searches**
- **Personal discussions** with members of the UKCISS Expert Research Panel
- **E-mail requests** sent to all UKCISS members and 20 other key contacts, including academics, commercial research organisations, industry contacts and other stakeholders.

The main topics investigated as part of the review include:

1. **Access and use of the internet by children** – Where, what, how often and with whom do children access the internet? And what are the links between location, social context, platform, what is accessed and how often and online risks?
2. **Internet/online child user profiles** – What are the characteristics of those accessing the internet in different ways in terms of their age, gender or socio-economic background? Are disadvantaged or vulnerable young people more or less likely to access the internet and are they more likely to encounter risks online?
3. **Online risks** – What evidence is there on young people's awareness and experience of different types of online risks, including online bullying, meeting and sharing details with strangers, accessing harmful or inappropriate content, enforcing negative behaviours and engaging in online sexual conduct?
4. **Safeguarding** – How aware are parents, teachers and children about ways of safeguarding from online risks? What is being done to try and safeguard children's online behaviour and how effective are such attempts? And what are children's experiences and attitudes towards safeguarding their online behaviour?

The NFER research team identified a total of 243 pieces of potentially relevant evidence. These were screened and classified using a systematic process to help identify research to be included in this review. Screening of evidence took account of key features of each piece of evidence, including the **type and quality** of evidence, the **age range** covered, and the **country of origin** of the research. Evidence has been prioritised according to the following characteristics:

- In the English language
- Evidence relating to children in the UK, including European studies
- Empirical evidence (including both quantitative surveys and smaller scale qualitative studies) or systematic reviews of empirical evidence
- Published from 2006 onwards
- Focussing on the 0-18 age range.

The review tried as far as possible to access full reports of studies. Where these were not available, it also included executive summaries, abstracts, data reports or press releases presenting the findings of research.

The study **excluded** any studies not relating to the UK, papers summarising existing research, opinion pieces (not reporting any new, empirical evidence) and policy documents.

The **58 pieces of evidence** identified as a result of this screening process are discussed in the following sections of this report. Key messages are presented based on the best available evidence relating to each of the four topics in terms of:

- Most recent evidence
- Findings that can be generalised to a wider population as a result of large sample sizes and clearly articulated research methods.

2. Key messages

Access and use

What do we know?

- Children spend more time online than their parents think
- It is becoming more common for children to access the internet in their own bedrooms and without parental supervision
- There is a growth in using alternative portable devices (including mobiles and portable media players) to access online content in a variety of places and without parental supervision

What do we not know?

- There is very little evidence on the links between using more portable devices and how this may increase online risks
- We do not know much about the extent to which children use such sites as 'Twitter' to share personal information

Characteristics of children accessing the internet

What do we know?

- Younger children (below the age of seven) are increasingly accessing the internet at home
- Young people from the most socio-economically disadvantaged groups are less likely to have access to the internet than other groups
- There is some evidence that children with special educational needs may be more likely to be cyberbullied than other children
- However, there is no clear link between the characteristics of children and other online risks – the overriding area of commonality is simply **access** to the online environment

What do we not know?

- There is very little research on the online risks faced by younger age groups accessing the internet, particularly those aged 5-7
- Very little is known about whether socio-economically disadvantaged and vulnerable children in the UK face more online risks than other children

Online risks for children and young people

What do we know?

- The most common risks facing young people appear to be giving out personal information, accessing pornography and violent or hateful content
- Around a third of children have received an unwanted or 'nasty' message via the internet and a quarter have received an unwanted or 'nasty' image of a sexual nature
- Research suggests that cyberbullying often takes place via instant messaging or social networking sites – around one in five 10-11 year olds and 12-17 year olds have been cyberbullied in the last year

What do we not know?

- More evidence is needed to quantify the extent to which children encounter online risks, rather than just focusing on young people's and adults' perceptions of such risks
- There is very little UK evidence on the role of the internet in reinforcing negative behaviours or attitudes such as suicide, race-hate, or anorexia

Safeguarding children's online experiences

What do we know?

- Only 45 per cent of parents use internet controls or filtering software, while 13 per cent of parents of children aged 5-15 have not heard of such controls
- Parents are even less aware of safeguarding controls for mobile phones and games consoles
- While children are generally aware of how they should behave to stay safe online, they often do not use these strategies.

What do we not know?

- More research is needed to explore what specific strategies work best in ensuring that young people use the internet safely
- There is limited evidence on teachers' awareness and understanding of effective ways of safeguarding from online risks and how to teach children about it.

3. What evidence is there on access and use of the internet by children in the UK?

The review identified 32 documents providing evidence on the access and use of the internet by children. As can be seen in Figure 3.1, **most evidence** is available on:

- What sites or content young people are accessing – although many studies focus on specific uses only, such as learning or social networking
- How often they access the internet – the research suggests that young people spend more time on the internet than their parents think

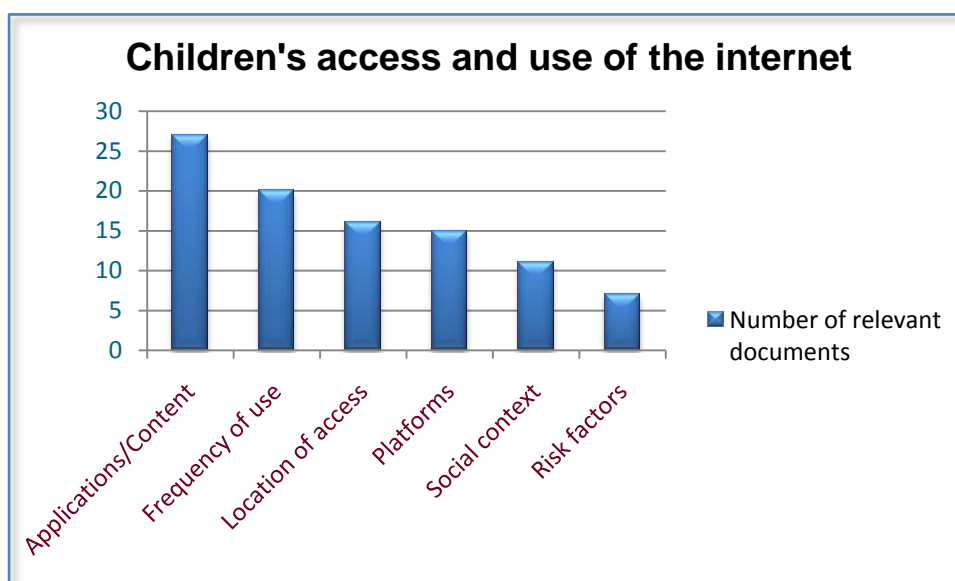
There is **less evidence** on:

- Where young people access the internet (for example, home, school or on-the-move)
- What platforms they use to access it (for example, PC, mobile, portable media player) – a lot of the evidence focuses on PCs only, with very little evidence on alternative platforms
- With whom they access the internet (for example, alone or with their parents).

There is **least evidence** on:

- The links between where, what, how and with whom young people access the internet and, for example, the likelihood of engaging risky online behaviour or accessing risky online content.

Figure 3.1: Availability of UK evidence on access and use



Recent key documents on access and use:

- Ofcom (2009b). *UK Children's Media Literacy: 2009 Interim Report*. London: Ofcom.
- Ipsos MORI (2009). *Children's and Young People's Access to Online Content on Mobile Devices, Games Consoles and Portable Media Players: Report Prepared for Ofcom*. London: Ipsos MORI.
- Eynon, R. (2009). *Harnessing Technology: the Learner and their Context. How Young People Use Technologies Outside Formal Education*. Coventry: BECTA.

What does the research tell us?

- It is increasingly becoming more common for children to access the internet in their own bedrooms (over one-third of 12-15 year olds in 2009) and without parental supervision (Ofcom, 2009b)
- More than half (51 per cent) of teenagers in Europe say they use the internet without any form of supervision from their parents (Cross Tab, 2009), while 23 per cent of parents in the UK with children under the age of 11 report that they allow their children to access the internet without supervision at home (Anti-Bullying Alliance, 2009).
- There is a growth in using alternative devices to access online content – for example, 19 per cent of parents say that their child uses a games console to go online (Ipsos MORI, 2009)
- Children spend more time online than their parents think – a recent survey found that children aged 8-17 spend 44 hours per month online; their parents thought it is only 19 hours per month on average (Symantec Corporation, 2009b)

What gaps are there in the evidence?

- There is very little evidence on using more portable devices (such as laptops, mobile phones, games consoles and portable media players) to access online content and how this may increase online risks
- There are a lot of studies on what content young people access on the internet, although many of these focus on specific uses only and the risks associated with these – less is known about other uses, in particular recent trends such as the use of 'Twitter' to share personal details
- More research is needed to explore the links between where, with what, how often and with whom children access the internet and the likelihood of online risks.

Potential future research areas:

Does the use of more portable devices lead to more unsupervised access to online content, resulting in more risky behaviour/exposure to harmful or inappropriate content?

Are children who access the internet in their own bedroom more likely to engage in risky behaviour online?

What links are there between the frequency of accessing online content and online risks?

4. What evidence is there on the characteristics of children accessing online content?

The 27 pieces of evidence identified for this review provide **fairly strong evidence** on the characteristics of young people accessing the internet, in particular with reference to their age and gender. There is also some evidence on other links between characteristics and internet usage, with regard to children's:

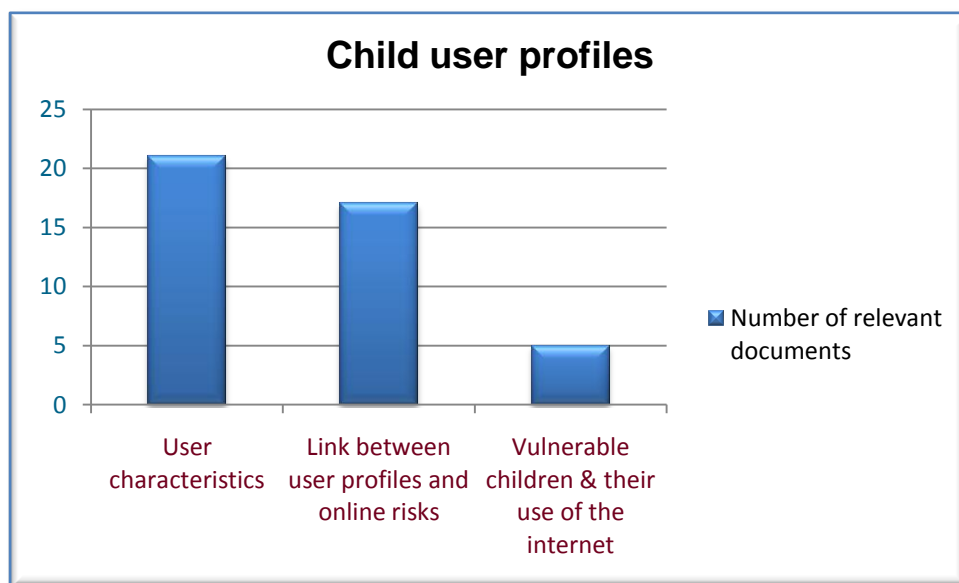
- socio-economic background
- geographical location, including whether they live in urban or rural areas.

Figure 4.1 shows that there is also **quite a lot of evidence** on the link between internet users' characteristics and online risks, although much of the research focuses on specific:

- types of risk only (for example, cyberbullying or online gambling)
- age groups (more evidence on those aged 11 or older than younger age groups).

There is **only limited evidence** in the UK on the extent to which more vulnerable young people (including, for example, those with special educational needs or young offenders) have access to the internet and whether such groups are more or less likely to face online risks.

Figure 4.1: Availability of UK evidence on child user profiles



Recent key documents on the characteristics of children accessing the internet:

- Ofcom (2008b). *Media Literacy Audit: Report on UK Children's Media Literacy*. London: Ofcom.
- Cross, E.J., Richardson, B. and Douglas, T. (2009). *Virtual Violence: Protecting Children from Cyberbullying*. London: Beatbullying.
- Livingstone, S. and Haddon, L. (Eds) (2009). *Kids online. Opportunities and Risks for Children*. Bristol: The Policy Press.

What does the research tell us?

- Almost all young people aged 12 or older have access to the internet – 98 per cent of 14 year olds say that they use the internet at home, school or elsewhere (Eynon, 2009)
- Children aged 5-7 are increasingly accessing the internet at home – 66 per cent in 2009 compared with 57 per cent in 2008. This increase exceeds the general rise of access to the internet in households (Ofcom, 2009b)
- Girls aged 12-15 are significantly more likely than boys of the same age to use the internet for contact with other people (84 per cent of girls compared to 75 per cent of boys use the internet at least once a week for instant messaging and 79 per cent compared to 64 per cent use the internet at least once a week for social networking) (Ofcom, 2008b)
- Young people from the most socio-economically disadvantaged groups are less likely to have access to the internet than other groups (Ofcom, 2008b)
- A recent survey shows that pupils with special educational needs and those in receipt of free-school meals are more likely to experience cyberbullying than other children (Cross *et al.*, 2009)
- However, the evidence suggests that there is no clear link between the characteristics of children and other online risks – the overriding area of commonality is simply **access** to the online environment (CEOP, n.d.).

What gaps are there in the evidence?

- There is a need for more research on the online risks faced by younger age groups accessing the internet, particularly those aged 5-7
- Even though there is some research on the extent to which socio-economically disadvantaged and vulnerable young people access the internet, more research could be conducted in this area
- There is also a need for more research to explore the extent to which socio-economically disadvantaged and different types of vulnerable young people are more or less likely to face on-line risks – this could include both quantitative and qualitative evidence exploring the links.

Potential future research areas:

What risks do younger online users aged 7 or below face – how many of them access harmful or inappropriate content?

To what extent are young people with learning difficulties and disabilities more likely to encounter online risks and what risks do they encounter?

What links are there between other forms of disadvantage and vulnerability (for example, young offenders) and engaging in risky online behaviour and other online risks?

5. What evidence is there on online risks for children and young people?

The review identified 44 documents providing evidence on online risks. As can be seen in Figure 5.1, **most evidence** is available on:

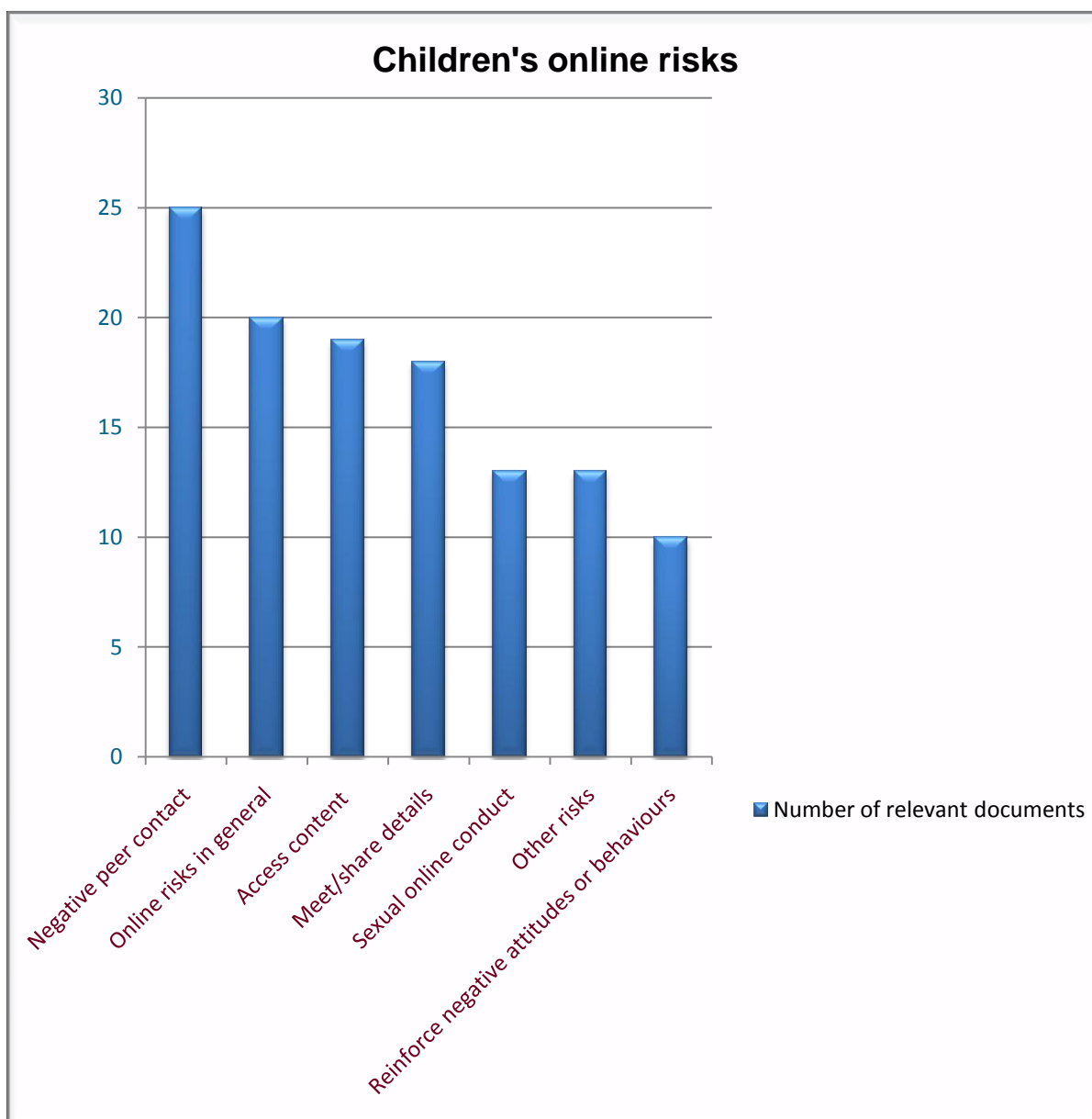
- Negative peer contact and bullying, including children's and young people's experiences of cyberbullying and how new technologies are being used to bully other children
- Online risks in general – in the form of general investigations of the risks of using the internet.

There is **less evidence** on:

- Meeting and sharing details with on-line contacts
- Accessing harmful or inappropriate content (for example, violence or pornography).

There is **least evidence** on:

- Sexual online conduct or behaviour (for example, sexting, sexual harassment, grooming)
- Other risks (for example, identity theft, and buying drugs, alcohol, or knives).
- Whether there is a link between children and young people's use of the internet and negative behaviours or attitudes (for example, suicide, race-hate, and anorexia).

Fig. 5.1: Availability of UK evidence of online risks

Recent key documents on online risks

- Cross, E.J., Richardson, B. and Douglas, T. (in press). *Virtual Violence: Protecting Children from Cyberbullying*. London: Beatbullying.
- Hasebrink, U., Livingstone, S., Haddon, L. and Ólafsson, K. (2009). *Comparing Children's Online Opportunities and Risks Across Europe: Cross-national Comparisons for EU Kids Online*. Second edn. London.: London School of Economics and Political Science, Department of Media and Communications.
- Bryce, J. (2009). *Internet Years Project*. London: Orange UK.
- Ofcom (2008c). *Social Networking: a Quantitative and Qualitative Research Report into Attitudes, Behaviours and Use*. London: Ofcom.

What does the research tell us?

- The most common risks facing young people in Europe appear to be giving out personal information, accessing pornography and violent or hateful content (Hasebrink *et al.*, 2009)
- The internet has created new forms of bullying. Research suggests that cyberbullying often takes place via instant messaging or social networking sites (CEOP, 2009) – 18.9 per cent of girls reported typing hurtful things on MSN that they would not say face-to-face (Kernaghan, 2009).
- One in five Year 6 primary school children report being cyberbullied in the past 12 months (Anti-Bullying Alliance, 2009); a similar proportion (19 per cent) of children aged 12-17 say that they have experienced cyberbullying (Synovate, 2009)
- Another example is ‘sexting’, in which children produce and circulate sexual content with each other. Around a third of 11-16 year olds have received an unwanted or “nasty” message and a quarter has received an unwanted or “nasty” image of a sexual nature (Cross *et al.*, 2009).

What gaps are there in the evidence?

- A lot of the research focuses on adults’ and young people’s perceptions of online risks, rather than on their experiences of engaging in risky behaviour or accessing harmful or inappropriate content. More evidence is needed to quantify the extent to which children encounter different types of online risks
- There is less available UK evidence on the role of the internet in reinforcing negative behaviours or attitudes such as suicide, race-hate, or anorexia. However, there is US research, which provides evidence on these issues (Ko *et al.*, 2009)
- There is a much stronger evidence-base on online risks for young people over the age of eleven than for younger children, especially those aged seven or below
- There are a lot of studies on the topic of online risks using large-scale surveys of children and young people. There is scope for further qualitative research to explore the factors affecting children and young people’s perceptions and attitudes to risks.

Potential future research areas:

To what extent do children in the UK actually engage in risky behaviour and encounter online risks?

What is the role of online content in reinforcing negative behaviours or attitudes such as suicide, race-hate or anorexia?

6. What evidence is there on attempts of safeguarding children's online experiences?

The 37 documents identified in the review relating to safeguarding of children accessing the internet provide **most evidence** (see Figure 6.1) on:

- The extent to which safety tools and safeguarding approaches are being used by schools, parents, Internet Service Providers (ISPs) and other organisations/stakeholders

There is **less evidence** on:

- How aware parents, teachers and children are about ways of safeguarding from online risks, including specific safety tools
- Children's and young people's experiences and attitudes towards safeguarding their online behaviour.

There is **least evidence** on:

- The effectiveness of attempts at safeguarding – most of the evidence available relates to parents' or children's perceptions of the effectiveness of particular approaches; in contrast, there appears to be a shortage of empirical research evaluating the effectiveness of safeguarding approaches.

Fig 6.1: Availability of UK evidence of safeguarding



Recent key documents on safeguarding

- Keating, A., Gardiner, C. and Rudd, P. (2009). *E-access, e-maturity, e-safety: a learner survey*. Slough: NFER.
- Cross Tab (2009). *European Online Safety Survey* [online]. Available: http://www.microsoft.com/emea/presscentre/pressreleases/OnlinebullyingPR_100209.msp
- Ofcom (2009b). *UK Children's Media Literacy: 2009 Interim Report*. London: Ofcom.
- Selwyn, N., Potter, J. and Cranmer, S. (2010). *Primary Schools and ICT: Learning from Pupil Perspectives*. London: Continuum.

What does the research tell us?

- Not all parents/carers are aware of safeguarding measures – recent research indicates that only 45 per cent of parents whose children use the internet at home use internet controls or filtering software; furthermore, 13 per cent of parents with 5-15 year olds say they have not heard of or do not know how to use such controls (Ofcom, 2009b)
- Parents/carers have low awareness of the existence and use of access controls for mobile phones and games consoles – for example, around a third of parents/carers whose children use a games console to go online are aware of such access controls and only around two-thirds of these parents actually activate these controls (Ofcom, 2009b)
- There appears to be a gulf between children's and young people's awareness of risk-avoiding strategies and their actual behaviour (Atkinson *et al.*, 2009) – for example, over two thirds (69 per cent) of teenagers in Europe believe they are aware of the risks associated with using the internet. However, only half (51 per cent) of teenagers regularly use privacy settings to restrict access to personal information (Cross Tab, 2009)
- Younger children aged 7-11 appear to have less awareness and understanding of risks than those aged 12-18 (Davies and Good, 2009) – recent research found that 7-11 year olds did not fully understand potential online risks and that official notions of 'e-safety' remain abstract and poorly understood by many children (Selwyn *et al.*, 2010)
- There is further scope for e-safety provision to be improved in schools, particularly in primary schools (Keating *et al.*, 2009).

What gaps are there in the evidence?

- Even though there is a lot of research on adults' and children's awareness of online risks and how to safeguard against them, there is very little evidence of the effectiveness of particular approaches. More research is needed to explore what specific strategies work best in ensuring that young people use the internet safely
- There is also limited evidence on teachers' awareness and understanding of effective ways of safeguarding from online risk and how to teach children about it. Although the views of parents are included in some of the research, fewer studies focus on the awareness and understanding of teachers.

Potential future research areas:

What specific strategies work best in ensuring that young people use the internet safely?

To what extent are teachers aware of the effective ways of safeguarding from online risk?

What support do members of staff in schools need to teach children and young people about online risks?

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