



# Resilience for the Digital World

A Positioning Paper

January 2016

**YOUNG MINDS**  
The voice for young people's **mental health and wellbeing**

ECORYS 

## Introduction

YoungMinds have been working with Ecorys, to better understand the impact of the digital world on young people's mental health and wellbeing. Our evidence review brings together a range of insights from research and expertise in the field. This positioning paper summarizes our findings so far, and proposes a new approach to protecting children online and promoting their digital resilience.

The full research scoping review is available as a stand-alone document! This is available online at: [http://www.youngminds.org.uk/assets/0002/5852/Resilience\\_for\\_the\\_Digital\\_World.pdf](http://www.youngminds.org.uk/assets/0002/5852/Resilience_for_the_Digital_World.pdf)

Date: January 2016

Authors: Marc Bush and Lucie Russell (YoungMinds)

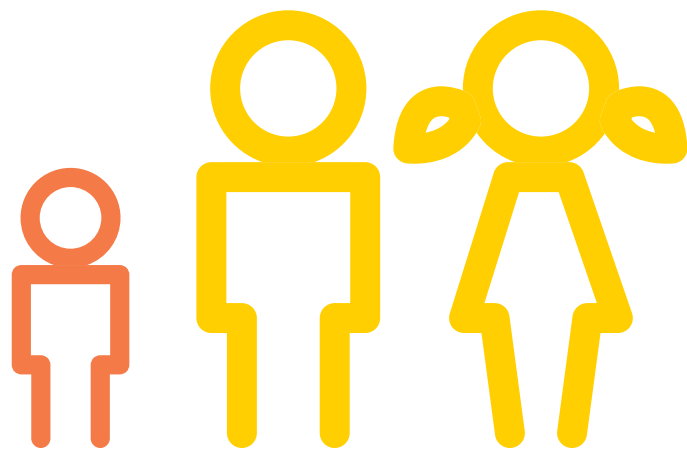
## Key Findings

Our review of the evidence found that:

### 1 Children and young people's use of the internet and social media has significantly increased over the past decade.

The growth in children's use of smart phones and tablets has increased the availability of social media. Half of 9-16 year olds in Europe now own a smartphone<sup>i</sup>, and many children are able to access the Internet through their games console<sup>ii</sup>. The vast majority of 9-16 year olds go online at least once a week, and the majority on a daily basis<sup>iv</sup>.

An estimated  
**one in three**  
of all Internet users in the world today are  
below the age of **18**



This proliferation has led to more active membership, and use, by networking and content sharing sites (such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram), and dedicated messaging platforms (including Snapchat and WhatsApp). In fact, two thirds of 9-16 year olds have at least one social media or networking account, rising to approximately 9 in 10 of all 15-16 year olds<sup>vi</sup>.

With this expansion has come greater autonomy for young people to explore their online worlds on their own terms. Much of this exploration is self-led, with just over half of teenagers in the Europe study using the Internet without parental supervision<sup>vii</sup>.

### 2 Young people consistently say that the digital world offers positive social and emotional benefits.

4 in 5 of young adults aged between 16-24 years believe that digital technology plays a positive role in their relationships, and ...



VIII

Around  
**half**  
found online interactions  
more straightforward than  
those taking place  
**face-to-face**



Similarly, a study by the NSPCC found that 11-16 year olds place a high value on feeling like they are part of an online or social media community<sup>x</sup>.

Young people use social media and online communities as an important distraction from the pressures of studying for exams, a solace from the strains of a challenging family life and to secure instant access to a like-minded community of peers who share their interests, passions and desires.

Similarly, when they face a challenging life experience, traumatic event or an episode of poor mental health, they frequently turn to social media platforms to share their experiences, look for information or advice, and make sense of what is happening to them.

Some children turn to their online friends and communities when they are in distress because online peer groups who have had similar experiences can help answer questions they might have (for example about managing their condition), which in turn builds a wider network of support and individual resilience that can shape how they respond to and navigate events in the future.

We know that many of the 1 in 10 children and young people who have a diagnosable mental health condition<sup>x</sup> go online to research more about their condition and to reach out to their peers for mutual support.

**3 Digital connectivity can lead to an additional risk of experiencing social, physical, psychological or emotional harm, although these challenges are not always recognised by young people themselves.**

Online gaming and messaging breaks down geographical barriers between peers, but it also removes the layers of ‘protection’ afforded by more traditional formats. Using smartphones makes managing your social networks and accessing online content much easier, but they are also instrumental in the distribution of pornography and the increase in cyber-bullying.

An evaluation of the school-based ThinkUKnow programme found that 11-16 year olds generally did not consider contacts whom they knew exclusively from their online interactions and whom they had never met to be ‘strangers’, and that ...

**1 in 5** had shared personal information and photos with someone they **ONLY** knew online<sup>xi</sup>

From a developmental perspective, research has shown adolescence to be a time of significant change<sup>xii</sup>. Many young people are beginning to experiment with adult decision making - exploring their identities and sexualities, building self-confidence, and learning to care for themselves. This time of change is associated with heightened impulsivity, attention seeking and sexual interest, which bring new risks<sup>xiv</sup>.

Additionally, over half of all adults with mental health problems were diagnosed in childhood and many conditions are first identified in teenage years<sup>xiii</sup>. Young people who have experienced adversity also have a higher propensity towards further online risk-taking during this period<sup>xv</sup>.

Drawing on recent studies, our research has identified a myriad of digital risks, which impact on children and young people’s social and emotional wellbeing<sup>xvi</sup>. The framework that was developed for the EU Kids Online study, a multinational research network supported by European Commission funding, helps to structure and classify these (see Table 1).

**Table 1. Risks associated with the online world**

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

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

Despite this, a recent survey of 5-17 year olds in the UK found that ‘dangers with using the Internet’ ranked considerable way down a list of potential risks, and posed a concern (unprompted) for just 2% of young people between 12-17 years<sup>xvii</sup>.

#### 4 In response to greater awareness of these risks, most social media platforms have introduced blocking, private view, and reporting functions.

Social media, gaming and internet providers have introduced a range of ways that young people can easily report harassment or flag a post as inappropriate to, for example, avoid similar content reaching their stream in the future. However, many of these are initiated once the young person has already been exposed to (for example) the violent, sexualised image.

We know that children are now acquiring digital skills quicker than previous generations because of much earlier access to the Internet. Family dynamics, including the digital confidence and/or competence of parents and the use by older siblings, play a key role in how and when digital literacy skills are acquired.

A recent study found that children of parents with lower internet use were less confident about staying safe online and were given lower levels of protection<sup>xxviii</sup>. At the other end of the spectrum, some evidence suggests that excessive parental control can inhibit the acquisition of important Internet safety skills by children<sup>xxix</sup>.

Currently, around 1 in every 12 children and young people deliberately self-harm in the UK<sup>xxx</sup>. This can be exacerbated by dedicated sites on the so-called “dark net” that aim to promote eating disorders or self-harming behaviours<sup>xxxi</sup>. Many of these sites are closed communities, and do not have the same safeguarding and reporting features that other social networking sites offer.

#### 5 Despite these responses children and young people’s mental health is being compromised.

Being exposed to messages, images and peer discussions can reinforce negative beliefs that children and young people hold about themselves, their lives and their futures<sup>xxxi</sup>. Excessive use of social media is associated with depression, and continuous checking of messages, likes, and refreshing content streams (expanded with the emergence of picture-sharing media such as Instagram and Snapchat) can also play a role in heightening underlying anxieties and lowering self-esteem<sup>xxxii</sup>. For some, this can lead to addictive or obsessive beliefs and behaviours. Similarly, online risks are often associated with offline patterns of risk-taking behaviour (including drugs and alcohol misuse, offending, interpersonal violence) and can induce or escalate wider mental health problems, such as depression, post-traumatic stress and self-harming behaviours.

#### 6 In addition to raising awareness about online risks and increasing online protection, we need to support young people to build their own digital skills and resilience, so they can navigate online worlds for themselves.

Safeguarding children online and reducing the risk factors they face is of vital importance, but existing approaches fail to adequately understand how children and young people consume social media, and the ways in which they actively create and curate online content.

Our research highlights that (contrary to most of the protection literature) children and young people are active creators of online content. They are generating their own material, posting it online and commenting on posts created on others<sup>xxxv</sup>. This happens equally on public forums (like Twitter and YouTube), closed communities (like Facebook), instant messages services (Snapchat), and has increasingly been popularised through collaborative online games (such as Minecraft or World of Warcraft).

We believe that when the Government and industry are designing interventions they need to give more attention to the ways in which young people are actively creating content. This means that new approaches would better understand how young people themselves can mitigate online risks and acquire the skills they need to navigate in their digital lives.

**By ‘digital resilience’ we mean the social and emotional literacy and digital competency to positively respond to and deal with any risks they might be exposed to when they are using social media or going online.**

We know that the digital resilience of children and young people plays a vital role in how risks are perceived, encountered and responded to. In a recent study, just over half of incidents on social media caused 11-16 year olds upset or distress for up to a day, and for 1 in 10 young people it continued to affect them socially and emotionally for a month or longer<sup>xxxvi</sup>. Those children who have greater levels of digital literacy and resilience were better able to mitigate the impact of risks posed by social media and ‘bounce back’ quicker from difficult online encounters. Sibling relationships can play an important role, too, with some older adolescents keeping a watchful eye on the online habits of their younger siblings, both in playing the role of tutor or controller. However, it is important to note that in some cases they can also enable access to age inappropriate online platforms or content<sup>xxxvii</sup>.

Recent studies have demonstrated that 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<sup>xxxviii</sup>. 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 sites, and rejection of the practice of ‘forwarding’ photographs without their permission.

Further, from our own work, we know that young people value being able to talk to other peers who have experienced mental health problems as it builds their network of support, self-esteem and positively impacts on their resilience both on and offline.

## 7 To build children’s digital resilience we need to bring together the expertise of industry, schools, the charity sector and Government.

The evidence review suggests that we should be developing online spaces, behavioural prompts and tools that provide quick and easy access to informed support from peers and professionals, and enable young people to manage their own mental health and wellbeing more effectively.

## Key Action Points

Specifically, we have identified a number of priority areas that need to be developed to ensure young people can build digital resilience and can manage their own mental health online. These include:

### 1. Embedding the promotion and acquisition of digital resilience in school curricula, and shaping it so that it is appropriate for the age and learning style of the child.

Our initial explorations suggest that the content of a digital resilience programme, must include components on:

- a. creating positive content (as part of wider digital literacy),
- b. learning how to stay safe, and protect yourselves and others online,
- c. building empathy and responsibility on and offline,
- d. identifying, understanding and dealing with challenging content, and finally,
- e. exploring how best to balance lives and identities on and offline.

Finally, this need to be strengthened by targeted outreach from the school or local community to parents who themselves have low digital literacy and resilience.

2. **Promoting resilience-building in existing self-led digital tools that young people use to manage their mental health.** This might involve including a new module on impulsive behaviour and sexual image-taking on popular health-related Apps or targeted online communities.

3. **Developing new online solutions that enable young people to build and maintain informed communities of peer support and peer education aimed at preventing mental health crisis and promoting digital resilience.**

4. **Identifying early indicators of mental distress and crisis on social media and online communities, so we can introduce behavioural prompts that build resilience.** For example, this might include supportive or signposting messages delivered to a child’s smartphone if they trigger a concern because of the timespan of their social media use or the frequent refreshing for new content.

5. **Capacity-building professionals who routinely engage with young people with higher levels of risk-taking behaviour to better under the impact the digital world has on people mental wellbeing.** This would include new models in professional training for teachers, professionals working in Child and Adolescent Mental Health services, social workers, and tailored support for Youth Offending Teams.

YoungMinds believes that these activities will only be successful if they are created in collaboration with children and young people. We need to harness their experience of social media and digital worlds, and build on their own experiences of navigating the online space in order to develop resilience for all, and to prevent crisis.

## References

- <sup>i</sup> Ecorys and YoungMinds (2015) Resilience for the Digital World: Research into children and young people's social and emotional wellbeing online
- <sup>ii</sup> Livingstone, S., Haddon, L., Görzig, A. and Ólafsson, K. (2011) EU kids online: final report. EU Kids Online, London School of Economics & Political Science, London: [http://www.lse.ac.uk/media@lse/research/EUKidsOnline/EU%20Kids%20I%20\(2006-9\)/EU%20Kids%20Online%20I%20Reports/EUKidsOnlineFinalReport.pdf](http://www.lse.ac.uk/media@lse/research/EUKidsOnline/EU%20Kids%20I%20(2006-9)/EU%20Kids%20Online%20I%20Reports/EUKidsOnlineFinalReport.pdf)
- <sup>iii</sup> 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: [http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/research/media-literacy/online\\_access.pdf](http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/research/media-literacy/online_access.pdf)
- <sup>iv</sup> Livingstone, S., Haddon, L., Görzig, A., and Ólafsson, K (2010) Risks and safety for children on the internet: the UK report. London: London School of Economics.
- <sup>v</sup> Livingstone, S., Carr, J., and Byrne, J (2015) *One in Three: Internet Governance and Children's Rights*. Ontario: CIGI.
- <sup>vi</sup> *ibid.* (Livingstone, et. Al., 2010)
- <sup>vii</sup> Spielhofer, T. (2009) Children's online risks and safety: A review of the available evidence. Report prepared for UKCCIS. Slough: National Foundation for Educational Research: [http://www.saferinternet.org.uk/content/childnet/saferinternetcentre/downloads/Research\\_Highlights/NFER\\_Childrens\\_Online\\_Safety\\_Report\\_final\\_Mar\\_2010.pdf](http://www.saferinternet.org.uk/content/childnet/saferinternetcentre/downloads/Research_Highlights/NFER_Childrens_Online_Safety_Report_final_Mar_2010.pdf)
- <sup>viii</sup> Livingstone, S., Davidson, J., Bryce, J., Millwood Hargrave, A., and Grove-Hills, J. (2012) Children's online activities, risks and safety: The UK evidence base. London: UK Council for Child Internet Safety.
- <sup>ix</sup> Lilley, C., Ball, R. and Vernon, H. (2014) The experiences of 11-16 year olds on social networking sites, London, NSPCC: <http://www.nspcc.org.uk/globalassets/documents/research-reports/experiences-11-16-year-olds-social-networking-sites-report.pdf>
- <sup>x</sup> ONS (2015) Mental health of children and young people in Great Britain, 2004: <http://www.hscic.gov.uk/catalogue/PUB06116/ment-heal-chil-youn-peop-gb-2004-rep2.pdf>
- <sup>xi</sup> Davidson, J., Martellozzo, E and Lorenz, M. (2009) Evaluation of CEOP ThinkUKnow Internet Safety Programme and Exploration of Young People's Internet Safety Knowledge: <http://www.cats-rp.org.uk/pdf%20files/Internet%20safety%20report%204-2010.pdf>
- <sup>xii</sup> Hanson, E., and Holmes, D. (2014) *That Difficult Age: Developing a more effective response to risks in adolescence*. Devon: Research in Practice
- <sup>xiii</sup> Kim-Cohen, J., Caspi, A., Moffit, T., et al. (2003) 'Prior juvenile diagnosis in adults with mental disorder: developmental follow-back of a prospective-longitudinal cohort' *Archives of General Psychiatry* 60: 709–717
- <sup>xiv</sup> c.f. Steinberg, L. (2004) 'Risk Taking in Adolescence: What Changes, and Why?' *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* Vol. 1021: 51–58.
- <sup>xv</sup> Gardner, M. and Steinberg, L. (2005) 'Peer Influence on Risk Taking, Risk Preference, and Risky Decision Making in Adolescence and Adulthood: an experimental study' *Developmental Psychology* 41: 625 - 635
- <sup>xvi</sup> Adapted from Livingstone, S., and Haddon, L. (2012) 'Theoretical framework for children's internet use' in Livingstone, S., Haddon, L. & Görzig, A. (eds.) *Children, Risk and Safety on the Internet: Research and Policy Challenges in Comparative Perspective*. Bristol, UK: Policy Press.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Department for Children, Schools and Families (2009), *Staying Safe Survey 2009: Young People and Parents' Attitudes around Internet Safety*. Available from: <http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/11110/1/DCSF-RR183.pdf>
- <sup>xviii</sup> Livingstone, S., and Palmer, T. (2012) Identifying vulnerable children online and what strategies can help them: [http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/44222/1/Libfile\\_repository\\_Content\\_Livingstone,%20S\\_Identifying%20vulnerable%20children%20online%20and%20what%20strategies%20can%20help%20them%20\(LSE%20RO\).pdf](http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/44222/1/Libfile_repository_Content_Livingstone,%20S_Identifying%20vulnerable%20children%20online%20and%20what%20strategies%20can%20help%20them%20(LSE%20RO).pdf)
- <sup>xix</sup> Ofcom (2015) Children's Media Lives: Year 1 Findings: [http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/research/media-literacy/childrens-media-lives-year-1/childrens\\_media\\_lives\\_report\\_FINAL1.pdf](http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/research/media-literacy/childrens-media-lives-year-1/childrens_media_lives_report_FINAL1.pdf)
- <sup>xx</sup> Chaudron, S., (2015) Young Children (0-8) and digital technology: A qualitative exploratory study across seven countries: <http://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC93239>

<sup>xxi</sup> APPG Body Image (2014) Reflections on body image: [http://www.ncb.org.uk/media/861233/appg\\_body\\_image\\_final.pdf](http://www.ncb.org.uk/media/861233/appg_body_image_final.pdf)

<sup>xxii</sup> [http://www.gla.ac.uk/news/headline\\_419871\\_en.html](http://www.gla.ac.uk/news/headline_419871_en.html)

<sup>xxiii</sup> Moran, P, et al. (2011) 'The natural history of self-harm from adolescence to young adulthood: a population-based cohort study' The Lancet: [http://www.thelancet.com/pdfs/journals/lancet/PIIS0140-6736\(11\)61141-0.pdf](http://www.thelancet.com/pdfs/journals/lancet/PIIS0140-6736(11)61141-0.pdf)

<sup>xxiv</sup> Barlett, J. (2015) The Dark Net, London: Windmill Books

<sup>xxv</sup> Quinlan, O. (2015) Young Digital Makers: surveying attitudes and opportunities for digital creativity across the UK, Nesta: <http://www.nesta.org.uk/sites/default/files/youngdigmakers.pdf>

<sup>xxvi</sup> Lilley, C., Ball, R. and Vernon, H. (2014) The experiences of 11-16 year olds on social networking sites: <http://www.nspcc.org.uk/globalassets/documents/research-reports/experiences-11-16-year-olds-social-networking-sites-report.pdf>

<sup>xxvii</sup> UK Council for Child Internet Safety (2015) Net Children Go Mobile: [http://www.saferinternet.org.uk/downloads/Research\\_Highlights/UKCCIS\\_RH83\\_Net\\_Children\\_Go\\_Mobile\\_Qualitative\\_Research\\_UK\\_Results\\_2.pdf](http://www.saferinternet.org.uk/downloads/Research_Highlights/UKCCIS_RH83_Net_Children_Go_Mobile_Qualitative_Research_UK_Results_2.pdf)





© 2016 YoungMinds and Ecorys

YoungMinds  
Registered charity numbers 1016968 & SC039700

Website:  
<http://www.youngminds.org.uk/>

Contact us:  
[ympublications@youngminds.org.uk](mailto:ympublications@youngminds.org.uk)