

Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes - Focus on Parental Controls

Aims

The Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes Report provides a one-stop resource on Ofcom's research on children's and parents' media use and attitudes. This year it includes in-depth analysis of the ways in which parents seek to mediate – or not – their children's media use. This draws on the new 2012 children's and parents' media literacy audit findings, and new qualitative research into parents' attitudes to, and experience of, parental controls on internet enabled devices.

Key Findings

Parental mediation

- Most parents of 5-15s have rules in place for their child's use of television (83%), internet (79%), mobile phones (72%) and gaming (76%).
- Children in households with a multichannel television service are now more likely to have access controls through a PIN or password than in 2011 (50% vs. 44%).
- When prompted with a list of possible parental controls that can be used on a PC, laptop or netbook, 46% of parents say they have such controls in place. This has not increased since 2011.
- Among parents of 12-15s whose child has a mobile phone that can be used to go online, 31% have applied filters to exclude websites aimed at over-18s.
- Parental controls are less likely to be in place for handheld games players (14%) or games consoles connected to a television (16%).
- 61% of parents of 5-15s say they have at least one of: safe search settings on search engine websites; parental controls installed on the PC/ laptop/ netbook used by the child; YouTube Safety Mode enabled; software to limit the time spent online; or PIN/ passwords set on broadcasters' websites.
- Compared to 2011, parents of 5-7s, 8-11s and 12-15s are more likely to use the 'history' function of their browser to see which websites their child has visited. Parents of 12-15s are less likely to use safe search settings (40% vs. 48%).
- The qualitative research found parental controls were seen as something to be used in addition to, not instead of, other forms of parental mediation. This was partly driven by a perception that parental controls do not protect against 'contact' risks (e.g., bullying or grooming). For some parents their lack of confidence with technology also resulted in a reluctance to completely trust parental controls.
- The quantitative research supported this, finding parents use a combination of approaches to mediate their child's internet use, including: regularly talking to their children about staying safe online; technical controls; and rules relating to parental supervision. 85% of parents use at least one of these and 20% use all three. Of the 15% of parents who do not use any of these elements, 8% have talked to their children about staying safe online but don't do this regularly, and 7% do none of the things asked about.

Reasons for not having parental controls

- The most frequent reason given by parents of younger children (aged 5-11) for not having technical controls is that their child is always supervised, while for parents of older children (12-15) it is because they trust their child.
- Lack of awareness of the availability of controls or understanding of how to install or activate them is also an issue. This was cited by 10% of parents of 5-15s in relation to PCs, laptops or netbooks (increasing to 15% who said they were not aware when specifically prompted on the issue), 21%-25% for controls on fixed/mobile games consoles, and 35% of 12-15s for controls on mobile phones.

- The qualitative research provides a more nuanced picture of the reasons parents do not install parental controls. It found that managing the day-to-day impact of the internet on family life (e.g., need to create family time away from the computer, enforce bedtimes, encourage physical activity) were front-of-mind for parents, rather than the risks of grooming, cyberbullying or access to inappropriate content etc.
- The qualitative research also found that levels of awareness of parental controls and what they can do tended to be low, and that the process of selecting and installing parental controls was seen to be complex and time-consuming, particularly for parents with lower levels of confidence about technology. This combination of factors resulted in a lack of engagement with parental controls.

Effectiveness of parental controls

- In both the qualitative and quantitative research, parents using parental controls express high levels of satisfaction with the solutions. However, a minority of parents agree that parental controls get in the way of what they want to view online and some disable the tools as a result.
- Analysis of children with rules relating to personal supervision shows that they are no less likely than children without such rules to undertake potentially risky behaviour online. Similarly, children with any type of technical mediation in place shows are no less likely than those without such measures to undertake such behaviour.

Contextual findings on potential harm and risky behaviour

- 3% of 8-11 and 8% of 12-15s with a mobile phone say they have had personal experience of being bullied via mobile in the past year, and 4% of 8-11s and 9% of 12-15s have been bullied online. These figures have not changed since 2011.
- Compared to 2011, boys aged 8-11 and girls aged 12-15 are more likely to have seen anything online in the past year that is worrying, nasty or offensive (12% vs. 6% for boys aged 8-11, 21% vs. 13% for girls aged 12-15).
- 54% of 12-15s say that they know how to delete their online history and 26% say they have done this in the last year. 22% know how to disable any online filters or controls, and 8% say they have done this in the last year.

Policy Context

The Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes Report provides information on trends in the media usage patterns of children and young people, including their potentially risk-taking behaviour, to help policy stakeholders identify which elements of media literacy to develop and promote. This year it includes new qualitative and quantitative data looking at parents' use and experience of parental controls to inform the current debate on this issue.

Methodology

The report draws primarily on the Ofcom Children's Media Literacy Tracker, a large-scale quantitative survey based on in-home interviews with children aged 5-15 and their parents/carers (N = 1717 conducted from March to April 2011). Questions are tailored to the age of the child, so not all are asked of each age-group. The qualitative research took place during July 2012 with parents of children aged 5-15, including an equal number of those with and without parental controls, and a small number of lapsed users. It included a series of extended in-home family interviews, some of which included children, as well as group discussions with parents. A total of 85 parents and 10 children took part in this research.

Source www.ofcom.org.uk/medialiteracyresearch (published October 2012)

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