THE EARLY YEARS ONLINE

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ABSTRACT

Children and young people inhabit a world that has both online and offline aspects, and so recognition must be given to the participation of children in early years settings. Research jointly initiated by the Plymouth City Council Early Years and Plymouth Safeguarding Children's Board set out to gain an accurate picture of internet use by children under 5 by surveying Early Years settings and parents of children associated with those settings.

Parents were surveyed about their children's use of technology, their feelings towards the impact of technology on their child's development, receipt of online safety advice from Early Year's settings and their feelings towards their own understanding of the Internet.

Representatives of the Early Years settings were surveyed about their use of technology within the setting, their approaches to online safety and their training activities in relation to online safety.

72% of the children surveyed use the internet for an average of half an hour a day. Parents reported that their children knew what they wanted to do online, the majority going to sites such as CBeebies or playing age appropriate games like Peppa Pig. Parents responses indicated that they were confident in their ability to protect their children with 95% stating they had a good understanding of the internet with 88% confident about understanding internet safety issues.

97% of the Early Years settings make use of technology with 81% having a secure internet connection and 37% allowing children online in their setting. There was strong agreement that online safety was everybody's responsibility, with 82% confident that staff in their setting use online technologies safely. However, 51% of the settings did not have a designated person for online safety and only half of the respondents stated they had an acceptable use policy.

The implications of the findings are both specific as well as broad. These findings provide for a set of comparators to observe adult vigilance. They will help to inform further research into why parental vigilance and engagement falls

away as children become older. From the broader perspective there are issues for parents; Early Years workers and their settings; professionals from all disciplines and agencies assessing risks to child protection.

Parents need to be aware of what their children are doing online from an early age, to try and keep up with the technologies as they evolve and to be part of their children's experiences. Early Years workers and settings must build in e-safety approaches so that young children can fully embrace the benefits of being online. Finally, there are implications for agencies and practitioners to ensure that policies and procedures acknowledge that e-safety issues arise at all ages from toddler and adult.

KEYWORDS: Children, online, early years, internet, technology.

Introduction

This research was situated in the Early Years Settings in Plymouth and was facilitated by Plymouth City Council Early Years and Plymouth Safeguarding Children Board. The aim was to explore important questions surrounding how young children are engaging with online technologies and thus address gaps in the current literature.

This is an important study that can be used to inform practice and policy and to help assist in the consideration of how age-appropriate use of technology could be encouraged. Given there are issues of safety and questions surrounding the effects of technology on children at early stages of development, it was important to analyse patterns of use and to be able to draw informed and evidenced opinion.

The research design considered the social factors that affected the child (Vygotsky, 1978). This included the area where they lived in terms of postcode, the types of technology they had access to within the home and the Early Years Setting, the length of time they made use of the technology, how long they watched the television and the number of siblings in the house. These elements were chosen as representative of the contextual factors that would influence how the child engaged with the online world.

To triangulate the information gathered about the children, representatives of the Early Years Settings were surveyed about their use of technology within the setting, their approaches to online safety and their training activities in relation to online safety.

Method

The research aim was to gather information regarding online use for the under 5's in the Plymouth area. Two populations of respondents are considered key in

the context of the under 5s – the parents and guardians to give a picture of home life; and the professionals within or connected to the early years settings to give an educational perspective.

Surveys were deemed to be the most economical, efficient, pragmatic and accessible way of gaining access to these key respondents and so two survey questionnaires were constructed.

The survey questionnaire was designed with a variety of questions, both closed and open. Some questions had yes/no responses to gain quantitative data about specific phenomena such as having an internet connection. Other questions allowed a more free-ranging response such as listing the technologies in use to gain qualitative data. One question was designed to elicit the degree of intensity or sensitivity of feeling and thus used a Likert style response framework. Respondents were asked key questions and invited to indicate their strength of feeling towards the questions. Text labels were given to the response options to minimise the problems with subjective interpretation of numerical scales. Four choices between strongly disagree and strongly agree were allowed to avoid the tendency for people to make a mid-point response.

The questionnaires were handed out in paper format to representatives from the early years settings after a conference held in April 2010. In addition the questionnaires could be downloaded from the Plymouth Children's Services website. The settings were asked to fill out the questionnaire relating to them and also to issue the parental questionnaire to parents and guardians whose children attended their setting.

The surveys collected data regarding the key variables for the context:

- Basic demographics of children's ages and household postcodes.
- Use of technology in the home, amount of time online and watching television, physical activity
- Parent's feelings towards e-safety.
- Use of technology in the setting.
- Staff perception towards online safety.
- Training

Where qualitative data was collected, open coding was carried out to extract the key categories. With the quantitative data, basic frequencies were calculated as outline descriptive statistics to give a general outline. Both types of data would benefit from further analysis to include more in-depth coding and more detailed statistical analysis.

The Early Years Settings

The responses received from the Early Years survey gave a variety of perspectives. There were 150 responses received in total with 117 representing practitioners situated in early years settings.

The number of settings represented was 94 and these included a number of nurseries, pre-school settings and child minders. All of these responses were from settings within the Plymouth City Council boundary.

The remaining 33 responses came from professionals working in supporting and related fields, the majority of whom were from the Plymouth area with two respondents from outside of Plymouth, one from Exeter and the other from Wiltshire. The responses in this category were from bodies such as the Plymouth City Council departments working with children or charitable bodies who support families and children.

Technology use within the Settings

The majority of the respondents admitted to making use of technology within their setting with both computers and cameras being the most common technologies in use. A small number of settings reported a clear boundary of use for computers with separate computers for office or administrative use and those being used by children attending the setting. Only a small proportion made specific mention of using Internet as part of their list of technologies used but a majority referred to having a secure internet connection.

Computers were reported by 81% of the settings with a variety of types of computer described with PCs and laptops dominating and two mentions of an Apple Mac. The respondents that only made a reference to using the Internet were assumed to be in the figures for using computers. 51% of respondents described using a variety of cameras, digital cameras and video cameras. Only one respondent referred to a webcam specifically. 11% of respondents made a clear distinction between computers required for their job as contrasted against use within the setting.

The picture of internet use is that of the majority of settings using it for their day-to-day administration and functioning with a significant minority allowing the children within the setting access. A majority of the settings, 88%, had an internet connection, which they all declared was with a recognized Internet Provider. 81% of those with a connection reported it to be a secure connection but 14% declared they did not know if it was secure. Only 2 respondents reported that their ISP was not secure.

Within the setting itself 37% of the settings allowed their children the opportunity of going online with the majority having no incidents of concern to report. However, 19% of those reported an incident causing concern with the majority reporting access to what they deemed to be inappropriate materials or websites and one respondent reporting access to online gaming and gambling sites.

In a number of cases the inappropriate website was Face book. Three separate respondents remarked on trying to manage the potential for interaction between staff and parents through Facebook.

> "Concerns around staff and parent facebook use how to manage security."
> "Social networking (FaceBook use) between staff / parents"

For another respondent there was evident ambiguity surrounding what was inappropriate but that a decision to support the member of staff was paramount.

> "Pre-School children were playing a "dress the doll" game which Breakfast Club Children had previously played. The "doll" was a "Barbie" type doll initially naked. One member of staff felt this image was inappropriate but not all staff members. We decided that anything that made staff feel uncomfortable should not be used and selected another game"

Mobile phone management within the settings

By far the largest proportion of the responses indicated that mobile phone usage was disallowed around children. 36% of respondents outlined this type of restrictive policy for staff use of mobile phones. 54% of the respondents described how this restrictive policy was put into place with mobile phones being locked away in staff rooms or managers offices. In some cases this extended to visitors mobile phones.

> "All staff are to keep mobile phones locked in the staff room. Any visitors to the nursery leave their mobile phones in the office safe"

Given the usefulness of the mobile phone, 12% of the respondents described how basic mobile phones were used within the settings. These basic phones would have no internet or camera facilities or would be issued primarily for use on trips outside of the setting.

There were some notable exceptions to these rules. 7% of the respondents reported that the requirement was to turn the phone off. Another approach seen in a support setting not offering daycare was that mobiles were in use but there were restrictions:

> "We have them - in setting. Photos to be taken of their own child only within groups"

Online safety

This section of the survey sought to explore not only attitudes and perceptions of practitioners but to also gain an understanding of practice within the setting in terms of policies and responsibilities.

Figure 1 illustrates the respondents perceptions towards four key questions surrounding online safety. They were asked to indicate how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the statements.

As can be seen by the first stacked column, it was clear the majority of respondents felt that online safety was indeed everybody's responsibility. These strong feelings are not continued into the other key areas. Respondents mostly agreed that staff in the setting could use online technologies safely, but this did not generate the strong feeling. In addition, most respondents felt reasonably

certain that staff would know how to report safety issues, but an element of doubt was indicated here, with 22% somewhat disagreeing. Finally, there were a number of respondents who felt that not all staff and parents were aware of the AUP in the setting, with 29% somewhat disagreeing.

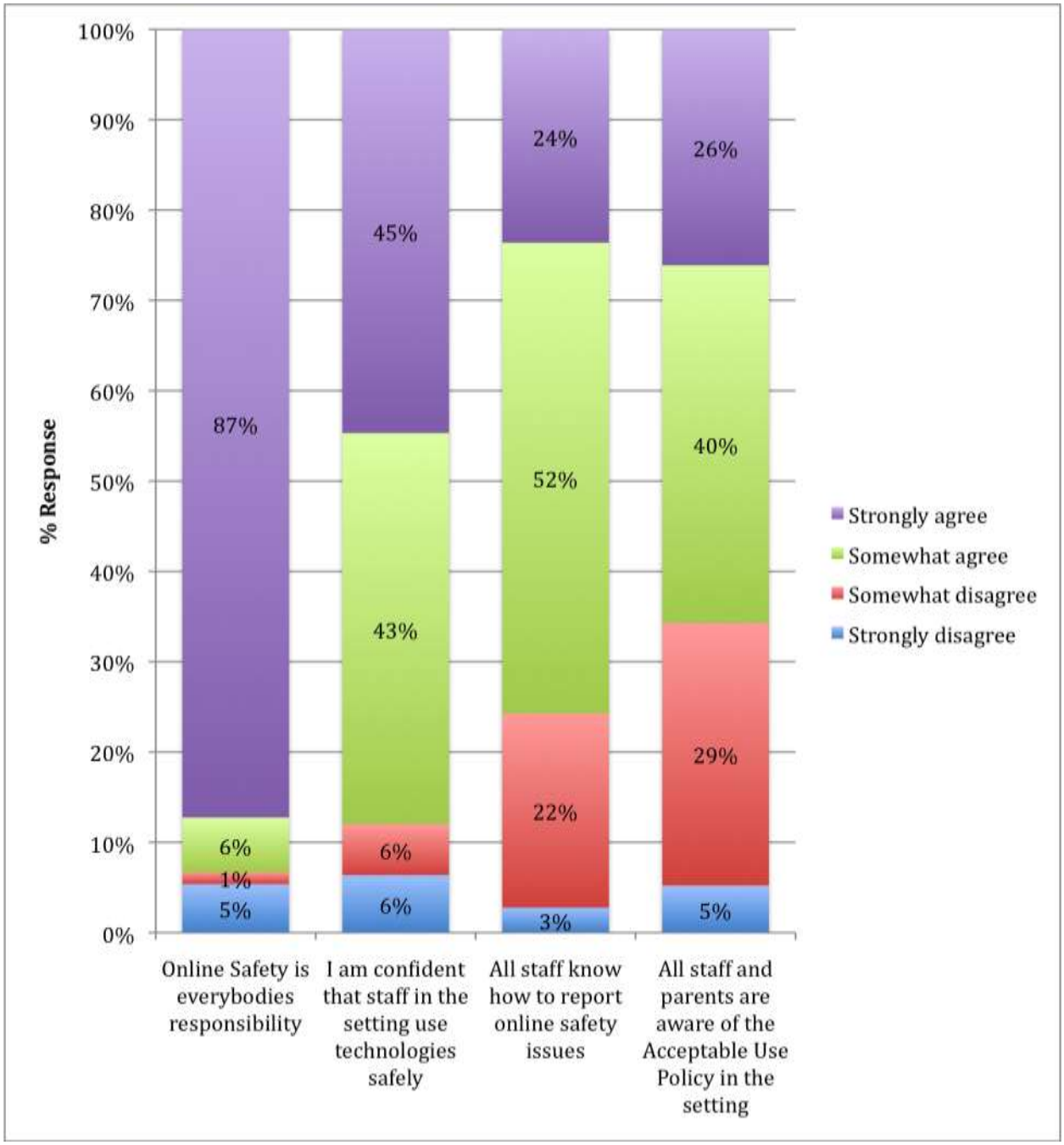

Figure 1: Online safety perceptions

53% of the respondents described their setting as having an Acceptable Use Policy (AUP) with 36% not having one. 31% of respondents did not know if their setting had an AUP.

Settings would appear to lack designated individuals taking responsibility for online safety. 51% respondents stated that their settings did not have such a designated person.

Home Life

Parents and guardians of children attending Early Years Settings were issued with a survey to capture their perspectives of online use of their under 5s. There were 219 households that responded to this survey spread across a wide geographical area across the city.

Technology use within the home

The picture emerging from this survey was one of engagement with online technology early on in the home. There were 423 children reported, 320 of them were under 5 and therefore classed as the early years children. It was not possible to drill down into the data to determine exactly their usage, so their household average time online is accounted for below.

The 423 children accounted for a total of 99 hours online, which makes an average of 24 minutes online per child. The amount of time online appears small in comparison to the amount of hours of television that are reported at 2 hours. There were 4 respondents who stated they did not watch any television but the maximum reported number of hours per day was 20.

59% of the early years children indicated that they had definite favourites online. 36% of those enjoyed children's websites such as CBeebies. There was an equal number who also enjoyed puzzles and games especially with a theme of an age appropriate children's character – such as Pepper Pig. A wide variety of childrens characters where mentioned in the responses – such as Thomas the Tank Engine, Postman Pat, Nick Jr and Bob the Builder.

The majority of children go online using a computer as their main device with 72% reporting using the computer to go online. However, 24% made use of a combination of devices such as the mobile phone, games consoles and TV online. 3% declared that they preferred to use games consoles.

A set of 4 questions were posed to uncover what parental attitudes were towards understanding the Internet. They were asked to indicate how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the statements.

Figure 2 illustrates where parents see themselves in terms of their understanding. The first column shows quite clearly a strong understanding of the internet with 62% rating themselves as strongly agreeing with the statement "I have a good understanding of the Internet". Putting this alongside the two questions "I am confident in my understanding of online safety issues" and "I have a better understanding of the Internet than any other parents I know" show a very confident population. The answers to the question about their child's abilities also could be interpreted that they are in control of the situation, they are the ones with the knowledge and their children are not.

Some parents chose to make comment at the end of the survey as a way of emphasising their level of awareness:

> "Most parents these days have a great understanding"

> ".My son is 3 and very bright but not able to get himself online and look at anything I wouldn't approve of. We have locked our browser so our 5 year old can't get past CBeebies. Anything else we would pre-approve and consider this is just common sense".

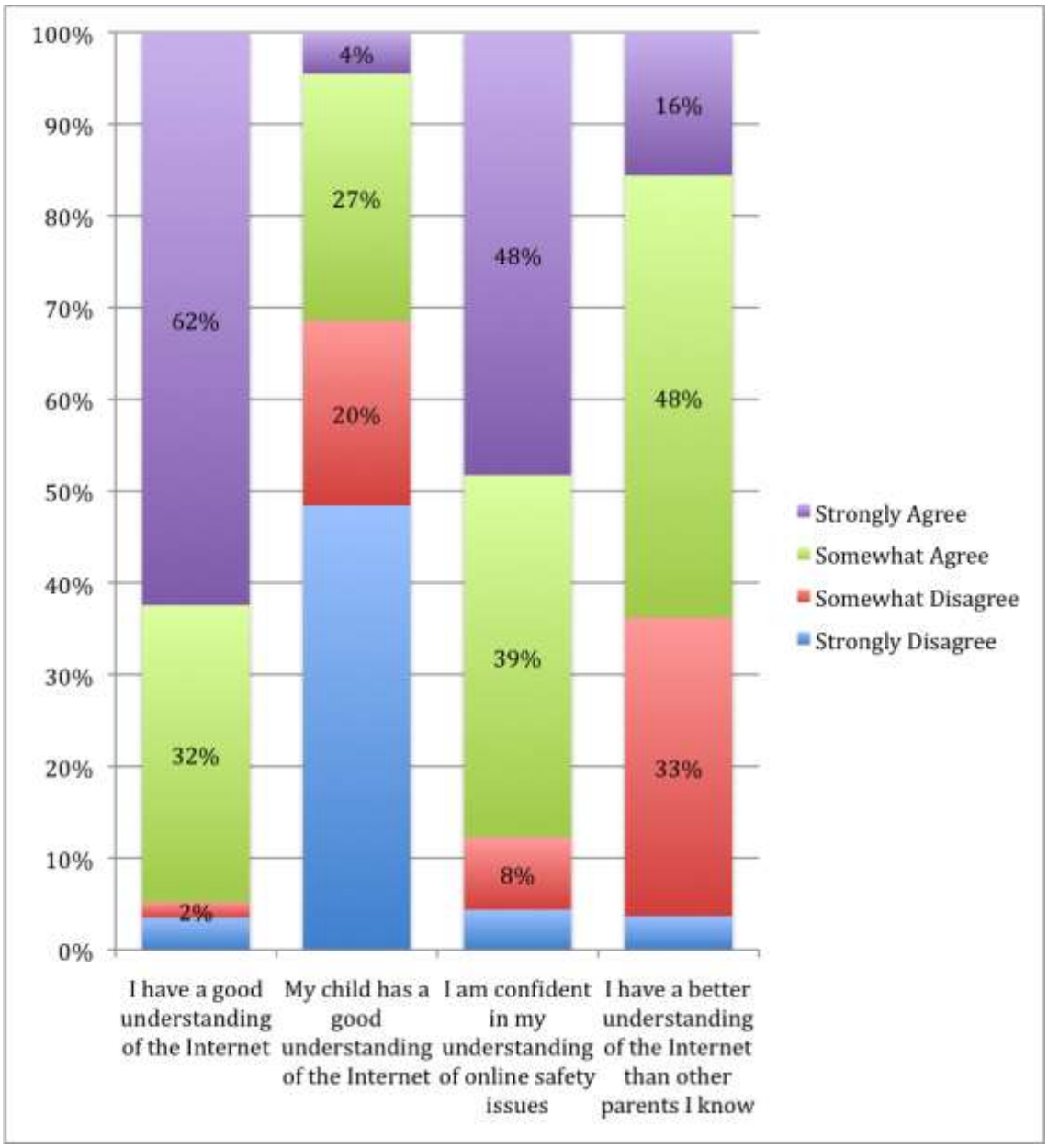

Figure 2: Parental perceptions to Internet awareness

Conclusions

The primary purpose of this research was to begin to understand the level of adult monitoring and control of the use of ICT by under-5's. The data could

indicate the current significant concerns of adults for the safety of under-5s when on-line. This, in turn, could offer guidance for professionals engaged in safeguarding and child protection for signs and symptoms that should be cause for concern when assessing children's safety on-line in their early years.

These two surveys combined offer a glimpse into an increasingly technology rich environment for the early years. Being online is clearly part of the child's life at home and as such will be influenced by the role models they have around them. Parents and older siblings have the key role of illustrating how to engage with the technology.

This research has shown that children are going online at home mostly with a computer but the ability to use a variety of devices is gaining ground. Although constant use of that variety of devices, the games console, the mobile phone, is not yet commonplace, as technology moves on, devices decrease in cost and accessibility becomes ubiquitous this is undoubtedly going to change. Therefore, for any engagement with children at any age, this consideration has to factored into any interventions or engagement. These children could be online with any device.

The parents who volunteered to return the research questionnaire are confident in their own abilities. They see themselves as competent, internet savvy individuals and thus are less likely to engage with parental training events. Training and awareness needs a different approach for these parents and so thought should be given in how to engage with them. The question remains as to the knowledge and confidence of parents we did not engage with, and what cultural and demographic reasons for non-returns from parents and non-engagement by some settings may reveal.

It is probable that the parents surveyed in this study represent the first generation with on-line experiences throughout their own childhoods. Their resulting familiarity with the medium and the technology offers them a confidence in their parental control of their children's on-line experiences that has not been available to parents with older children surveyed by earlier studies. It could be argued that the parental confidence in managing their children's on-line safety evidenced here represents a dangerous complacency.

The chosen parental approach to on-line safety in the early years is most likely to be consolidated and remain as the dominant parenting methodology. Reliance upon technical management is no substitute for effective behavioural guidance. In addition, as technology continues to develop, even parents who have been raised with internet access may fall behind their children's knowledge and use of new technologies and applications. In any case, parental control is made more difficult as internet access is available through a wide-range of mobile technologies away from their home and family environments.

Parenting methods for e-safety are likely to reflect the values, skills and approaches in all other areas of the parent-child relationship, and the parent's own behaviours on-line. When considering e-safety guidance and the vulnerability of children on-line, consideration of early years behaviours and

family norms should also be taken into account. Our study begins to offer an insight into the impact of family cultural norms on attitudes towards internet access and use.

This study also offers sight of the wide range of management approaches to e-safety. The reported strong confidence of staff in having Acceptable Use Policies in place and understanding of how to report e-safety issues is contradicted by the overall absence of staff with designated responsibility for maintaining e-safety in practice – a core requirement of a strong AUP, and a line-management approach to reporting concerns.

Further, the required role of practitioners in safeguarding children requires explicit acknowledgement that young children access the internet at home if not in the setting, and any assessment of risk, including appropriate parenting, should involve consideration of the family's engagement with ICT. Clearly, this is not yet embedded in Early Years settings, and should also be recognised as not being sufficiently acknowledged throughout social care agencies.

Clearly the settings do not have the capacity or perhaps confidence to deliver online safety advice. This research illustrates the strong belief that everybody has a responsibility, yet there is ambivalence demonstrated in how that is actually carried out. The lack of an individual with a clear responsibility for online safety combined with the low number of people attending training contributes clearly to this situation.

The use of technology within the settings was varied but does not yet point to a homogenously technology rich environment. Staff need to have confidence in being able to guide the children in their settings online so to allow more than 37% to have access and to provide good role models in online behaviour. To do this effectively, they need to have an awareness of risks, balanced with a healthy viewpoint on reality. The evidence in this research was that not many settings had experienced issues online, but the fear of experiencing issues online was a barrier.

Future Work

The surveys gave a benchmark and starting point for exploring the lives of the under 5s. However, to gain a more in depth picture further work is indicated. . In particular, comparative research to consider parenting attitudes and behaviours towards children's on-line activities at different ages may offer key guidance for effective role-modelling from the early years onwards.

There is also a suggestion here that older siblings are affecting how younger children are using technologies. The data hints at mobile phone usage being increased in households with older siblings. . Further data could be collected as part of a wider research programme to find an explicit link between ages of children in the household and actual mobile phone usage. In addition, it would be useful to gain an understanding of how the mobile phones are used, how long the child spends on the mobile phone and what type of mobile phone is

used. This would inform any form of intervention or assessment that may be taking place with that household.

The variety of devices available to early years children is of interest. This could form the basis of a longitudinal study to find out if the pattern of usage is going to change over time, whether as suspected, the variety of devices accessing the internet does lead to increased use.

There is more to be discovered about how these early years children use the internet, to explore more how they engage with the websites. A further research programme would explore how particular websites are engaged with, perhaps to look more at the types of engagement and the effects that has on behaviour. In particular the effect on neurological development of early engagement with on-line gaming including *Cbeebies* and *Club Penguin* as well as games consoles should be considered. Comparison with data from research on gaming as a mood modifier in older children and adults should raise concern for the potential impact on early brain development.

The Early Years Settings themselves warrant further exploration. In some instances the information on the survey was not as clear as it might have been and needed to be ignored from the statistical data. Interviews could be carried out with the settings in order to corroborate and triangulate the information. Semi-structured interviews with staff at the setting would be able to uncover the depth of understanding and the reality of the situation in the setting with regard to engagement with online technologies and understanding.

The importance of role models emerges from this research. It would be beneficial to conduct research into how parents now model online behaviours and how staff in the settings also model online behaviours. A number of parents outlined the potential for addiction and bad behaviours as part of an influence on their child's development. Further research could usefully explore this in far more depth.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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