

# Online Habits of Finnish Children

## *Use, Risks and Data Misuse*

Reijo Kupiainen, Annikka Suoninen & Kaarina Nikunen

Finland is known as one of the worlds' leading countries in digital technology and education. According to Statistics Finland (Official Statistics of Finland 2010), 86% of Finns are Internet users, and every second Finn uses the Internet several times a day. Consumer Survey 2011 (Suomen virallinen tilasto 2011) shows that nearly 90% of households have a computer and about 80% have access to the Internet. Around 90% of households have a mobile phone as well.

Finnish children are living in a digital media environment that is saturated not only by the Internet and mobile phones, but also by television, sound recordings, radio, video games, books and magazines. Even children under 1 year may play digital games (Suoninen 2011b, 9-10). Moreover, 58% of 9- to 16-year-olds use the Internet in their own bedrooms at home, while 39% use it at home but not in their bedrooms (Livingstone et al. 2011, 21).

In the present article, we provide a general overview of Internet use among Finnish children and youth. The article is based on two surveys: EU Kids Online in Europe, and Children's Media Barometer in Finland. The EU Kids Online survey comprised a sample of 25,142 children aged between 9 and 16 years from 25 European countries. In Finland, the EU Kids Online sample was composed of 1,017 children and youth. This survey also included an interview with one parent of each child.

Children's Media Barometer is a study of the media use of 0- to 8-year-old children, which was conducted by interviewing children and observing their media environment. A questionnaire was also administered to their parents; 743 parents answered the national survey. Here, we use some of the statistical findings from this survey. The study was conducted by the Finnish Society of Media Education.

### **Children, Gender and Internet Use**

Finland is an Internet-intensive country where children have grown up as digital natives. According to Children's Media Barometer (Suoninen 2011a), one-third of children between the ages of 0 and 8 use the Internet at least once a week and 44% of children in this age group were allowed to use the Internet at home (ibid. 16). This survey demonstrates that Internet use usually begins at the age of 4 or 5, when at least 50% of children go online occasionally. The use of the Internet becomes more common in the pre-school

years, around the age of 6. By 7-8 years of age, 70% of children used the Internet on a weekly basis (Suoninen 2011b, 14). However, this does not imply that children go on the Web alone without surveillance. They actually begin their Internet use and digital life with their parents and siblings. They have their first experience of the Internet when they sit on their parents' lap when parents are surfing the Web or social networking sites.

However, younger children have their own media preferences on the Internet as well. According to parents, the most popular website for 0- to 2-year-old kids is YouTube (Suoninen 2011a, 27). Older kids visit websites of children's television programmes or different gaming sites; the most popular websites are *Pikku Kakkonen*, a TV magazine show for children produced by the Finnish public service broadcasting company YLE. *Pikku Kakkonen* is a familiar and safe TV programme that many parents also watched when they were children. The programme started in 1977 and nowadays the daily show is also available on the Internet.

Among children in the age group 9-16 years in Finland, 79% use the Internet every day or almost every day, while 19% use it once or twice a week (Livingstone et al. 2011, 25). It is notable that parents of younger children responded that they use the Internet more often than their children. This shows that the Internet is an important media environment in everyday life for adults as well, and that parents and children share the digital lifestyle.

However, parents do restrict and regulate children's use of the Internet in various ways. For instance, 86% of parents of 3- to 8-year-olds stated that they have certain rules for children's Internet use. Typically, they restrict the time for using the Internet or a particular time of the day when children can be online (Suoninen 2011a, 29). Restrictive mediation of child's Internet use was common among older children as well; 90% of parents of 9- to 16-year-olds reported that they followed some restrictive practices (Livingstone et al. 2011, 110). Restrictions are not, however, the only way to control a child's Internet use. In addition, parents check available records of the child's Internet use and use certain software or parental controls to filter or monitor it. Active mediation is also used; for example, 94% of parents reported that they talk with their 9- to 12-year-old children about what they do online, while 85% have the same talk with older children in the age group 13-16 years. However, it is notable that 15% of families of 13- to 16-year-olds do not have a common discussion culture about Internet use.

According to the EU Kids Online survey 69% of parents reported that they monitored their children's Internet use by checking the websites they visited, their profiles on social networking sites or online communities, their friends or contacts on the social networking sites, or their messages in email or instant messaging. However, only 39% of 9- to 16-year-olds reported that their parents use this kind of monitoring, and 12% said that they were not aware of whether their parents were monitoring. Especially the 15- to 16-year-olds and their parents were in disagreement: 65% of the older teenagers said that their parents were not monitoring their Internet use, while 60% of parents confirmed that they were. This significant disagreement may be due to the fact that teenagers are not aware of their parents' monitoring, and hence these issues are not discussed openly in the family. In the case of older teenagers, this kind of secret monitoring, however, can raise questions about privacy issues: Do parents have the right to monitor the contacts and messages of their 15- to 16-year-old children and what kind of rights do young people have in their families? Other reasons could certainly be parents' tendency to overemphasize their role in monitoring children's Internet use.

Finland is largely known as the ‘mobile phone nation’ because of Nokia Corporation, one of the biggest mobile phone producers in the world. Therefore, it is somewhat surprising that only one-fourth of the children use mobile phones and 12% other handheld portable devices for accessing the Internet. In Europe, using mobile phones and handheld devices to access the Internet is most common in Norway, the UK, Ireland and Sweden. The mobile use for the Internet in Finland is clearly lower than in other Nordic countries and near the country average for other European countries. (Livingstone et al. 2011, 23).

One possible reason for lesser use of mobile phones for Internet is that children can comfortably access Internet in their homes and schools; hence, it is not necessary to use other small-screened, portable devices and incur additional costs for mobile phone use. Another reason could be that children in Finland use the Internet mainly for gaming and watching videos, while mobile phones are more suitable for social networking.

At the European level, use of the Internet for school work is the top online activity. But because part of the interviews in Finland were made in June, the results are not comparable. The question for children was “how often you have done it [used the Internet for school work etc.] in the *past month*”. In Finland, the children’s summer vacation usually starts in the beginning of June, and May is a rather “free time” at school as well. For this reason, the results from Finland are a bit different. The most popular Internet activities among Finnish kids are playing games alone (84% have done this in the past month), watching video clips (82%), receiving and sending email (72%), using the Internet for school work (72%) and visiting social networking sites (66%).

It seems that the habits of Internet use emerge at an early age. According to the Children’s Media Barometer data, little children begin their online life by watching videos on YouTube and other Internet sites. Then, 5- to 6-year-olds begin gaming on the Internet and by 7-8 years of age, over half of Finnish children play digital games on the Internet at least once a week.

## Gendered differences

In digital gaming, the differences in Internet use between boys and girls are significant across all age groups. For example, in the 13-16 age group, 41% of boys and only 8% of girls played games on the Internet every day or almost every day. Gaming seems still to be a boys’ hobby, and gender differences are significant, especially with regard to the heavy gamers. However, this does not mean that girls do not play. A quarter of 13- to 16-year-old girls played games on the Internet once or twice a week, and 34% played once or twice a month. The varying interest in gaming appears quite early in the children’s life; according to the Children’s Media Barometer data, boys start playing digital games at a younger age as compared to girls and they play more often as well. At age 5, over 50% of boys play digital games at least weekly while less than a quarter of girls of the same age play that often. At age 7-8, 30% of boys and 16% of girls play digital games daily or almost daily, and 39% of boys and 25% of girls play Internet games at least three times a week.

It was also established that Finnish children use the Internet for content consumption and friendship-driven social networking. More unusual is interest-driven participation and co-production of the content. Many scholars (Jenkins 2004; 2006, Baym 2006) have emphasized the emergence of a ‘participatory culture’ that accelerates and sup-

ports a variety of 'online content creation'. YouTube and other social network sites like MySpace and DeviantArt enable young people to post, share and discuss media works. However, the EU Kids Online data demonstrate that young people are not so keen to publish and share their own media content on the Internet. For example, only 13% of children and youth in Finland said that they write a web log or online diary. Here, the gender differences are also evident. Writing a web log is a girls' 'thing'; 27% of girls in the 13-16 age group and only 9% of boys in the same group reported writing a blog.

One of the reasons for the popularity of web logs among teenage girls is the so-called style or fashion blogs. A Finnish finder server for blogs, 'Blogilista', includes almost 3,000 tags under the word 'fashion', over 2,000 tags under the word 'lifestyle' and over 1,500 tags under the word 'style'. Interest in fashion and lifestyle begins earlier on social networking sites like GoSupermodel. According to the Children's Media Barometer data, this site was one of the ten most popular websites among 7- to 8-year-old girls, and it is still more popular among somewhat older girls.

GoSupermodel or 'GoSu' appears in eight languages and is produced by the Danish online media entertainment company watAgame. GoSu is pronouncedly an online *girlie* space that allows girls to connect to self-presentation, appearance, makeup and fashion. The site draws on the Barbie and Bratz culture, with a mixture of traditional femininity and girl power, expanding it to the online world. GoSu includes a range of activities such as gaming, chatting, decorating one's room, making and buying fashion magazines as well as buying clothes, either with the money earned in games or with real money.

GoSu includes games of makeup and dress-up, mostly played alone. Only one game, which involves a photo shooting session, allows you to play with other members. GoSu seems to follow the trend of gendered online activities, as the EU Kids data showed that both girls and boys play games on the Internet. However, gaming with others is far more popular among the boys, whereas girls tend to play alone (Livingstone et al. 2011, 34).

In addition, GoSu addresses young girls as creators of fashion by taking advantage of the popularity of various fashion blogs on the Internet. Young girls are active bloggers, and GoSu also uses this aspect by creating space for them to write stories.

One of the activities encouraged by the template includes producing magazines. Girls create magazines with different kinds of stories of their hobbies, celebrities and friendship issues. The readymade magazine format is easy to fill with one's own content. These magazines are then bought and reviewed by other members of the site.

GoSu highlights the gendered nature of Internet use among children and youth. Networking sites such as GoSu are marketed for and targeted at specific gendered age groups, thus making use of and highlighting the various differences between boys' and girls' online activities.

## **Risks and Safety on the Internet**

The EU Kids Online research (Livingstone et al. 2011, 139) showed that the more children use the Internet daily, the more likely they are to have encountered risks. EU Kids Online classified the risks of harm to children based on their online activities, for example, pornographic content, racist or hateful content, meeting new people on the Web, harassment and stalking, 'grooming', personal data misuse, bullying, 'sexting' and potentially harmful user-generated content like pro-anorexia websites. However,

risks do not necessarily mean harm in any case. Some of the activities could also be beneficial, such as meeting new people online. Sometimes, of course, when children lack the necessary digital, social and protective skills, these risks may pose a danger.

Finland, like other Nordic countries, is one of the ‘risk countries’; however, risks are seldom perceived as harmful when compared to Norway, Sweden and Denmark. Children and youth believe that they are savvy and skilful Internet users.

Like in other European countries, the most common risk activity among Finnish children is communicating online with new people whom they have never met face-to-face. Half of the children and youth surveyed have communicated with ‘online only friends’. But their experiences were positive. These online friends are mostly friends of friends or of family members. Only 12% of Finnish children had met an online contact in person in the past year, but these were mostly cases of friends of somebody whom they already knew. However, 1% of the children were bothered by these offline meetings, and only one girl was slightly upset after having met with a girl of her own age.

Pornography was another huge risk; 37% of the children reported that they had seen images that were ‘obviously sexual – for example, showing people naked or people having sex’. Among Finnish children, 29% had seen sexual images on the Internet. Other media outlets through which they had seen sexual images included books, magazines, television, movies and DVD. Internet is as common a source for sexual images, as is television, film or video. Of the children who had seen these images, 20% were bothered by them (ibid. 51, 56).

Other risks are more unusual. For example, 5% of Finnish children had encountered online bullying. The EU Kids Online data demonstrated that bullying is more common offline than online (ibid. 63). In Finland, 10% of children had encountered offline bullying. A bit surprising was the finding that nearly 36% of children who had encountered bullying were not at all upset with what had happened. To some extent, it appears that bullying is a part of everyday life and the Internet has a role to play in this. However, we have no evidence to show that bullying is more common in the age of Internet and mobile phones.

Some online risks can be combated using digital and media skills. Remarkably, Finnish children claim to know the most digital and safety skills in Europe (see Kjartan Ólafsson’s article in this volume, Table 5). Finnish children reported that they have mastered on average almost six of the above-mentioned skills. The average in Europe was 4.2 skills (Livingstone et al. 2011, 28).

According to the study, although Finnish children are skilled Internet users, they do not have so many online activities as compared to children in other European countries where the average number of digital skills is high. The EU Kids Online report claims that ‘in countries where children do a wider range of activities online they also have more digital skills’ (ibid. 142). However, this is not true in Finland. Children in Finland generally appear to be more consumer-oriented Internet users who play games and watch videos, as mentioned previously.

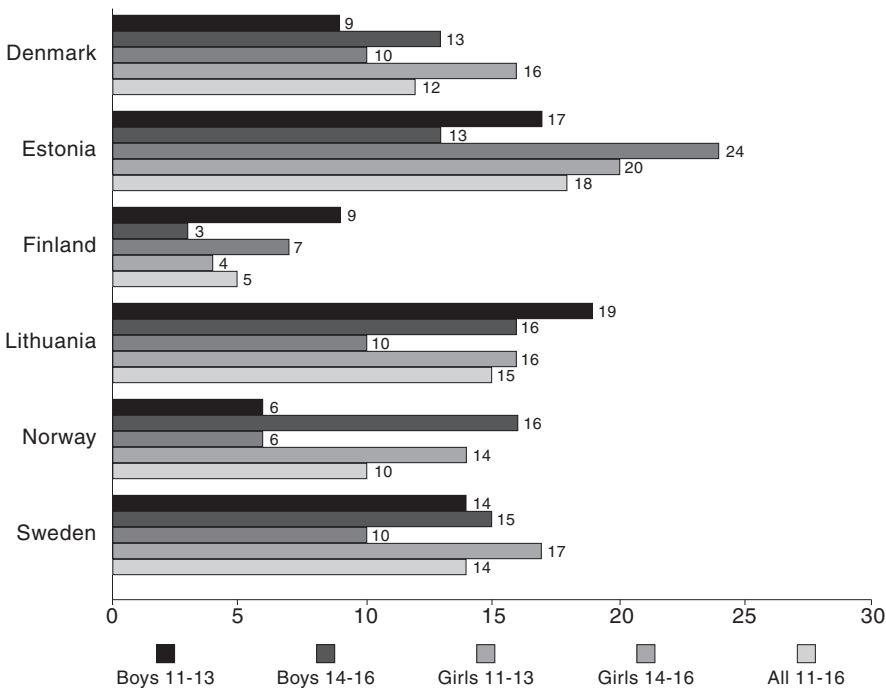
## **Data Misuse from the Nordic Perspective**

There are interesting differences with regard to personal data misuse between some Nordic and Baltic countries in the EU Kids Online data. In the survey, respondents aged 11 and

older were asked if somebody had, in the past 12 months, used their personal information in a way they did not like, if somebody used their password to access their personal information or to pretend to be him/her, or if they had lost real money by being cheated on the Internet.

Among 25 European countries in the EU Kids Online study, Finnish children and teenagers had experienced this kind of data misuse least often (Figure 1). Only 5% of Finnish respondents reported having experienced data misuse in the past year, while the international country average was 10%. Interestingly enough, experiences of data misuse were above average in all other Nordic and Baltic countries except in Finland; 10% of Norwegian respondents and 12% of Danish respondents said that they had experienced misuse of personal data. Of the 25 countries participating in this study, data misuse was most common in Estonia (18%), Lithuania (15%) and Sweden (14%).

**Figure 1. Data Misuse in Nordic and Baltic Countries**



There is, however, no simple explanation as to why some children and teenagers have experienced misuse of personal data on the Internet while others have not, as the victims of data misuse are not from the same age group in all the countries. In Finland, data misuse was experienced more often by younger children than by teenagers, while the opposite was true in Norway. In Estonia and Denmark, girls were victims of data misuse more often than boys. In Lithuania and Sweden, experiences of data misuse were less common among younger girls than boys or older teenagers, while the most common victims were younger boys in Lithuania and older girls in Sweden.

On an international scale, certain types of Internet behaviour seemed to be connected with the occurrence of data misuse. Data misuse was experienced more often by those who were in direct contact, at least once a month, with persons whom they had never met face to face, either by sending a photo or video of themselves, by sending personal

information (e.g., full name, address or phone number) or by adding these people to their friends list or address book. This kind of behaviour was far more common among Lithuanian, Estonian and Swedish children and teenagers than those from Norway, Finland or Denmark. In fact, the percentage of Lithuanian and Estonian respondents with this kind of direct weekly contact with Internet acquaintances was higher than those with this kind of contact on a monthly basis in Norway, Finland or Denmark.

## Conclusion

To sum up, it appears that the Finnish children live in a highly media-saturated environment. They start using the Internet at an early age, and this practice is more frequent among Finnish children and youth than in Europe on average. This puts Finnish children in the high-risk group in terms of online vulnerability. However, at the same time, Finnish children possess the best digital skills in Europe, skills that enable them to deal with the possible risks and dangers of the online world. Therefore, risks faced by Finnish children and youth are rarely harmful.

Interest in online culture is shared in the family: both parents and children are active Internet users. However, while parents monitor and control children's use of the Internet, there seems to be disagreement and uncertainty as to the extent to which parents monitor their children. This suggests that the issue of monitoring Internet use and content surfed is not adequately discussed within Finnish families.

## References

- Baym, N. (2006) 'The Emergence of On-line Community', in Jones, S. (ed.) *Cybersociety: communication and community*, Newbury Park: Sage, 35-68.
- Jenkins, H. (2004) The Cultural Logics of Convergence Culture. *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 7(1)33-43.
- Jenkins, H. (2006) *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. MacArthur Foundation, [http://digitalllearning.macfound.org/atf/cf/%7B7E45C7E0-A3E0-4B89AC9C.../JENKINS\\_WHITE\\_PAPER.PDF](http://digitalllearning.macfound.org/atf/cf/%7B7E45C7E0-A3E0-4B89AC9C.../JENKINS_WHITE_PAPER.PDF)
- Livingstone, S., Haddon, L., Görzig, A. and Ólafsson, K. (2011) *Risks and Safety on the Internet. The Perspective of European Children. The London School of Economics and Political Science*. <http://www.eukidsonline.net>. (20/4/2011).
- Official Statistics of Finland (OSF) (2010) Use of Information and Communications Technology. Helsinki: Statistics Finland. [http://www.stat.fi/til/sutivi/2010/sutivi\\_2010\\_10-26\\_tie\\_001\\_en.html](http://www.stat.fi/til/sutivi/2010/sutivi_2010_10-26_tie_001_en.html). (12/04/2011).
- Suomen virallinen tilasto (SVT) (2011) Kuluttajabarometri. Maaliskuu 2011, Liitekuvio 14. Tietokoneen ja internet-yhteyden yleisyys kotitalouksissa 2/2001-2/2011. Helsinki: Tilastokeskus. [http://www.stat.fi/til/kbar/2011/03/kbar\\_2011\\_03\\_2011-03-28\\_kuv\\_014\\_fi.html](http://www.stat.fi/til/kbar/2011/03/kbar_2011_03_2011-03-28_kuv_014_fi.html). (12/4/2011).
- Suoninen, A. (2011a) 'Lasten mediankäytöt vanhempien kertomana', in Kotilainen, S. (ed.) *Children's Media Barometer. The Use of Media Among 0-8-year-olds in Finland. The Finnish Society on Media Education*. <http://en.mediakasvatus.fi/publications/>, pp. 15-44. (29/04/2011).
- Suoninen, A. (2011b) 'Children's Media Use as Described by Their Parents', in Kotilainen, S. (ed.) *Children's Media Barometer. The Use of Media Among 0-8-year-olds in Finland. The Finnish Society on Media Education*. <http://en.mediakasvatus.fi/publications/>, pp. 9-14. (29/04/2011).

---

REIJO KUPIAINEN, Ph.D., Researcher, Department of Art and Media Pori, Aalto University, reijo.kupiainen@aalto.fi

ANNIKA SUONINEN, Ph.D., Lic.Soc.Sc, Researcher, Research Centre for Contemporary Culture, University of Jyväskylä, annikka.suoninen@jyu.fi

KAARINA NIKUNEN, D.Soc.Sc., Researcher, School of Communication, Media and Theatre, University of Tampere, kaarina.nikunen@uta.fi

