



Children and the Internet:

Which children are the most vulnerable?

Nicola Brace

Does your research then suggest differences among the children?

Sonia Livingstone

Well there are differences by age and gender, yes absolutely. And one should be wary of talking about children as a homogenous category. There are differences by class, difference in experience, in a way, you can identify differences in vulnerability. You know, some children are very confident, things have gone well for them, they feel well supported. So when they talk about the internet they are happy to talk about the challenges or the risks in a way that doesn't suggest anxiety.

Sometimes children who have had it tougher, and are a bit more vulnerable or feel less supported, can also talk about the internet in a more anxious way. But oddly they can also be the ones for whom the internet is a kind of a place where they can share some of their anxieties with others.

So I can think a few years ago from talking to children about their use of social networking sites, and for some it was just a great way to arrange what they're gonna do on Saturday night and they'd make the arrangements and off they'd go. And others who had worries would say, well, I can really talk to my friend about this and, you know, it can be private and a little distanced and I feel in control of the conversation and I can share it.

Nicola Brace

In terms of future research, do you think one of the main issues that psychologists ought to address is vulnerability, the differences in vulnerability amongst children?

Sonia Livingstone

That's a question I'm thinking a lot about at the moment, because though we don't want to talk about children as if they're a homogenous group, we haven't yet got very good indicators of which children are particularly at risk on the internet and so which children need to be addressed by public policy intervention. So we still do tend to, you know, talk about what to do for all children, rather than targeting the particularly vulnerable.

So there are a range of psychological measures that we can think about: relations between the parent and the child; measures of self-esteem or self-efficacy or, you know, how confident is the child in themselves. A range of measures one could look at. All the questions of social support. It's assumed that a child who has friends and others that they can talk to, is a child who will be more resilient to what they find on the internet than one without such support.

So I think the next steps for research are really to use the range of measures available to psychologists, to get a more accurate idea of which children are particularly at risk, and I suppose the hypothesis is that the children who are vulnerable offline are those who are going to be vulnerable online, whether it's that they take more risks because they're

looking for something else that they can't find in their offline lives, or whether they'll come across what anyone will come across, but they will be particularly vulnerable to it.

Nicola Brace

Thanks ever so much for talking to me today.