

Vulnerable Children in a Digital World 2019 – Research Summary and Insights

Evidence from the Cybersurvey¹ suggests that young people with offline vulnerabilities are more likely to encounter risks online. There are significant numbers of children living with vulnerabilities or living in conditions that make them vulnerable. In England alone the Children's Commissioner suggests that 2.3 million children are living in family situations which makes them vulnerable.

This research, which draws on the Cybersurvey² suggests that knowing the offline vulnerability that a child or young person is experiencing allows us to predict the type of risks they may face online. If we can predict, we can do more to prevent the risk from becoming harmful. But to do this successfully the adults supporting the child must have the skills and confidence to engage meaningfully with them about their online life.

Despite many children being dependent on their devices and all the connectivity it brings, our research suggests that many parents, carers, and professionals need more help and advice. This may be further complicated as online safety education is often rule based, where children are drilled on what to do and not do. Part of growing up is exploring what happens when rules are not followed. If something bad happens children may be less likely to talk about it, if they fear it happened because they have 'broken the rules'. This may mean children are less likely to ask for help as they are worried about being told off and so miss out on being supported through the issue.

Online risk is grouped into four categories:

- **Contact** – High risk online relationships
- **Content** – Visiting or being exposed to websites
- **Conduct** – High risk conduct
- **Cyber scams** – Abuse of personal data

The type of vulnerabilities a child experiences are an indicator of the risks they may face

We know that some vulnerabilities experienced by children are temporary and some are more permanent. For the time a child has to deal with the vulnerability they have an increased risk of online harm.



Offline vulnerabilities predict different online risks, but all are significant for all categories of high online risk experiences



Vulnerability plus experience of a high-risk scenario combine to make it likely the young person will experience several other forms of high-risk scenario



Adversities are not present in isolation as vulnerable children tend to live with several difficulties which means the online risks, they are likely to encounter may cover all areas of contact, content, conduct and cyber scams

1. The Cybersurvey is an annual survey of young people's views and online experiences run by Youthworks since 2008. Over the last 10 years, 38,000 young people have participated. A research partnership has been established between Youthworks and Dr Aiman El Asam of the Department of Psychology at the University of Kingston to study samples of this data further. Evidence for the research paper is drawn from Cybersurvey data and reports by Adrienne Katz and research papers by this partnership Dr Aiman El Asam and Adrienne Katz.

High-Risk Online Scenarios					
Risks	Contact	Content	Conduct	Cyber scams	Overall risk – all 4Cs' together
Vulnerabilities					
Special educational needs and disabilities	Predicts contact risks. Includes sexting under pressure, coercion, blackmail, or threats to send more images				Significantly higher score for basket of all high-risk online scenarios
Communication difficulties			Predicts conduct risks. More likely to visit gambling sites and chat rooms	May struggle to understand T&Cs - can leave them more susceptible to scams	Significantly vulnerable to all high-risk online scenarios
Family / Social (care-experienced)		Higher exposure to harmful content		Particularly susceptible to cyber scams. This can link to being a victim of online aggression	Higher overall risk for all high-risk online scenarios
Mental health difficulties					Significantly high risk for the basket of all high-risk online scenarios
Physical disabilities			Predicts conduct risks. More likely to visit sites with adult content		Significantly more likely to experience a basket of all high-risk online scenarios

Insights from the research



Some parents are struggling to provide the support around online safety that their children need - perhaps because specific resources may not be available.



Professionals have to have the confidence to engage in conversations about a child's digital life. Their online life is a key part of their identity and so to ignore it misses out a significant part of how they live their lives.

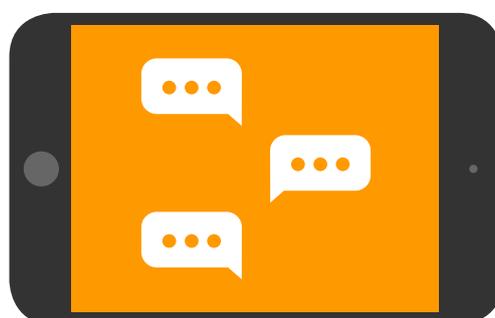


Online safety education must be delivered more than once a year and in ways that are appropriate for each child. Children experiencing vulnerabilities will require targeted or intensive education and support.

Conclusion

The insights from this research can be used to ensure that young people living with vulnerabilities are given the relevant, proactive, and nuanced support they need to connect safely online. Not every child in every group identified will encounter these risks and many who are not in these groups will also face challenges online. However, for all children to be given the opportunity to connect only safely these three things need to happen:

1. Parents and carers need more support, with better resources and education
2. Professionals require updated risk assessments, and an understanding of contextual safeguarding
3. Young people need to be offered more personalised online safety education



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