

# **Results in Brief**

# Better digital skills can reduce online harm for children

New research explores and measures children's and young people's digital skills to enable them to thrive in the digital age.





© Studio Romantic/stock.adobe.com

With the world becoming increasingly digital, children and young people should develop critical and functional digital skills that allow them to fully participate in society and create opportunities for their future.

Perceiving a lack of comprehensive academic research on children's and adolescents' digital use in Europe, the <u>ySKILLS</u> (Youth Skills) project started a longitudinal three-wave survey in six countries – Germany, Estonia, Italy, Poland, Portugal and Finland.

Through mixed methods, the KU Leuven led the research to understand more about the digital skills young people should develop to use ICT for their educational, informational and social inclusion and wellbeing.

"Children with higher levels of digital skills seem to be better able to protect their privacy online. Despite existing evidence showing that better digital skills are linked to more online risk-taking, they are linked to better coping with online risks," explains Leen d'Haenens, ySKILLS project coordinator.

## **Risks and vulnerabilities associated with digital skills**

ySKILLS examined the risks related to children's and adolescents' use of ICT and, in line with the European strategy for a better internet for kids [2] (BIK+), studied vulnerability factors that affect the development of digital skills.

"It has become clear that specific groups of young people, for example, the psychologically vulnerable and traditionally marginalised, may be less likely to be able to take advantage of online opportunities," states d'Haenens.

The project shows that an unequal distribution of digital skills leads to an unequal distribution of outcomes. What concerns d'Haenens is that vulnerable and marginalised young people, such as ones with a low socioeconomic background, are also less able to avoid negative outcomes.

The data of the survey shows, for instance, that children who feel discriminated against tend to engage in more risk behaviour. Meanwhile, low family support is associated with an increased exposure to harmful content and sexting.

#### New digital skills indicator

ySKILLS developed a new <u>youth Digital Skills Indicator</u> (yDSI) to measure the digital skills of young people aged 12 to 17. It is a child centric and cross-national validated measurement tool with 31 items distributed over perceived digital skills and digital knowledge.

According to d'Haenens, the yDSI is highly valuable: "It can be used to identify gaps in digital skills, to track progress over time, and to develop targeted interventions to improve digital skills. It considers the different ways children use digital technologies and learn."

The project reveals, for example, that from 2021 to 2022, the same group of children surveyed presented a limitation in advancing information and navigation skills, content creation and production skills, even with an increase in internet usage.

#### Steps for a better development of digital skills

The findings of ySKILLS will be used to develop new strategies and policy recommendations to help young people benefit from the opportunities of digital skills, while minimising the risks.

For instance, the project points out that governments should develop customised digital skills initiatives to strengthen vulnerable or underrepresented young people. It

also suggests that more attention should be given to regulation to limit the risks posed to young people's safety by commercial providers of digital products and services.

The results of ySKILLS have also been useful to other related research, such as the <u>CO:RE project</u> that is creating a knowledge base on the impact of technological transformations on children and youth.

## Keywords

ySKILLS, digital skills, children, online risks, adolescents, yDSI, internet for kids, digital knowledge, youth digital skills indicator

| /SKILLS                    |                 | Funded under                                 |
|----------------------------|-----------------|--|
|                            |                 | SOCIETAL CHALLENGES - Europe In A Changing   |
| Grant agreement ID: 870612 |                 | World - Inclusive, Innovative And Reflective |
|                            |                 | Societies                                    |
| Project website            |                 |  |
|                            |                 | Total cost                                   |
|                            |                 | € 3 188 703,50                               |
|                            |                 |  |
| <u>10.3030/870612 🗠</u>    |                 | EU contribution                              |
|                            |                 | € 3 188 703,50                               |
|                            |                 |  |
| Project closed             |                 | Coordinated by                               |
|                            |                 |  |
| EC signature date          |                 |  |
| 3 November 2019            |                 |  |
|                            |                 | Belgium                                      |
| Start date                 | End date        |  |
| L January 2020 3           | 1 December 2023 |  |

# This project is featured in...



19 July 2023



Last update: 18 July 2023

**Permalink:** <u>https://cordis.europa.eu/article/id/445202-better-digital-skills-can-</u> reduce-online-harm-for-children

European Union, 2025