Factsheet: Parental awareness of children's experiences of online risks and harm

Evidence from Ngā taiohi matihiko o Aotearoa – New Zealand Kids Online

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This factsheet presents findings from a study looking at New Zealand parents', caregivers' and whānau perceptions of children's experiences of online risk and harm.

Research suggests that parents tend to largely underestimate their child's engagement in risky and/or hurtful behaviours as well as their experiences of harm online (see Byrne et al., 2014; Dehue et al., 2008; Symons et al., 2017). While helpful, the available international evidence is not only limited but also does not reflect the New Zealand context. In addition, understanding parental knowledge of the online experiences of children is important as parents play a critical role in helping their child to prevent or deal with bothering experiences and risky behaviours as well as providing children with emotional support when things go wrong online (Khurana et al., 2015; Livingstone et al., 2017; Pacheco & Melhuish, 2018a, 2018b).

To help close the gap of New Zealand-based evidence on the topic, this factsheet presents findings from a quantitative study conducted by Netsafe with New Zealand parents and their children. The objectives of the study are to measure parental knowledge of children's experiences of risks and harm online, and to compare parents' level of awareness with their child's self-reported experiences.

Highlights

1. There is a mismatch between parents', caregivers' and whānau awareness and their children's reports of bothering or upsetting experiences online. This seems consistent with past research; however, the gap is smaller in New Zealand compared to the evidence collected overseas.

2. At the same time, parental awareness about the emotional impact this had was, to a large extent, consistent with children's reported experiences.

3. We found different levels of parental awareness about the types of online risk that children encountered. Parental knowledge about children being treated or treating someone else in a hurtful way was not significant in our results. However, it appears that some parents were unaware of their children meeting face-to-face someone they first met online.
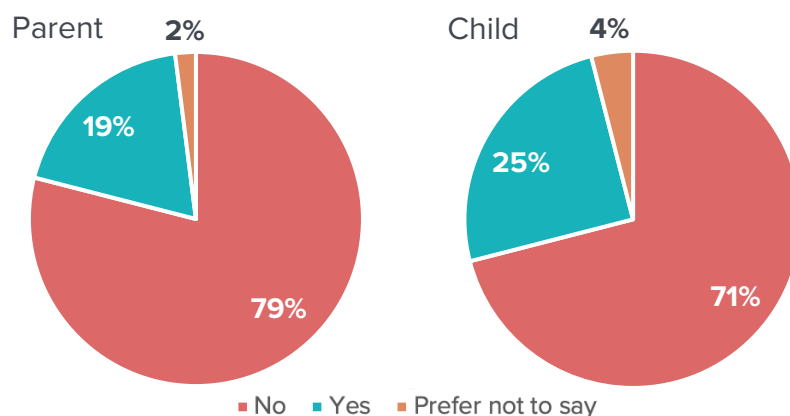
4. Parents, caregivers and whānau of adolescents aged 13-17 seem to significantly underestimate their children's exposure to potentially harmful online content such as violent images, hate speech, self-harm, and experiences of taking drugs, among others.

5. Nearly half of parents in our sample believe they have the skills to help their child deal with risks and harm online. In contrast, only a quarter of them think their child has the ability to cope with bothering experiences on the internet.

6. The empirical findings in this study will help to inform the development of interventions that not only target children but also provide parents, caregivers and whānau with appropriate resources and information to enhance the safety of their children's online experiences.

7. There are, however, unanswered questions on the topic. For instance, further research should look at parental awareness of children's engagement in the exchange of nudes ('sexting'), a phenomenon that is attracting public attention.

Findings

Awareness of children's experiences of online harm

To explore parental awareness of children's online harm, our survey asked participating parents (n=2,061) whether in the last 12 months they were aware of anything online that bothered or upset their child in some way. We explained that the online experience might include something that made their child uncomfortable or scared or was something that they should not have seen. Figure 1 is comprised of two pie charts, one with findings from parents and the second one with children's responses (n=2,061). Overall, 19% of parents said they were aware of an online experience that bothered their child in the prior year. When compared with children's answers (25%), our data show that parents' overall response was lower by six percentage points. While this is not a large difference it is significant and consistent with international research. This finding suggests that some New Zealand parents, caregivers and whānau are not aware of all challenging experiences their children encounter online.

Figure 1. Parents' awareness and their child's self-reported bothering experience online in the prior year

QP6. As far as you are aware, in the past year, has anything happened online that bothered or upset your child in some way? (e.g. made them feel uncomfortable, scared or feel that they shouldn't have seen it)
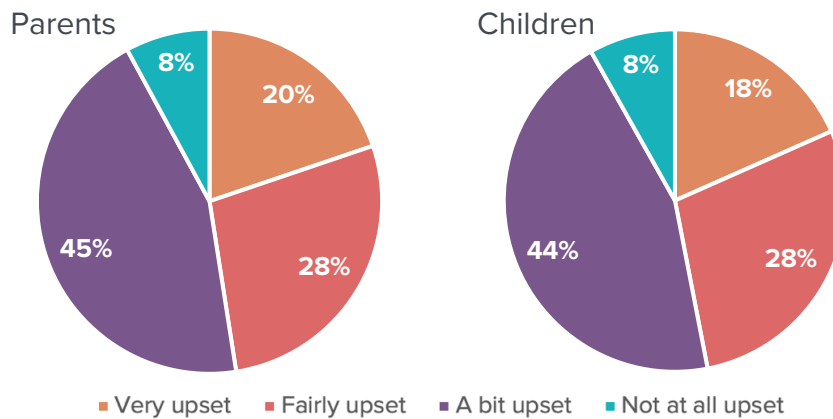
QK9A. In the past year, has anything happened online that bothered you or upset you in some way? (for example, made you feel uncomfortable, scared or that you shouldn't have seen it)

Base: All parents of children aged 9-17 (n=2,061), all children aged 9-17 (n=2,061)

Parents, caregivers and whānau who believed their child had been bothered or upset by an online experience (n=384) were asked about how often they thought this had happened. A large majority (82%) indicated "just once or twice", 13% said "monthly", 3% "weekly" and 1% answered "daily". These percentages were, to a large extent, similar to the answers provided by the children (n=515) who took part in Netsafe's study (see Pacheco & Melhuish, 2020).

These parents were also asked about how upset their child was the last time something happened online that bothered them. In this respect, 45% said their child was "a bit upset" followed by 28% who said they were "fairly upset". Meanwhile, 20% said their child was "very upset" and 8% said the child was "not at all upset". These results are compared with the children's in Figure 2, which shows that differences between parents' and children's responses were not significant.

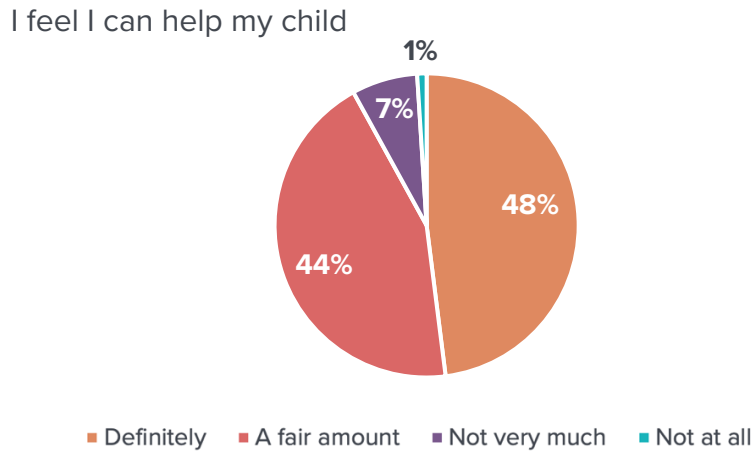**Figure 2. Parents' perception of child's emotional impact**

QP8. The last time something happened online that bothered or upset your child, how upset were they about what happened (if at all)?

QK10. Thinking now about the last time this happened to you, how upset were you about what happened?

Base: parents who have experienced something online which bothered them in the last year (n=391). Children who have experienced something online which bothered them in the last year (n=515).

All parents, caregivers and whānau were asked whether they felt they could help their child to cope with online experiences that bothered or upset them. Just under half of parents said they are "definitely" confident in their ability to help their child cope with things that bother them online – see Figure 3. Parents of girls (51%) and children under 13 years old (51%) were more likely to feel able to help their child in this regard. In contrast, parents who identify as Asian (41%) felt less confident about their abilities to support their child compared to parents from other ethnicities.

Figure 3. Parents' perceptions of their own ability to support their child with a bothering online experience

I feel I can help my child

- 1%
- 7%
- 44%
- 48%

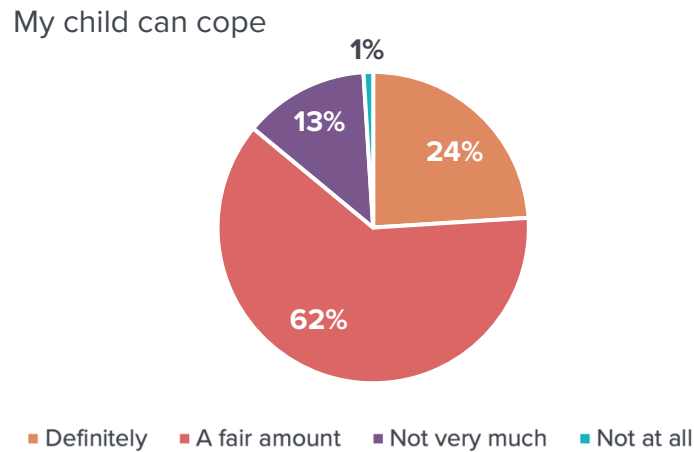■ Definitely   ■ A fair amount   ■ Not very much   ■ Not at all

QP9. Do you feel you can help your child to cope with things online that bother or upset them?

Base: All parents of children aged 9-17 (n=2,061).

All parents were asked about their child's ability to cope with online experiences that upset or bothered them – see Figure 4. Overall, about a quarter said their child could "definitely" cope. This was higher for parents of girls (26%) and parents of children over 15 years old (39%).

Figure 4. Parents' perceptions of their child's ability to cope with bothering online experience

My child can cope

- 1%
- 13%
- 24%
- 62%

■ Definitely   ■ A fair amount   ■ Not very much   ■ Not at all

QP10. Do you think your child can cope with things online that bother or upset them?

Base: All parents of children aged 9-17 (n=2,061).

Awareness of children's experiences of online risks

In this section, we explore in more detail the extent of parents' awareness of children's experiences of and/or engagement in risky behaviours and their exposure to potentially harmful online content. We asked parents, caregivers and whānau whether in the last 12 months their child had experienced any of these five online risks: (a) been treated in a hurtful or nasty way on the internet by someone, (b) met anyone face-to-face that they first got to know on the internet, (c) treated someone else in a hurtful or nasty way on the internet, (d) had contact on the internet with someone that they had not met face-to-face before, and/or (e) someone excluded them from friendship groups.

As shown in Table 1, a quarter of parents said they were aware their child had contact online with someone they had not met face-to-face before. This was followed by awareness of the child being excluded from friendship groups (18%) and treated in a hurtful or nasty way online (17%). Our data also suggest a disparity between parental awareness of online risks and children's own accounts of these experiences. For example, in the prior year, 6% of parents indicated their child met in person someone that they got to know first online. This rate was lower by 4 percentage points compared to children's reported answers. On the other hand, parents' awareness of their child being treated in a hurtful way online was slightly higher than their surveyed children's self-reported experiences.

Table 1. Parental awareness of child's risks online

Type of online risk	Parent	Child
Been treated in a hurtful or nasty way on the internet by someone	17%	15%
Met anyone face-to-face that they first got to know on the internet	6%	10%
Treated someone else in a hurtful or nasty way on the internet	7%	9%
Had contact on the internet with someone that they had not met face-to-face before	26%	38%*
Someone excluded him/her from friendship groups	18%	**

QP11. As far as you are aware, in the past year, have any of these things happened to your child on the internet?

QK7. Have you ever had contact on the internet with someone you have not met face-to-face before? QK8A. In the past year, have you ever met anyone face-to-face that you first got to know on the internet? QK12. In the past year, has anyone ever treated you in a hurtful or nasty way? QK16. When you treated someone in this way, how did it happen? Via a mobile phone or online device (computer, tablet, etc.)

Base: All parents of children aged 9-17 (n=2,061). All children aged 9-17 (n=2,061).

* Participating children reported about their lifetime experience rather than in the last 12 months

** Not asked of children

What is more, in our results, parents of boys (29%) reported a higher occurrence of online contact with a stranger in the prior year than parents of girls (22%). On the other hand, parents of girls (19%) were more likely to report their child was treated in a harmful way online compared to parents of boys (15%). Māori parents (22%) also reported a higher rate in this respect. Meanwhile, 10% of parents of children aged 14

and older said their child met someone face-to-face that they first got to know on the internet, which is higher by four percentage points than the overall rate for all ages. Interestingly, parents of both boys and girls each reported a rate of 7% when asked whether their child had treated someone else in a hurtful way on the internet. In terms of age, the higher rate for this type of behaviour was reported by parents of 15-year-olds (11%). Finally, regarding the child being excluded from friendship groups, it was more common for parents of girls (20%) to report this type of experience than parents of boys (15%).

In another question, we explored parents' awareness of children's exposure to potentially harmful online content. In this respect, the following items were measured: (a) gory or violent images, (b) hate messages that attack certain groups or individuals (e.g. people of a different colour or religion or nationality), (c) their experiences of taking drugs, (d) ways of physically harming or hurting themselves, (e) ways of committing suicide, and (f) ways to be very thin (such as anorexia or bulimia). Data for this question were only collected from parents of children aged 13 to 17 years old (n=1,110) due to the sensitive nature of the question.

As shown in Table 2, parental awareness was, overall, significantly lower compared to children's reported experiences. In this respect, 22% of parents said they were aware their child was exposed to gory or violent images; in contrast, children's responses (36%) were higher by fourteen percentage points. Also, while about 1 in 10 parents indicated their child was exposed to content related to experiences of taking drugs, a quarter of children reported exposure of this kind. Parental awareness about children's exposure to hateful speech online (13%) was significantly lower compared to children's self-reported accounts (27%). See Table 2 for further details.

Table 2. Parental awareness of child's exposure to potentially harmful online content (children aged 13-17)

Type of potentially harmful online content	Parent	Child
Gory or violent images	22%	36%
Hate messages that attack certain groups or individuals (e.g. people of different colour or religion or nationality)	13%	27%
Their experiences of taking drugs	11%	26%
Ways of physically harming or hurting themselves	8%	20%
Ways of committing suicide	8%	17%
Ways to be very thin (such as anorexic or bulimic)	6%	15%

QP12. As far as you are aware, in the past year, has your child seen a website or an online discussion where people talk about or show any of these things? Please do not include sites with positive health or educational advice; just tell us about sites that seem to encourage or help people do these types of damaging things.

QK40. In the past year, have you seen websites or online discussions where people talk about or show these things?

Base: Parents of children aged 13-17 (n=1,110). All children aged 9-17 (n=1,032).

According to our data, it was more common for parents of boys (23%) and Pacific parents (33%) to report that their child has been exposed to gory or violent images online in the past year. Regarding their child's exposure to hateful content online, higher rates were reported by parents of girls (16%), parents of children aged 15 (18%), and Māori parents (17%). In terms of exposure to experiences of taking drugs, parental awareness was higher among parents of girls (13%), parents of children aged 15-17 (15%) as well as Māori and Pacific parents, 15% for each ethnic group. Regarding exposure to self-harming content, parental awareness was higher among parents of 17-year-olds (20%), and Māori parents (11%). On the other hand, higher rates were reported by parents of girls (10%), Pacific parents (13%), and Māori parents (10%) regarding children's exposure to online content about ways of committing suicide. Finally, the occurrence of parental awareness about children accessing online content regarding ways to be very thin was higher among parents of children aged 14 (11%), parents of girls (10%), and Asian parents (8%).

Finally, we explored parental awareness of children's experiences of security and privacy-related risks online. To this end, nine items were measured with all parents of children aged 9-17 (n=2,061). As Table 3 depicts, the most common risk reported by parents was their children being asked to make an in-app purchase when playing an online game (35%). This was more common among parents of 9-year-olds (41%) and parents of boys (39%). Parents also indicated whether their child was spending too much money on online games or in-app purchases (10%) and if their device acquired a virus or spyware (9%). The former, spending too much money, was higher among parents of boys (14%). The latter, their child's device getting a virus or spyware, was more common among parents of 17-year-old teens (14%). Table 3 also compares parental awareness of these types of risks with children's actual self-reported experiences.

Table 3. Parental awareness of child's exposure to security and privacy risks

Type of security and privacy risk	Parent	Child
The devices (e.g. phone, tablet, computer) they use got a virus or spyware	9%	12%
Somebody used their password to access their information or to pretend to be them	6%	10%
Somebody used their personal information in a way they didn't like	4%	7%
Somebody created a page or image about them that was hostile or hurtful	3%	5%
They lost money by being cheated on the internet	3%	4%
They spent too much money on online games or in-app purchases	10%	*
They were asked to make an in-app purchase when playing an online game (e.g. to do well in the game)	35%	*
Someone found out where they were because they tracked their phone or device	3%	*
Someone pretended to be them online to trick other people	5%	*

QP13. As far as you are aware, in the past year, have any of these things happened to your child on the internet?

QK21. In the past year, has any of the following happened to you on the internet?

Base: All parents of children aged 9-17 (n=2,061). All children aged 9-17 (n=2,061).

* Not asked of children

Methodology

As previously mentioned, for this study Netsafe adopted the Global Kids Online project's quantitative research toolkit which provides researchers with guidance to carry out reliable and standardised national research on the opportunities, risks and challenges in the digital age. The findings presented in this study are based on data gathered through two quantitative surveys conducted online between 20 July 2018 and 30 September 2018. The sample of parents and children is broadly representative by age, gender, and ethnicity. Respondents were recruited from online research panels in New Zealand (with recruitment criteria based upon Census data for gender, age, location, and ethnicity). Field work was administered by Colmar Brunton. The contact rate with adults aged between 27 and 59 years old was deliberately increased as these adults are more likely to have a child aged between 9 and 17.

Comparisons between Statistics New Zealand demographic data and the survey data suggested that some post-survey weighting was required to ensure a balanced age-gender profile of children and to correct for an under-representation of Māori and Pacific respondents. Post-survey weights adjusting for demographic variables such as age, gender, and ethnicity profile is a common approach used in social surveys which helps ensure that the final sample is representative of the overall population.

The final weighted sample is representative of the population of children and parents by ethnicity, age, gender, and location. The overall sample size of n=2,061 provides robust nationwide analysis (with maximum margins of error of +/- 2.2%), and also allows a degree of analysis by individual age-group (for example, analysis of 9-year-olds is subject to maximum margins of error of +/- 6.2%). The maximum margin of error when comparing parent and children is 3% when the result is based all respondents from both samples (at 50% agreement).

The key characteristics of the children and parent surveys are described below.

Child survey	Parent survey
- Involved a representative survey of children aged 9-17. - Parental permission obtained for each participating child. - In households containing more than one child in the relevant age-group, a random child was selected for interview. - The child survey was around 20 minutes in length. 2,061 children completed the survey. - The child questionnaire largely focused on their internet use, including their attitudes and experiences online. 1,110 children aged 13-17 completed a further 5-minute questionnaire about their exposure to and sharing of harmful content online (children younger than 13 were excluded from these questions).	- For every child completing the survey, one of their parents or guardians also completed a survey. - The sample of parents was broadly representative of parents of children aged 9 to 17. - The parent survey was around 15 minutes in length. 2,061 parents completed the survey. - The parent questionnaire had a strong focus on internet mediation and rules in the home and perceptions of their child's experiences online.

About Netsafe research

Netsafe carries out research as a wider part of its statutory role as Approved Agency under the Harmful Digital Communications Act 2015 to inform the design and delivery of its resources and services and provide research-based evidence for others working to address online safety issues. The topic of this report sits within the scope of the Act's ten communications principles that together describe a range of potentially harmful types of online communications, and it adds to the range of research-based publications released by Netsafe: https://www.netsafe.org.nz/advice/research/

To contact Netsafe for more information about its research programme or how you can contribute contact: research@netsafe.org.nz

For more information about New Zealand's Harmful Digital Communications Act 2015 and Netsafe's Approved Agency role visit: https://www.netsafe.org.nz/hdc-act

About Global Kids Online

This report is part of Netsafe's research project Ngā taiohi matihiko o Aotearoa - New Zealand Kids Online, and our third publication as a member of Global Kids Online.

Global Kids Online is an international network of academics, social researchers, and experts dedicated to the study of children's rights, risks and opportunities in the digital age. Its purpose is to generate rigorous cross-national research-based evidence regarding the way children access and use the internet and to understand the risks and opportunities of their interaction with digital tools. Netsafe has implemented the project's quantitative research toolkit in New Zealand, enabling it to carry out reliable and standardised national research with children and their parents on the opportunities, risks and protective factors of children's internet use.

Global Kids Online is an initiative of UNICEF's Office of Research-Innocenti, the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), and EU Kids Online. Find out more at: https://globalkidsonline.net/

What's next?

Netsafe will be publishing more findings from Ngā taiohi matihiko o Aotearoa – New Zealand Kids Online about parental mediation of children's digital experiences. To learn more about this and our other research work contact: research@netsafe.org.nz

Netsafe provides a collection of online safety resources free and available to all New Zealanders at: https://www.netsafe.org.nz/the-kit/resource-centre/

Netsafe also provides resources specifically developed for parents at: https://www.netsafe.org.nz/parenttoolkit/

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