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Excessive internet use among Australian children

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Background

This brief report builds upon the findings of the EU Kids Online project's work into Excessive Internet Use among the 19,834 European children (aged 11-16) participating in that study. It compares the European data with the much smaller cohort of 300 Australian children (aged 11-16) who were researched in the parallel AU Kids Online project. In both cases the children were selected according to a random sampling strategy. The full EU Kids Online report includes the research methodology and can be accessed via: [http://www2.lse.ac.uk/media@lse/research/EUKidsOnline/EU%20Kids%20II%20\(2009-11\)/EUKidsOnlineIIRReports/D4FullFindings.pdf](http://www2.lse.ac.uk/media@lse/research/EUKidsOnline/EU%20Kids%20II%20(2009-11)/EUKidsOnlineIIRReports/D4FullFindings.pdf)

The full AU Kids Online report can be accessed via:

<http://cultural-science.org/journal/index.php/culturalscience/article/view/49/129>

The EU Kids Online Excessive Internet Use report can be found at <http://www2.lse.ac.uk/media@lse/research/EUKidsOnline/EU%20Kids%20Online%20report.s.aspx>

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Summary of EU Kids Online Excessive Internet Report findings

True excessive internet use, where a child notes that they have experienced all of the five symptoms of excessive internet use investigated, is rare. Across the 25 European countries involved in the EU Kids Online project, the average is 1% of children who have experienced all of these behaviours. There is variation between these European countries, however, with 5% of children in Cyprus indicating that they may engage in excessive internet use, compared with nine countries where the proportion of excessive internet users rounds down to 0%. In four countries – the UK, Ireland, Portugal and Turkey – 2% of children are identified as excessive internet users. This compares with Australia, where 2% of children have also experienced all five indicators of excessive internet use. No countries report a 3% or 4% incidence, and the average rate is 1% overall.

Given that child-reported excessive internet use is comparatively rare, how do we account for parents' common perceptions that their children overuse the internet? In part, arguments around internet use and time spent online can represent the usual family dynamics of living in a household with older children and teenagers who seek greater autonomy and independence. Further, disagreements around restrictions may indicate a child whose friends are allowed greater internet access, and thus the child is arguing about relativities, rather than seeking to defend a high dependence upon internet use.

Occasionally, however, there is a genuine problem and the EU Kids Online research indicates that there is a complex relationship between excessive internet use and other emotional, social and psychological issues faced by the small percentage of children who might be

classified as excessive users of the internet. These children tend to be older, to have emotional problems and to be ‘sensation-seeking’. In such cases it is unclear whether excessive internet use might be a coping mechanism for the child whereby their use of the internet helps them deal with other troubling issues in their lives, or whether their internet use is a causal factor in creating those other issues. Where a child faces a range of emotional, psychological and social challenges, including excessive internet use, then it is important to seek professional help: maybe from a school counselor, a medical practitioner or a clinical psychologist. However, if a child’s only problem is excessive internet use, and their family and friendship relations are otherwise fine, then the internet use by itself is unlikely to be a major problem, or indicate cause for significant concern.

Based on the EU Kids Online research, the advice to parents worried about excessive internet use is to consider their child’s offline behaviours as well as their online behaviours, and to act early if the child indicates they are experiencing significant emotional problems. Such actions include opening channels of communication between parents and the child and seeking of outside support if necessary. The EU Kids Online Excessive Internet Use report indicates that simply restricting time spent online can ignore the causes of behaviour and is consequently a less productive way to deal with the issue. It is also likely to prevent the child using the internet in positive ways that might help address some of the problems they face.

The EU Kids Online research indicates that the ways in which parents regulate their children’s internet use is a comparatively weak factor in explaining whether or not a child becomes an excessive user of the internet. Even so, there is some evidence that parents that involve themselves in their children’s internet activities make a positive difference. Such involvement might be through helping the child with skill development, talking with them about what they do online and generally showing an interest in the child’s internet activities. Such involvement becomes more important where a child has been bothered by an online experience, such as by being bullied online.

How does the Australian research compare with the European findings?

Figure 1 (below) indicates that Australian children aged (11-16) are more likely than their European counterparts to say they have ‘very often’ experienced the five behaviours investigated as indicators of excessive internet use. They are also more likely to say that they have ‘fairly often’ experienced these behaviours. Even so:

- 42% of Australian children have ‘never/ almost never’ caught themselves surfing when they were not really interested;
- 45% have ‘never/almost never’ spent less time than they felt they should with family, friends or doing schoolwork because of the time they spent on the internet;
- 48% have ‘never/almost never’ felt bothered when they could not be on the internet;
- 51% have ‘never/almost never’ tried unsuccessfully to spend less time on the internet and
- 79% have ‘never/almost never’ gone without eating or sleeping because of the internet.

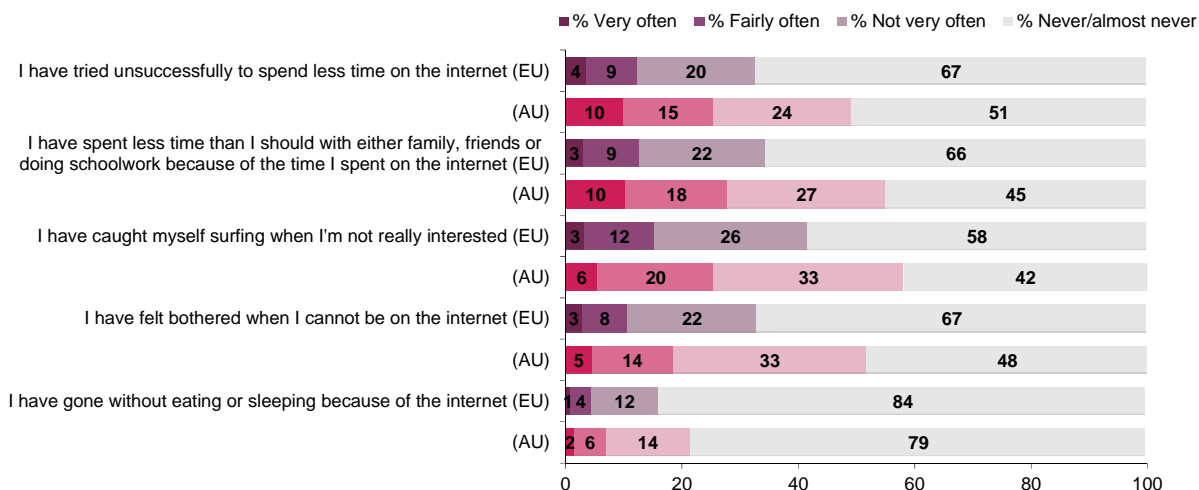


Figure 1: Excessive internet use among European and Australian children (percentages)

When we use Figures 2a and 2b, below, to compare the proportions of Australian children indicating they have no experience of the five behaviours associated with excessive internet use with those from the EU study, we see that there are a range of differences between the AU Kids Online data and the EU Kids Online data. (Incidentally, the number of Australian families where the head of the household has an education level which stopped at Primary School or below is so small that this line of data is not reliable.)

The European data indicates that older children are at greater risk of excessive internet use, but the Australian data demonstrates that children aged 13 are most likely to say they experience five out of the five excessive internet use behaviours. Seven percent of 13-year old Australians say this, dropping to 5% of 14 year olds and 1% of 15 year olds. In the 11, 12 and 16 year old age groups the proportion of children experiencing all five indicators of excessive internet use drops to 0% (which means that it is less than ½% of respondents in that age group). Similarly, whereas there is little indication of a gender difference in the EU Kids Online data, with 1% of boys and girls equally registering all five behaviours, in Australia 3% of boys say this compared with 1% of girls. Gender may be a factor in the Australian case.

If we look at the children who experience one or more of the five behaviours across the two studies, there is little difference between boys and girls in both cases, although the relative proportions indicate a variation (28% of girls and 30% of boys in the EU Kids Online study, and 49% of girls and 50% of boys in the AU Kids Online research). The Australian data also indicate that early teenage years and transition to high school may be associated with experiences of excessive internet use behavior. This differs from the European case where it is older children who are more likely to have experienced all five indicators of excessive internet use. In Australia, from aged 12 onwards, age is associated with the likelihood of a higher proportion of Australian children experiencing one or more behaviours indicative of excessive internet use. This is true of:

- 35% of 12 year olds;
- 39% of 13 year olds;
- 52% of 14 year olds;
- 62% of 15 year olds and
- 68% of 16 year olds.

In the AU Kids Online study there is some indication that children from families where the head of the house completed their education at secondary school level are more likely to experience all five behaviours than is the case with children from families where parents have been educated to tertiary level. There was no significant difference between the secondary and tertiary groups, however, in the proportions of children without any indicators of excessive use, and those with one or more indicators. In the EU Kids Online data, the greater education of parents was associated with children being slightly more likely to experience one or more indicators of excessive internet use.

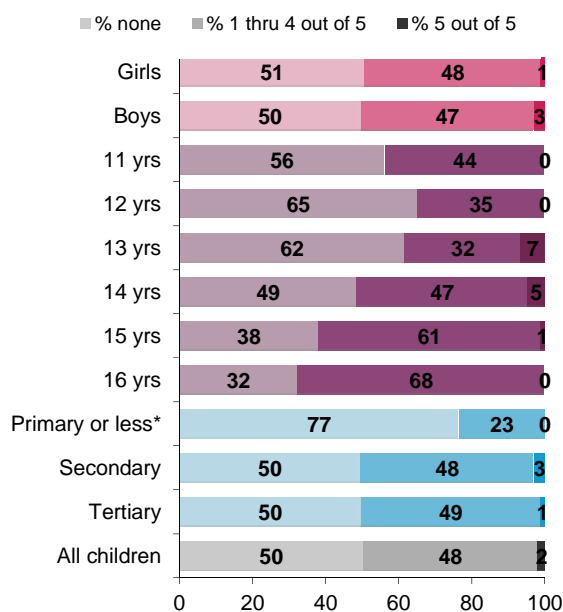


Figure 2a: Number of excessive use indicators out of five among Australian children

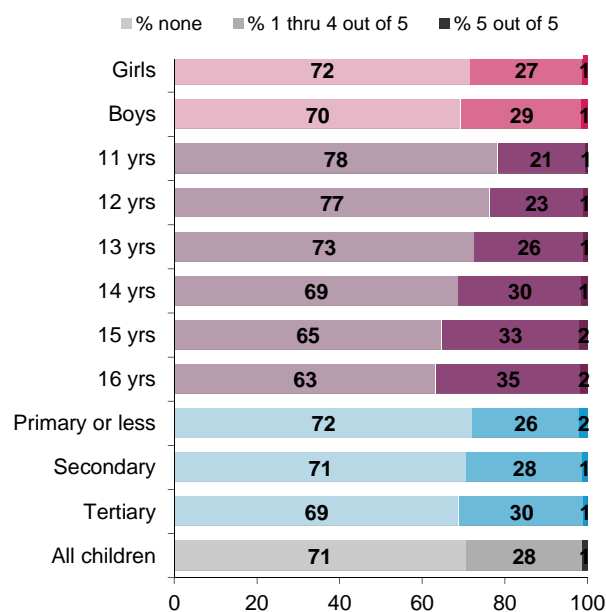


Figure 2b: Number of excessive use indicators out of five among European children

Turning to Australia's comparative ranking in relation to the 25 nations in the EU Kids Online study, we see that children in Australia are more likely than children in any of the 25 European nations to have experienced one or more behaviours associated with excessive internet use:

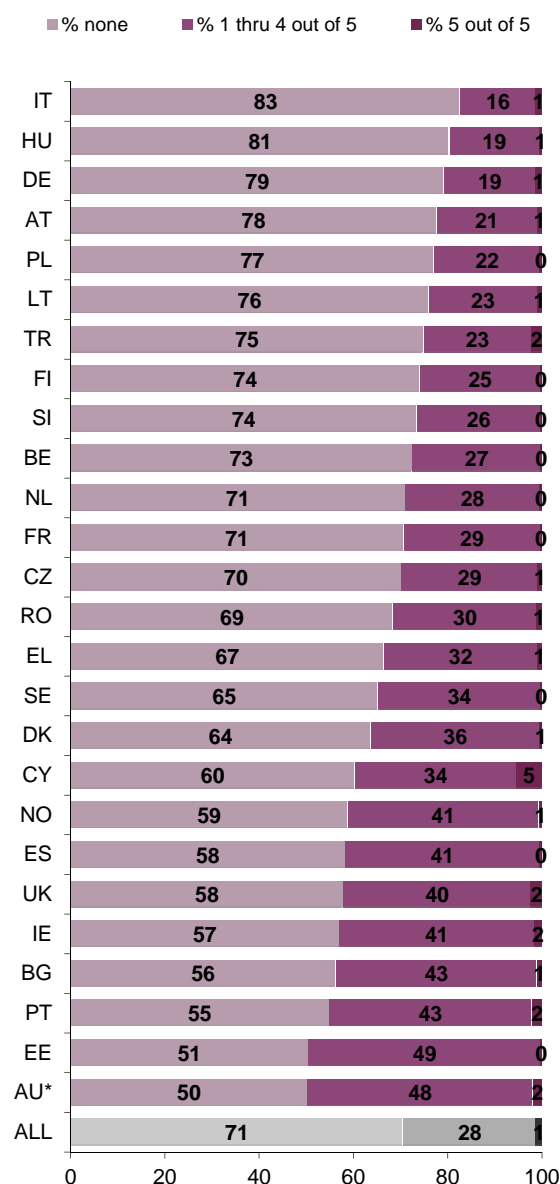


Figure 3: Number of excessive use indicators out of five by country

Conclusion

Although excessive internet use is rare, there are some indications that Australian boys are more likely to experience this condition than girls, and this seems to be more of an issue in 13-14 year olds in Australia than with 15-16 year olds. In both respects the Australian data differs from that collected in the EU Kids Online research. It must be remembered that these are self-reported behaviours and not comparative behaviours: so a child might spend 40 hours online per week and not feel that that is excessive, while another might believe that 20 hours a week is impacting upon their schoolwork and their relationships with family and friends. Where a parent is concerned about their child's internet use, the situation is only likely to be serious if the child's online behavior is coupled with offline emotional problems. In most cases, children will 'grow out' of feeling that they use the internet excessively and this is indicated across the Australian age range of 11-16 with behaviours and experiences associated with excessive internet use peaking at 13-14.