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contrasting the perspectives of children  
and parents**

## Book section

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## **Chapter Six**

### **Regulating the internet at home: Contrasting the perspectives of children and parents**

**Sonia Livingstone and Magdalena Bober**

#### **Opportunities and risks as children go online**

Young people's access to the internet is steadily increasing. Three quarters of 9-19 year-olds in the UK had accessed the internet from a computer at home in Spring 2004 (Livingstone and Bober, 2004), this figure being among the highest in Europe (Eurobarometer, 2004) and far higher than among UK adults generally (49% of UK households had internet access in December 2003; ONS, 2004). The ways in which the internet is rapidly becoming embedded in everyday life is attracting widespread attention, raising questions about access and inequalities, the nature and quality of use, the implications for children's social and educational development and the balance between online opportunities and risks for children and their families.

In academic and policy debates over the management of internet diffusion and appropriation, children and young people tend to be regarded with ambivalence, being seen both as 'the digital generation', pioneers in developing online competencies, yet also vulnerable and potentially at risk. Parents seem to share this ambivalence, especially given their children's apparently greater expertise with the internet. Thus, parents are keen to improve their children's educational prospects but also concerned about online dangers (Facer et al, 2003; Livingstone, 2002; Turow and Nir, 2000). As locations and platforms for internet access diversify, domestic management and regulation of children's internet access and use is increasingly challenging. No longer can parents monitor a single computer in the living room. One fifth (19%) of 9-19 year-olds have internet access in their bedroom (particularly boys, middle class children and teenagers), and fewer than half of the computers online in homes with children are located in a public room (Livingstone and Bober, 2004).

The opportunities afforded by the internet are considerable, though to a fair extent still untapped at present. But media attention, and hence public concern, more often alerts the public to the potential risks and dangers, stimulating discussions of how to regulate or restrict children's internet access and use. These opportunities include creative/ content production, civic/ political expression and deliberation, community involvement and activism, gaining valued technological expertise, advancing careers or employment, obtaining personal/ health/ sexual advice, accessing educational/ information resources, participating in specialist/ identity/ fan forums and sharing a

common culture. The risks, on the other hand, include exposure to illegal content, contact with paedophiles (e.g. via grooming in chat rooms), exposure to harmful or offensive content, encountering extreme (sexual) violence or racist/ hate material, being open to commercial exploitation and to manipulation or misinformation, invasions of privacy and unwelcome contact (spam, viruses, etc). While many of these opportunities and risks are not new to society, they are, arguably, more immediate and more widespread – especially for children – than was the case for previously-new media (Fliehy, 2003; Livingstone, 2002). In terms of media regulation, therefore, it may be that the stakes have never been higher, as society seeks to strike a balance between the failure to minimise the dangers and the failure to maximise the opportunities.

This chapter examines the activities of parents and children in balancing these risks and opportunities as they seek ways of using the internet meaningfully within their daily lives. We caution, however, that researching issues of domestic regulation often pushes at the limits of research methodology, for they relate to the private, often unnoticed, sometimes secret or illicit practices of everyday life. This raises ethical challenges and measurement difficulties, risking answers which are more socially desirable than honest, more ‘official’ than actual, more context-dependent than universal (Greig and Taylor, 1999; Livingstone and Lemish, 2001). The research reported here, drawing on the *UK Children Go Online* (UKCGO) project, could only attempt to address this through sensitive questioning, cautious interpretation of answers and triangulating multiple data sources while recognising the complex nature of families’ interpretations of everyday, sometimes contested, practices.

### **Framing policy-relevant research**

As social institutions, activities and services increasingly move online, the regulation of internet access and use is of growing concern across many domains, including education, consumer law, child-protection, employment skills, crime, the arts, e-commerce and policies for media literacy and for social in/exclusion. Regulatory responsibilities for online risks and opportunities must be apportioned to stakeholders dispersed across government, industry, education, employers, police, child welfare services, parents and children themselves. Questions concern not only how to apportion such responsibilities but also how to ensure coordination across them. Within this, a key point of contestation is how far to devolve responsibility from the state to the industry (via self-regulation) or to the individual citizen (here, mainly parents, though also children). In seeking to inform these deliberations and the policy tools and outcomes that result (e.g. government regulation, industry codes of practice, public education and awareness programmes, media literacy training), a detailed empirical account of the emerging domestic practices of regulation is vital.

Empirical research suggests that the very breadth of activities and services supported by the internet gives rise to ambivalence among parents, much more so than for other media. Parents worry that internet use may lead their children to become isolated from others, expose them to sexual and/or violent images, displace more worthwhile activities and risk their privacy. At the same time, most believe that the internet can help their child do better at school and help them learn worthwhile things. Indeed, this is why they acquire domestic access in the first place (Buckingham, 2002; Livingstone and Bovill, 2001; Turow and Nir, 2000). So, there is a perhaps unprecedented challenge for parents as they introduce into their homes a medium that offers such great benefits that they can hardly miss out and yet risks such great dangers that they can hardly give it house room. While in the early days some ambivalence also attached to television, the opportunities and risks online are rather more extreme. The technology is also much more difficult to manage, thereby adding to their burden. From the early research on domestic internet use, much of it primarily qualitative and small-scale, a research agenda is emerging (Livingstone, 2003). Research questions include:

- How are children accessing and using the internet? Does their use fit with societal expectations?
- How are parents regulating their children's use? Does this parallel or differ from the regulation of previously-new media?
- When and why do children's and parents' interests, practices and understandings coincide or conflict in relation to the internet?
- What opportunities and risks are children encountering online? What challenges do parents face? What policies would support both children and parents?

In pursuing research that may inform policy, we do not mean to position ourselves simply on the administrative side of an administrative/ critical opposition (Lazarsfeld, 1941). Rather, we hope to be reflexively self-critical regarding the possible uses of the research and to adopt an independent critical stance towards the policy agenda itself. We must leave it to the reader to judge whether we have achieved this.

### **Devolving regulation to parents**

As the research agenda moves forward, so too does the policy agenda. In the UK, an early struggle occurred over whether internet governance should rely on state-regulation or self-regulation and so whether it should be top-down or 'lighter-touch' regulation, the latter winning out at least for the moment. As the draft Communications Bill (eventually, the Communications Act of 2003) was being debated, the UK Government position seemed to be in support of the free market and against 'regulating' internet content. When the new regulator (Ofcom - the Office for Communications) was created, the Secretary of State in the Department of Media, Culture and Sport, Tessa Jowell (2003), stated, 'OFCOM must now deliver a new regulatory system that will be light touch and unobtrusive wherever possible, but decisive and robust wherever

necessary'. A couple of years on, the risks faced by young users of the internet are increasingly apparent to a concerned public, and the policy of not regulating content seems less straightforward (Currie, 2005). One policy response is to bring the issue under the rubric of 'media literacy'. Hence, Ofcom's consultation document on media literacy stated:

With increasing complexity of technology and wider media choice people will have to take more responsibility for what they and their children see and hear on screen and online .... We will all become gatekeepers for content coming into our homes. (Ofcom, 2004)

Although it is as yet unclear whether individuals can or will bear this responsibility successfully, or even what 'successfully' would mean in this context, the present approach – for a range of political, economic and social reasons – is to build parental regulation into UK (and international) policy, in effect devolving the regulation of children's access and use onto parents. The reasons for this development are many, and are worthy of critical analysis in themselves. They return us to some long-standing struggles, hardly new to the internet, of cultural protectionists versus civil libertarians, communitarians versus market liberals, technologists versus social reformers, commercial expansionism versus the ethic of public service and nation states versus the emerging institutions of global governance. The uneasy alliance between the civil liberties lobby and the pornography industry complicates matters, as does the unwelcome turn of events by which child welfare activists find themselves co-opted by the conservative forces of the moral majority. Meanwhile the state is subject to the buffeting of much bigger forces. By contrast with the normative and cultural contexts that shaped the regulatory institutions and norms for previous media (press, film, broadcasting, etc), in the case of the internet there is considerable pressure on governments to achieve near-universal access to the technology to support economic and social goals, together with the considerable challenge of managing national responses to a global technology and the difficulty of developing regulation for a technology that changes rapidly and flexibly, often precisely in response to regulatory initiatives.

Early moves 'to delegate responsibility and authority downwards' were evident in the European Commission's 'Green Paper on the Convergence of Telecommunications, Media and Information Technology Sectors' (1997). This sought to instigate a shift from direct control by government to governance through 'action at a distance' by regulating parents, for example through discursively-established norms of 'good parenting' and 'appropriate children's conduct' (Oswell, 1999: 52). It would seem that devolving responsibility to parents offers a policy solution for some otherwise intractable problems, avoiding the need for politically-difficult intervention in the market while promoting a discourse of individual empowerment and consumer choice. Put positively, the result is an expectation that individual actors – parents, teachers, even children – will become informed through the dissemination of appropriate expertise and so empowered to regulate

themselves and each other in their internet use. However, as Harden (2000: 46) more caustically observes, ‘while anxieties about risk may be shaped by public discussion, it is as individuals that we cope with these uncertainties’. Focusing then on the policy consequences for individuals, this chapter asks what it means for families that their once-private practices of using and managing media use in the home are increasingly a matter of public – and commercial – regulatory policy. We examine some of the ways in which parents and children are responding to this greater responsibility to take charge of the media entering their homes, and we identify some of the emerging difficulties for children, parents and policy-makers.

### **Parental strategies of domestic regulation**

The internet is proving challenging, even frustrating, for parents and children as they attempt to fit it into their homes and their lives. These challenges include practicalities (such as affordability, knowing what to buy, installing and upgrading, etc), questions of use (involving social capital or social support) and, more subtly, cultural and cognitive issues relating to media, or internet, literacy (gaining the benefits and avoiding the risks, becoming a producer as well as a receiver of content, critically evaluating the information accessed, etc). While parents’ strategies for managing their children’s use of the internet are emerging, so too are children’s tactics for evading, or resisting (de Certeau, 1984), this family ‘game’ being further complicated by the fact that children often have more confidence and expertise with new media than do their parents.

Academic literature divides regulation into positive regulation (encouraging, facilitating or requiring certain activities) and negative regulation (discouraging, impeding or prohibiting certain activities). Research on parental mediation of children’s use of media, conducted mainly in relation to television, shows that parents tend to combine positive and negative strategies, from the relatively open, non-directional strategy of parent-child co-viewing or sharing the media experience to more restrictive or controlling strategies (Van Der Bulck and Van Den Bergh, 2000; Bybee et al, 2982; Dorr et al, 1989; Lin and Atkin, 1989). Parents may try to influence their child’s reactions through discussion or by simply sharing media time with the child, and they may seek to control access to media and, hence, time spent on that activity. Clearly, these strategies vary in their aims: some treat the media as, potentially, a positive influence on their children; others are designed to protect children from possible media harms. In relation to television, a variety of factors has been found which influence parental mediation of children’s viewing, and such mediation has, in turn, been shown to have various consequences – for media use, media effects, consumer socialisation and media literacy (Abelman, 1985; Austin, 1993).

Critics of this research tradition argue that it takes an adult-centred approach, focused more on parents’ concerns and practices than on children’s interests or desires, often assuming that parents’ and children’s perspectives

on domestic regulation will concur. By contrast, a child-centred approach makes no such assumption, instead including within the research design the possibility of adult-child divergence, particularly in relation to children's interests and concerns with their autonomy, privacy, play and rights to self-expression (James et al, 1998; Corsaro, 1997; Livingstone, 1998). Hence, a 'child-centred' approach regards children as active and interpretative (though not necessarily highly sophisticated or media-savvy) agents who appropriate and shape the meanings and consequences of the 'new' through a series of established and novel social semiotic practices. Other critics are concerned about the implicit agenda at stake, suggesting that this is motivated by moral panics about technology and about the mass public and that, in response, it constructs a false ideal of the innocent and vulnerable child which then misleads research and policy (Buckingham, 2002; Drotner, 2000; Osswell, 2002).

### **The challenge of conducting a risk assessment**

Let us turn to the empirical. Within the regulatory discourses of government and policy makers, it seems that, implicitly if not explicitly, advice to parents treats assessing the risks faced by a particular child as straightforward. Yet problematically, since parental and other regulation is based on a risk assessment, if parents underestimate children's risks, they may devote less effort to minimising these risks than if their perceptions were veridical. Perhaps there is, unfortunately, no veridical account to be obtained here. However, one of the main findings of our UKCGO survey is a considerable discrepancy between the accounts that parents and children give of children's experiences online. While parents and children would not be expected to tell identical stories of childhood experiences, since many factors shape their differing perspective on everyday family life, these discrepancies are both systematic and substantial.

**Insert Figure 1 about here:  
Have you/has your child done these things on the internet?**

Strikingly, for a wide range of risky experiences, parents systematically underestimate the frequency with which their children encounter such risks (see Figure 1). Or, to put this rather more cautiously, for we cannot know 'the truth' of the matter, children report considerably higher levels of problematic online experiences than do their parents. For example, nearly half (46%) of 9-19 year-olds who go online at least once a week say that they have given out personal information while only 5% of parents think their child has given out such information. Similarly, while 57% of these young people have come into contact with pornography on the internet, only 16% of their parents believe this to have occurred. And again, while one in three say they have received nasty or sexual comments online, only 7% of

parents think that their child has received sexual comments, and only 4% think that their child has been bullied online.

Possibly these differences are methodological, with parents and children applying different criteria to the definition of ‘pornography’ or ‘hateful comments’, for example. Even if this is the whole explanation, the regulatory challenge as perceived by parents would not match that drawn out of children’s own accounts. However, the scale and range of these discrepancies suggests that, in some key ways, parents are unaware of children’s need for discussion, guidance and, in some cases, restrictions on their internet use.

### **Setting domestic rules**

Given these discrepancies in assessing the occurrence of problematic incidents, should one ask parents or children about the occurrence of equally subtle domestic practices? These practices occur in the privacy of the home, and they are not always welcomed or even recognised by children, yet parents do not always practice as they preach. Thus, while we have reasons to question the accounts of both children and parents, the UKCGO survey asked both 9-17 year-olds who use the internet at home at least once a week and their parents about, firstly, the rules of internet use and, secondly, the practices of internet use, again in the hope that, if their views did not coincide, the discrepancies would in themselves prove informative.

**Insert Figure 2 about here:**

#### **Are there any things which you (your child) are not allowed to do on the internet?**

Restrictive forms of guidance appear a little more common than evaluative or conversational forms of guidance: 42% of children aged 9-17 who live with their parents say that they have to follow rules about for how long and 35% about when they can go online. Parents agree with their children, for 43% of parents claim to have set up rules for how much time their child can spend on the internet. The balance of rules overall reveals parental priorities, assuming that they set rules for those activities which concern them. Some internet uses are clearly considered worthwhile or, more likely, safe and so less in need of restrictive regulation (e.g. games, email, instant messaging) while others, that parents consider unsafe, are regulated more (e.g. shopping, privacy, chat, some forms of interactivity).

When we pursued these rules in more detail, we found that not only do children perceive a higher incidence of risky problematic experiences online than do their parents, but conversely, parents perceive a higher degree of domestic regulation than do their children. Figure 2 shows that parents claim a greater degree of domestic control than their children recognise. For example, 86% of parents do not allow their children to give out personal information online, but only 49% of children say this is the case; 20% of children claim they must not fill out forms online, compared with 57% of parents who do not

allow this; 62% of parents forbid their children to use chat rooms, but only 40% of children acknowledge this rule.

In short, asking parents and children the same questions about domestic regulation of the internet does not produce the same answers. Doubtless, the truth lies somewhere in between. We may conclude that parents are more complacent than is wise, assuming that rules are being followed when they are not and assuming that rules are not needed when they are. It is also likely that children and parents differ in their conception of rules, especially since rules are often implicit and may not be complied with. Parents may stress the ‘general’ or ‘official’ rule of the household, which holds even while exceptions are made. Children may instead reflect on actual circumstances, not identifying a ‘rule’ if it is occasionally broken. Whether a greater degree of understanding between parents and children is desirable or achievable or not, regulatory discourses should not presume either to be the norm.

### **Implementing domestic regulatory practices**

Rules are one thing, practice is often different. In relation to the internet, parents may regulate through social and/ or technical strategies.

#### **Insert Figure 3 about here: What parents do when child is using the internet**

According to children, one third say that their parents play a direct social role in supporting their internet use – by helping (32%), suggesting websites for the child to visit (32%) and generally sharing in the experience of using the internet by sitting at the computer with the child (31%); however, up to two thirds do not. One third of 9-17 year-olds also report a variety of indirect monitoring activities, saying that their parents know what they (the child) are doing online (31%), how to check what sites they have visited (30%) and how to access their (the child’s) email (15%). However, only a fifth say that their parents stay in the same room (22%) or keep an eye on the screen (17%) when they are online, and few parents, they say, actually check up on their emails (4%) or history file of websites visited (9%).

Parents give a somewhat different account of the social context of children’s internet use. They are more likely to claim a direct role in sharing and supporting their child on the internet: 81% say they ask what the child is doing on the internet (compared with only 25% of children), 57% say they help the child online (compared with 32% of children), and 32% claim to sit with the child when online (and here children agree – 31%). Parents also stress an indirect social monitoring role: 63% say they keep an eye on the screen (compared with 17% of children), and 50% say they stay in the same room when the child is online (compared with 22% of children). Parents less often claim technical monitoring, though they do this more than children realise: 41% of parents say they check the computer later to see what the child has

been doing (compared with only 9% of children), and 25% claim to check their children's emails (only 4% of children seem aware of this).

Not all regulatory practices are socially managed, and considerable reliance is being placed by government and industry on technical forms of management – filtering, monitoring, rating, and so forth. Children can be positive about filtering, as Emma (10, from Hertfordshire), tells us: 'It restricts the websites that you can go on. My uncle set it up for me. And it stops people emailing you like nasty emails ... It deletes their email, so if like really bad people email you, it changes your email for you automatically.' Other young people are more sceptical about the effectiveness of filtering, such as this group of 14-15 year-old boys from Essex:

- Jim            Filtering, yeah, sometimes, yeah, it filters out what you don't want it to filter.
- Sean          You type in bad language or something or something to do with pornography, and if you go to Google, and you want pictures of Essex – because it's got sex at the end, it won't let you on it. That's what happened with the school.

Moreover, we found considerable confusion regarding the implementation of filtering technology. In homes with internet access, 35% of children say that filtering software has been installed on their computer, and 46% of parents claim this. However, 23% of parents say they don't know if a filter is installed, and only 15% of parents who have used the internet say that they know how to install a filter.

Overall, most parents whose child has home access to the internet claim that they directly share in and/or support their child on the internet, though their children are less likely to say that this occurs. Parents also claim to monitor their child's internet use indirectly or discreetly, though again children appear less aware of this. However, one in ten (10%) say they do not know what their child does on the internet, and a fifth (18%) say they do not know how to help their child use the internet safely. This suggests a clear need to improve and extend the reach of awareness and internet literacy initiatives.

### **The practical difficulties of parental regulation**

At least two difficulties undermine parents' attempts to regulate their children's internet use. The first is that while parents are responsible for their children's safety, they must also manage their children's growing independence and rights to privacy, something that children themselves feel strongly about. The second is that, as parents and children agree, children are more often more expert on the internet than their parents.

On privacy, our qualitative work shows that children relish the opportunities the internet affords them for identity play, relationships, exploration and communication, and they may not wish to share this experience with their parents. Despite government advice, it is not accidental that many computers are located in private rather than public spaces at home,

making regulation more difficult and intrusive than it would be otherwise. Nor is it irrelevant that children can appear silly, naughty or even deceitful in relation to rules of media use. As household members with comparatively little power, these and other tactics represent a means to a valued end, that of maintaining one's privacy (Livingstone, *in press*). Indeed, the survey shows that wherever the computer is placed – in a private or public room – children seek to use the internet in privacy, with four fifths (79%) of those with home access mostly using the internet alone.

Although online privacy is more commonly discussed in relation to invasions of privacy from commercial organisations (Montgomery, 1996), children are more concerned about maintaining their privacy from people that they know, unsurprisingly given the nature of at least some of their online communication. Amir (15, from London) explains, 'My parents don't ask me "ooh, what did you go on?" because I wouldn't like it if I came from school, came home, and they search my pockets. I'd say "what are you doing – that's personal". What if I had something I didn't want them to see? Just like I wouldn't search my mum's bag.' Consider too the conversation among this group of 17 year-olds from Manchester:

- |             |   |
|-------------|---|
| Stuart      | Good thing about the internet at home is you're free to access anything you want.   |
| Steve       | My mum says, as long as she doesn't get charged on the phone bill on top of the internet, she doesn't care what I go on.  |
| Interviewer | Does your mum sometimes check what you're doing?  |
| Steve       | She'll check what I'm doing. But most of the time I'm just in chat rooms or doing email.  |
| Stuart      | Good thing about search engines, they can't actually trace what website you've been on, if you actually learn to search for it.   |
| Nina        | That's what I do.   |
| Stuart      | 'Cause my mum used to check what websites I've been on, but she doesn't now, so like...   |
| Interviewer | What do you mean? You go to a website through the search engine?  |
| Stuart      | Yeah, you like, um, bring up the Ask Jeeves, shall we say, then you type in the website you want to go on – say like Lycos – you type in Lycos in the actual bar, and that brings Lycos up. Do it that way, it's untraceable. |
| Nina        | You just like don't want your mum spying on you and knowing everything about you.   |
| Steve       | Because you want your independence, really, you don't want your mum looking over your shoulder checking what you're doing all the time.   |

Young people's freedom and independence are here contrasted with parents who spy or check up on you. Within the peer group, young people share tactics to maintain their privacy, regardless of any justification parents may have for such a monitoring role.

Asked by the UKCGO survey which of a list of activities they mind their parents doing, two thirds (69%) of 9-17 year-olds who use the internet at least once a week say that they mind their parents restricting or monitoring their internet use, including checking their email (42%), blocking websites (28%), checking their internet use without their knowledge (30%) or even with their knowledge (15%). The survey findings also confirm that parents and children can easily fall into a kind of tactical dance in which the more parents attempt to monitor or control their children's internet use, the more children are minded to evade such control. We asked 12-19 year-olds with home access who use the internet at least weekly if they had taken any actions to protect their privacy online and offline. While 35% say they have not done this, two thirds have taken some action to protect their privacy online, both from outsiders and from those they know. Thus, 38% report having deleted emails so no one else could read them, 38% have minimised a window when someone else came into the room, 17% have deleted the history file, 17% have deleted unwanted cookies, 12% have hidden or mislabelled files to keep them private, and 12% have used someone else's password without their permission.

The result is that parents and children are positioned as opponents in a struggle rather than in cooperation to resolve an externally-generated problem – a risky technology. When Amir (15, from London) points out that, ‘Talking to your parents about the internet is bad for you. They might try and think about taking the internet off your computer, which isn’t good for us’, he makes it plain that the power of parents to restrict children’s pleasures undermines the discussion necessary for a more cooperative and open style of regulation. In some cases these struggles result in conflict: 19% of parents and 9% of children acknowledge that the internet occasions conflict or annoyance between parents and children.

This tactical dance is made more complicated by children’s confidence and skills in internet use. The intriguing and even unusual way in which internet expertise reverses the traditional generation gap, positioning parents as naïve and children as authorities, poses a second difficulty for parental regulation. Quite simply, many parents lack the expertise, especially by comparison with their children, to intervene in or mediate their internet use, whether technically (e.g. by installing a filter) or socially (by discussing contents or services with their child). Nina (17, from Manchester), speaks for many when she says, ‘My dad hasn’t even got a clue. Can’t even work the mouse ... so I have to go on the internet for him.’

In the UKCGO survey, we asked parents and children to rate their internet skills. Unsurprisingly, children usually consider themselves more expert than their parents. Even among internet users who go online daily or weekly, 19% of parents describe themselves as beginners compared with only 7% of children, and only 16% of parents consider themselves advanced compared with 32% of children. While most parents and children are confident in their searching skills, among parents only one in three knows how

to set up an email account, and only a fifth or fewer are able to set up a filter, remove a virus, download music or fix a problem. Yet children also struggle with the internet. Although they enthusiastically use the internet, proudly labelling themselves ‘the internet generation’, children too vary in confidence and competence when faced with the challenge of getting the best from the internet while avoiding its problems (Livingstone and Bober, 2003).

Some of these difficulties concern finding what they want. As Heather (17, from Essex) says, ‘Every time I try to look for something, I can never find it. It keeps coming up with things that are completely irrelevant to the actual thing that you search for. And a load of old rubbish really.’ Other difficulties are more subtle, for example, judging the reliability of information online. Faruq (15, from London) tells us, ‘It’s like you don’t know who’s doing what, whose website it is, who wants what, who wants you to learn what. So you don’t know who’s put what information there, but … it’s reliable – but you don’t know who’s put it, who wants you to gain what from that information.’ Indeed, the survey findings confirm these limitations in internet literacy. Despite the stress laid on ICT in education policy, nearly one third (30%) of pupils report having received no lessons at all on using the internet, although most have been taught something: 23% report having received ‘a lot’ of lessons, 28% ‘some’ and 19% ‘just one or two’. Many children, it seems, lack key skills in evaluating online content: four in ten pupils aged 9-19 say that they trust most of the information on the internet, half trust some of it, and only one in ten are sceptical about much information online. Only 33% of 9-19 year-olds who go online at least once a week say that they have been told how to judge the reliability of online information, and among parents of 9-17 year-olds, only 41% are confident that their child has learned how to judge the reliability of online information.

There is a danger, then, that this combination of factors – that children seek to evade parental invasions of their privacy, as they see it, and that children may be, or may appear, more expert than their parents in using the internet – will result in a failure of domestic regulation and, therefore, a failure to address children’s (and parents’) concerns. For, despite their considerable enthusiasm for the internet, children, like their parents, also worry about the internet. Ellen (10, from Hertfordshire) draws on the *thinkUknow* campaign ([www.thinkuknow.com](http://www.thinkuknow.com)) when she observes that the internet can be dangerous ‘because adults can like turn their voices into younger children, and like they can ask for pictures and stuff and ask to meet you. If you give away your name and address, they could’. Indeed, the survey found that three quarters of 9-19 year-olds (74%) are aware of some internet safety campaign or have heard or read a news story that made them think the internet can be dangerous: 48% of daily and weekly users worry about ‘being contacted by dangerous people’, 44% worry about ‘getting a virus’, and 38% worry about ‘others finding out things about you’.

### Mind the gap?

As national regulation of the complex communication environment is ever more difficult to sustain, there is increasing interest in building parental regulation into national and international policy. This chapter has examined how parents and children are responding to this growing responsibility, as well as some of the difficulties they face. For parents, the emerging story of children's internet use is neither as positive as they hoped when first investing in the internet, nor as worrying as the media panics would have us believe. For regulators, the emerging story is equally ambivalent – parents are making considerable efforts to manage this regulatory responsibility, but it is proving worrying and demanding. More importantly, the outcomes are, at best, mixed.

Empirically, we have identified a significant gap between parents' and children's experiences of the internet, one that impedes the effective regulation of children's internet use within the home. Parents, it appears, underestimate the risks their children are experiencing online. Children, it appears, underestimate the regulatory practices their parents are attempting to implement. Parental anxieties tend towards being both ill-informed and, in some ways, ineffective in supporting regulation. Children's enthusiasm for the new medium is resulting in some risky behaviours. Of course, experiences vary considerably, and as the locations and forms of use multiply, some children are becoming adept at finding ways to do what they want to do online. Meanwhile, others are getting lost.

Although, of course, some discrepancies between parents' and children's accounts are to be expected of ordinary family relations, in this case they also point up a problematic conception of family relations within academic and policy discourses. First, the dominant tradition of research tends to assume that domestic regulation consists of authoritative and responsible parents setting rules that reflect their level of concern about the media and innocent children dutifully complying. This view is easily undermined by the simple method of including both parents and children in the research design. And it is no accident, nor simply an annoying impediment to the smooth implementation of a regulatory policy, that parents and children prefer flexible, contextualised strategies of domestic regulation rather than a high level of consistent control. By contrast, ethnographic approaches – to the appropriation of new media within the household, rather than to the issue of regulation in particular – reveal families' everyday lives as occasioning a host of justifications for exceptions to any rule and, more importantly, reveal the home as a site of contestation between parents and children, for the good reason that they have differing interests at stake (Hoover et al, 2004; Seiter, 1999).

Taking this a step further, it can be argued that the dominant view is implicitly technologically-determinist (Mackenzie and Wajcman, 1999) in the sense that, like many parents themselves, it construes the media as an external force that impacts on ongoing family life, directly modifying children's behaviour unless parents provide a buffer in the form of parental mediation or restriction. Recent work on historical shifts in the family (Stacey, 1998) and in

childhood (James et al, 1998) points towards an alternative view, one that recognises the stresses and conflicts faced by the family in late modernity and positions the media as one among several convenient resources for families to work through their struggles over public and private boundaries for the home, dependence and independence of family members, generational shifts in moral values, and so forth (Hoover et al, 2004; Livingstone, 2002).

In late modernity, as Giddens (1991), Beck (1992) and others have argued, power relations within the family have shifted from a model of authority and generational hierarchy, to the more egalitarian, democratised ‘pure relationship’. Parental authority exercised through control over rules and rewards is giving way, though not without a struggle, to a parent-child relationship that prioritises trust and negotiation, as mediated by the discourse of rights, including children’s rights. Parental regulation of media provides, on this view, an occasion for relationship ‘work’ rather than a response to an external threat. Consequently, popular discussion of the benefits and risks of the media for children is imbued with a strongly moral undertone and, since it is the new media that mark the key transition for parents from the norms of their own childhood to those of their children’s childhood, these discussions centre on new media and have a strongly nostalgic flavour (Buckingham, 2000).

### **Conclusion**

Where does this leave the policy of devolving regulatory responsibility to parents? We have suggested that a policy seeking to regulate children’s access to the internet by, in effect, regulating parents is problematic. These problems arise in part from the apparent reluctance of policy-makers to look inside the family, preferring to stop their regulatory scrutiny at the front door, as becomes immediately apparent when one adopts a child-centred approach. In practical terms, the policy neglects the ways in which children themselves respond to being regulated and, therefore, the game of strategy and tactics being played out between parents and children in many homes. In theoretical terms, the policy positions regulation as a buffer against the impact of external media harms rather than a process embedded in the historically and culturally specific dynamics of parent-child relations. The game of strategy and tactics that results, albeit as an unintended consequence, from the traditional approach to parental regulation precisely undermines the trust-based negotiations within the family that are central to attempts to democratise the family. This matters not only because this is a goal for many parents but also because it is central to other areas of policy, notably those concerned with family welfare and children’s rights (Hill and Tisdall, 1997). There is an irony here that, in seeking to reduce top-down state regulation of ‘the market’, so as to further regulatory goals of freedom of markets and of individuals, pressure is placed on parents to reassert traditional hierarchical relations of authority with their children.

This chapter has not, for reasons of space, examined the reasons why devolving internet regulation to parents is increasingly promoted by the policy community in the UK and elsewhere. There are, we must acknowledge, considerable merits in such an approach – both practically (for the global internet is highly intractable for national regulation) and theoretically (for the empowerment of individuals can only be a worthy goal). Rather, our purpose is to add to the public discussion a sense of the difficulties that such a policy generates, both for parents and children and for the implementation and evaluation of the policy itself. Regulation – whether of organisations or individuals - institutionalises a formal relationship of regulator to regulated, and it requires a consistency and standardisation in its implementation, both of which fit poorly with the contemporary family. This message of standardisation, as Oswell (1999) describes it, is present for example in the well-meaning information and awareness campaigns directed at parents designed to achieve the domestic norms and practices necessary for consistently regulating children's internet access and use (and, thereby, achieving societal goals such as segregating pornographic content from children, preventing commercial invasions of their privacy and, generally, policing the boundary between the activities of adults and minors). Again, we do not mean here to undermine these goals, but rather to identify the costs of seeking to achieve them in this way. After all, as Rose (1999) cautions, from a critical, Foucauldian perspective, the more there is talk of children's rights and children's participation, the more is society moved to regulate the conditions of this participation. And as our empirical work has shown, the more parents represent the tools for such regulation, the more uncertainty, confusion and resistance, rather than standardisation, seems to result.

In conclusion, this chapter has argued that relying on parents to implement consistent, effective regulation within the home is problematic, not necessarily because parents are unwilling or incompetent but rather, because for both practical and theoretical reasons, this is a difficult and in some ways inappropriate burden to rest on parents' shoulders. The realities of everyday family life, and the particular practices and expertise building around the internet, mean that such a policy is unlikely to be consistently successful. Further, to the extent that it does work (for example, if parents are sufficiently frightened into exerting tight controls over their children's online activities), it is likely to undermine not only children's freedom and privacy to explore and express themselves online but to also undermine the democratic negotiation of mutual rights, trust and responsibilities between parents and children more generally.

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Livingstone and Bober, 2003) with a major national face to face survey conducted in homes with 1,511 children and 906 parents in Spring 2004 (Livingstone and Bober, 2004). See Livingstone and Bober (2005) for the final project report, and [www.children-go-online.net](http://www.children-go-online.net) for further project details and publications.

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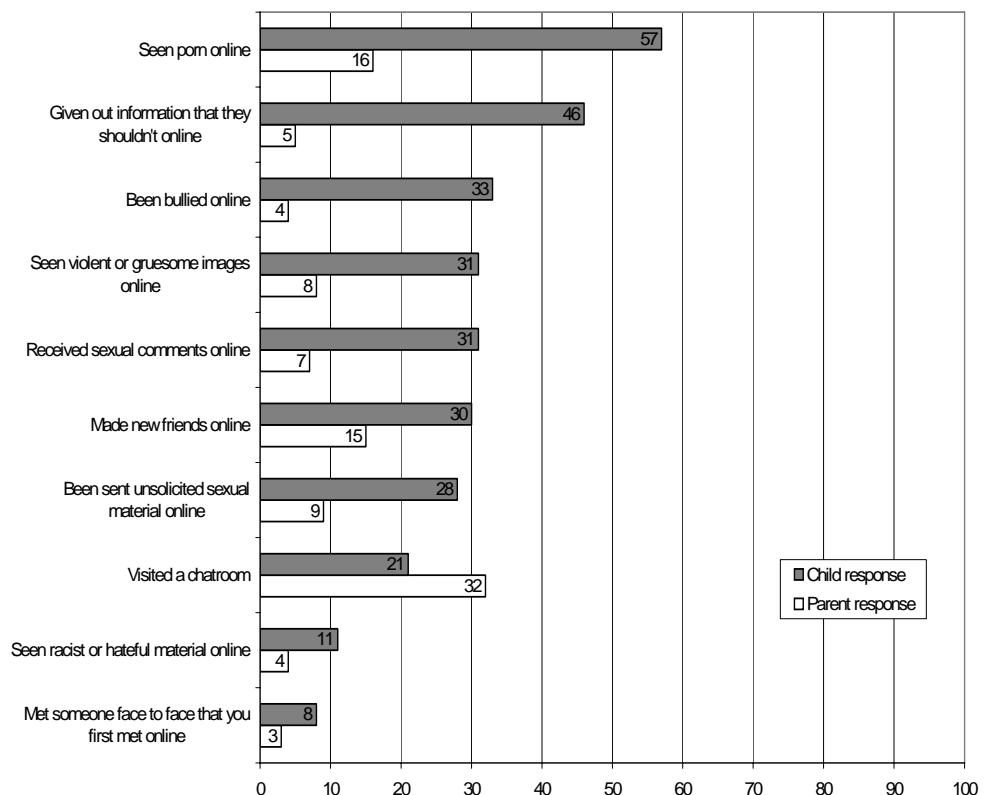
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**Figure 1**

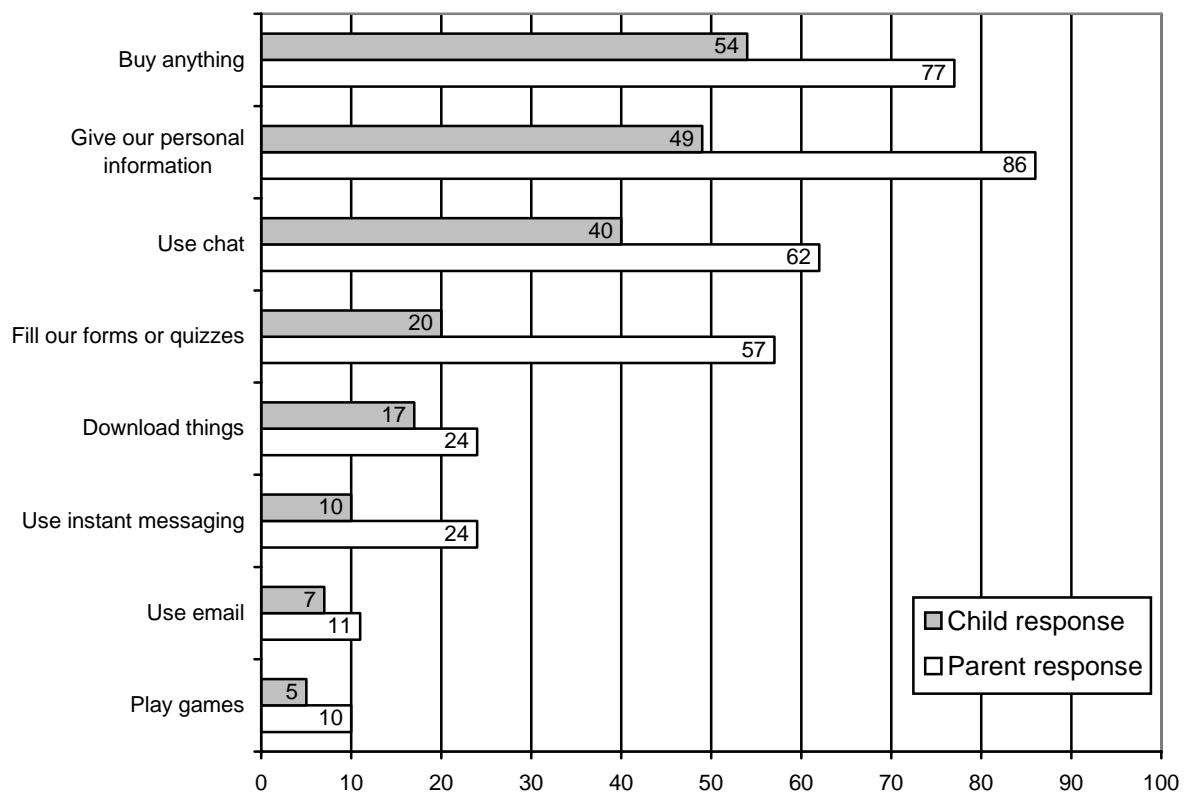
Have you/ has your child done these things on the internet? (Multiple response)



Base: All 9-19 year-olds who use the internet at least once a week (N=1,257);  
Parents of 9-17 year-olds (N=906)

**Figure 2**

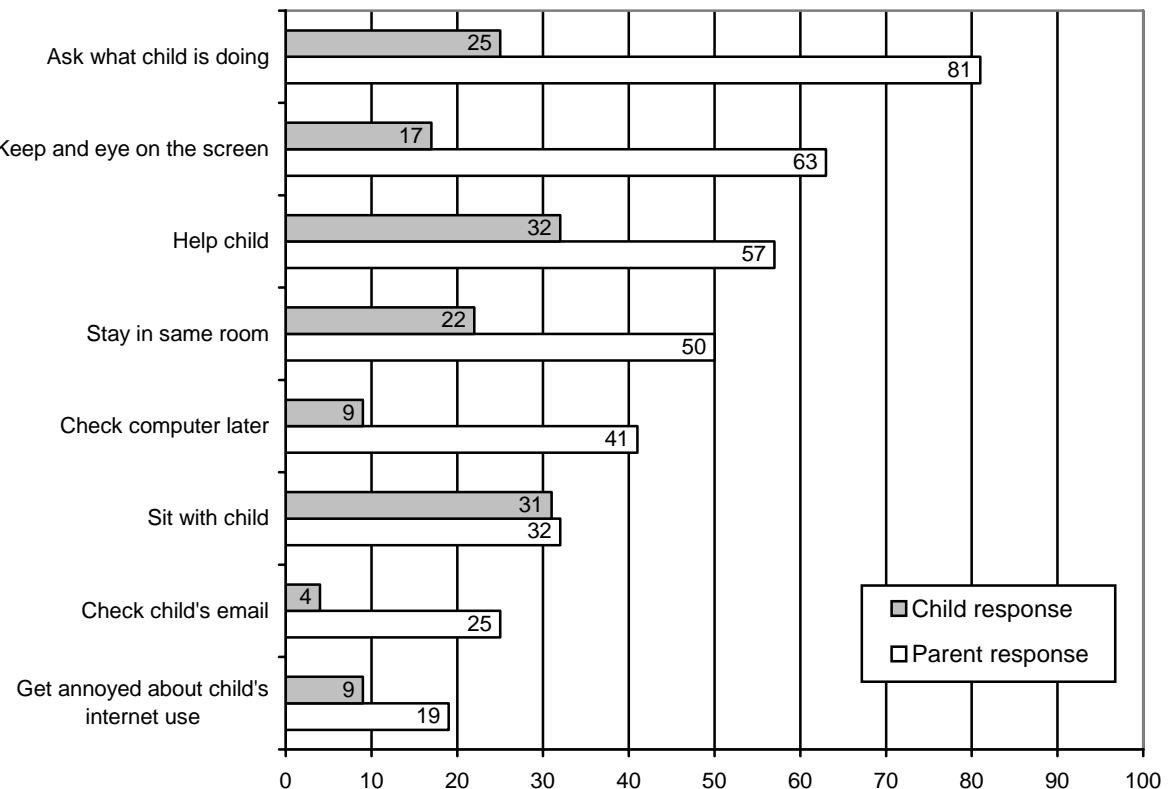
Are there any things which you are (your child is) not allowed to do on the internet? (Multiple response)



Base: 9-19 year-olds who use the internet at least once a week (N=1,257);  
Parents of 9-19 year-olds whose child has home internet access (N=677)

**Figure 3**

What parents do when child is using the internet (Multiple response)



Base: 9-17 year-olds who live with parent(s) and use the internet at least once a week (N=1,060); Parents of 9-17 year-olds whose child has home internet access (N=677)