

# Towards a safer use of the Internet for children in the EU – a parents' perspective

## Summary

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This survey was requested by the Directorate General Information Society and Media, and coordinated by Directorate General Communication.

This document does not represent the point of view of the European Commission. The interpretations and opinions contained in it are solely those of the authors.

Flash EB Series #248

# Towards a safer use of the internet for children in the EU – a parents' perspective

Conducted by  
The Gallup Organisation, Hungary  
upon the request of Directorate General  
Information Society and Media



Survey co-ordinated by  
Directorate General Communication

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**THE GALLUP ORGANISATION**

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## Introduction

This survey (Flash Eurobarometer 248: *Towards a safer use of the Internet for children in the EU – a parents' perspective*) was conducted to study parents' views about their children's use of the Internet, to determine parents' strategies to supervise their child's Internet usage and their own awareness of safety measures.

In detail, the survey examined:

- children's Internet and mobile phone use, and the link with their parents' Internet use
- parents' concerns about the risks their child was facing when using the Internet
- the contexts in which children asked their parents for help with an Internet-related problem
- parental supervision over their child's Internet use (i.e. tactics used to supervise usage, setting rules for children's Internet use and using filtering or monitoring software)
- institutions or organisations to whom parents could / would report illegal and harmful content seen on the Internet
- parents' views about actions that would contribute to a safer use of the Internet
- parents' preferred sources for obtaining information and advice about safe use of the Internet.

Earlier surveys on this topic were carried out in 2003/04 (*Special Eurobarometer N° 203 and Candidate countries Eurobarometer CC-EB 2004.1*) and 2005/06 (*Special Eurobarometer N° 250*). Although this Flash Eurobarometer builds on these earlier surveys, it is different in various ways:

- the survey only looked at parents (including step-parents/guardians) of a 6-17 year-old child
- the questionnaire has been re-designed
- telephone interviews have replaced face-to-face discussions.

The fieldwork of the Flash Eurobarometer 248 "*Towards a safer use of the Internet for children in the EU – a parents' perspective*" was conducted between 9 and 17 October 2008. Approximately 12,750 randomly selected parents (including step-parents/guardians) of a 6-17 year-old child were interviewed in the 27 EU Member States. If there was more than one 6-17 year-old in the household, the parents were asked to answer the questions thinking about the child whose birthday was closest to the date of the interview.

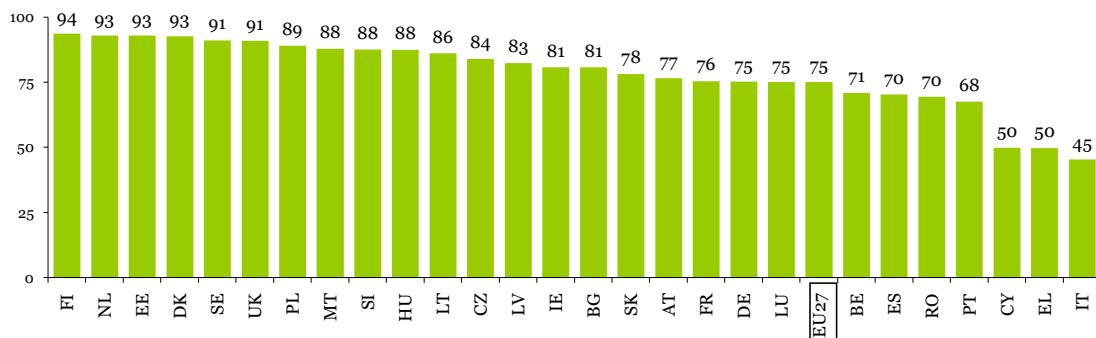
Interviews were predominantly carried out via fixed telephone, with WebCATI (web-based computer assisted telephone interviewing), approximately 500 in each country – except in Cyprus, Luxembourg and Malta where approximately 250 interviews were conducted. More details on the survey methodology are included in the annex of the analytical report.

# 1. Children’s Internet and mobile phone use<sup>1</sup>

## 1.1 Children’s Internet use

- Internet use among children in the EU27 is widespread and growing continually: three quarters of children (6 to 17 years-of-age) – in the opinion of one of their parents – had gone online.
- The number of children using the Internet varied considerably across Europe. The proportion of parents who thought that their child used the Internet was the lowest in Italy (45%), Greece and Cyprus (both 50%). In all other Member States, at least two-thirds of the parents answered that, as far as they knew, their child used the Internet: from 68% in Portugal to 94% in Finland.

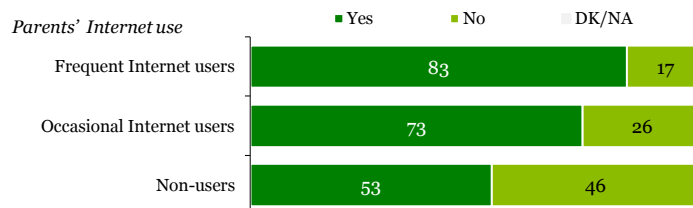
**Chart1 : Does your child use the Internet?**



Q5. As far as you know, does your child use the Internet anywhere?  
 Base: all respondents  
 % of "Yes" shown, by country

- In most countries, the proportion of parents using the Internet was higher than the proportion of children; at the European level, this difference was 9 percentage points (84% of parents vs. 75% of children). There were exceptions: children were more likely, than their parents, to use the Internet in Malta (88% of children vs. 63% of parents), Romania (70% vs. 58%), Poland (89% vs. 82%) and Hungary (88% vs. 80%).
- This overall finding seems to contradict the expectation that children are more likely to be Internet users than their parents’ generation. However, a higher probability that parents use the Internet was only seen in regard to the younger children: for parents answering questions about their 6-10 year-old, the values were 81% for parents and 60% for children. However, for the older groups there were no differences: 84% of 11-14 year-olds and 86% of 15-17 year-olds used the Internet compared to 85% of their parents.
- Children whose parents were frequent Internet users (i.e. using the Internet every day) were themselves also the most likely to use the Internet (83%), followed by those whose parents were occasional Internet users (73%). Half of the parents who did not use the Internet themselves said that their child had online access.

**Chart 2: Does your child use the Internet?**

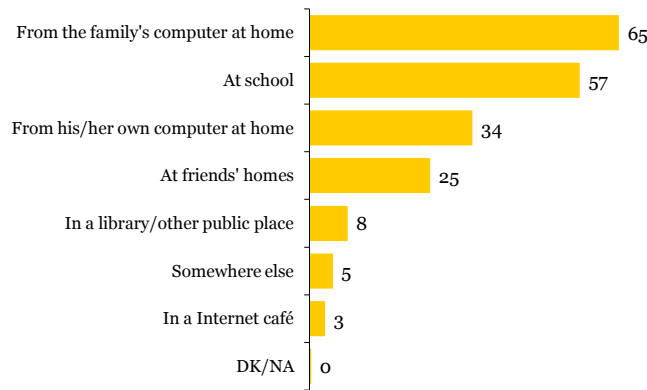


Q3. How often do you use the Internet (from any location)?  
 Q5. As far as you know, does your child use the Internet anywhere?  
 Base: all respondents; % by country

<sup>1</sup> Note: This study asked parents to assess their child’s Internet and mobile phone use. Earlier studies showed that parents’ belief of children’s Internet (and mobile phone use) might be lower than children’s reported use.

- The largest proportion of online children (65%) used the Internet from their family’s computer at home, while one-third used their own computer at home. In total, nine out of 10 children – who were Internet users – accessed it from home.
- A slim majority of the parents (57%) answered that – as far as they were aware – their child had access to the Internet from school; only half as many parents (25%) mentioned a friend’s place for using the Internet.

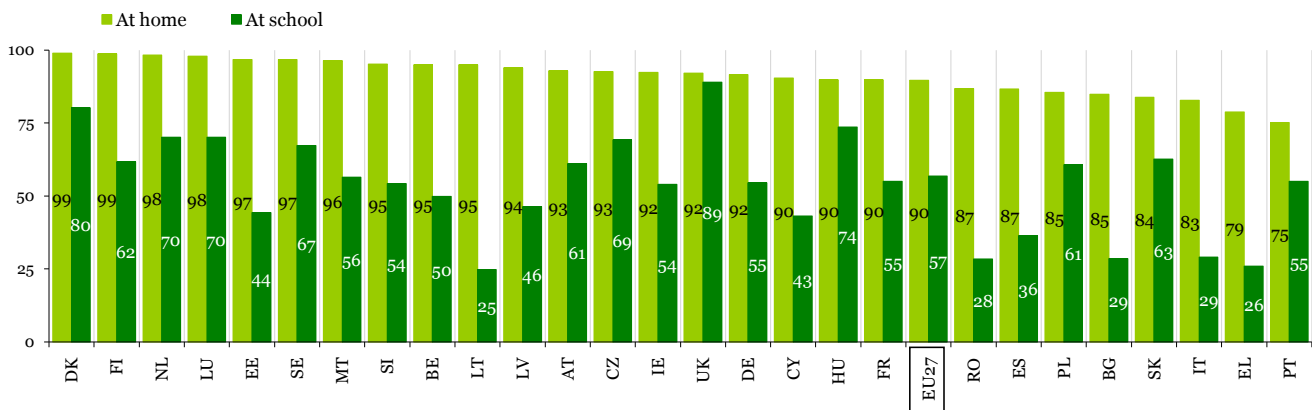
**Chart 3: Where does your child use the Internet?**



Q5A. As far as you are aware, where does your child access the Internet. Please list all the places where you are aware he/she is accessing Internet?  
 Base: parents whose child uses the Internet  
 % of "Mentioned", EU27

- The individual country results showed that home was the most common place from which to access the Internet in all Member States, while school followed in second place. However, the difference between the likelihood of using the Internet from each of these places was the smallest in the UK (92% at home vs. 89% at school), Denmark (99% vs. 80%) and Hungary (90% vs. 74%), and the largest in Lithuania (95% vs. 25%) and Romania (87% vs. 28%).

**Chart 4: Using the Internet at home vs. at school**



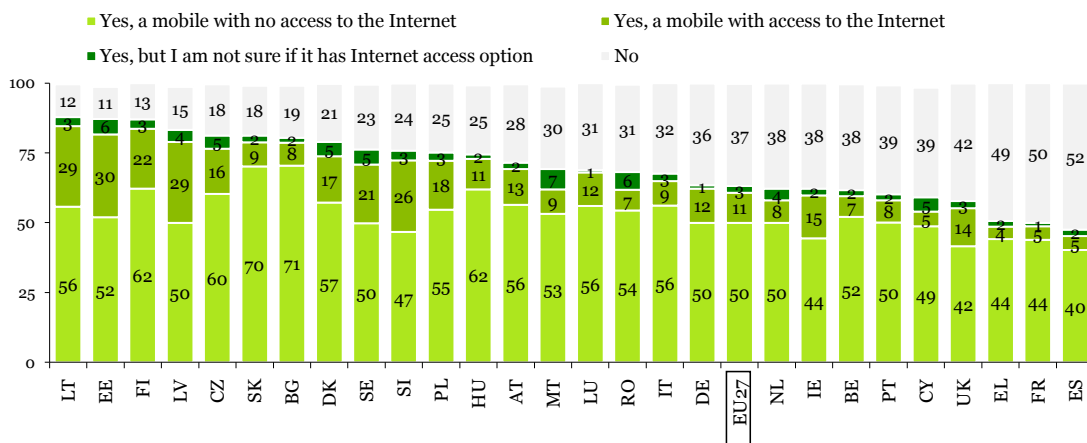
Q5A. As far as you are aware, where does your child access the Internet. Please list all the places where you are aware he/she is accessing Internet?  
 Base: parents whose child uses the Internet  
 % of "Mentioned" by country

- Younger children were the most likely to use the Internet from a shared family computer (72% of 6-10 year-olds vs. 58% of 15-17 year-olds). Older children were more likely to use the Internet on their own computer at home (47% of 15-17 year-olds vs. 22% of 6-10 year-olds), at school (57% vs. 49%), at a friend’s place (32% vs. 16%) or in an Internet café (6% vs. 1%).

## 1.2 Mobile phone use

- Almost two-thirds of the respondents said that their child had a mobile phone and only 37% said the opposite. Of the children with a mobile phone, the largest group had one without access to the Internet (50%), while 11% had a mobile phone with such access, and 3% of the parents did not know if this was the case.
- Children in Spain, France and Greece were the least likely to own a mobile phone: in these countries approximately half of the parents answered their child had a mobile phone – with or without the capability of Internet access. In all other countries, at least six out of 10 children owned a mobile phone: from 59% in the UK and Cyprus to 88% in Lithuania and Estonia.
- The country rankings showed that 6-17 year-olds in the eastern European Member States and the Nordic countries were more likely to own a mobile phone than those in the Union's southern and central regions.

**Chart 5: Does your child use a mobile phone of his/her own?**



**Q8. Does your child use his/her own mobile phone?**  
Base: all respondents  
% by country, DK/NA not shown

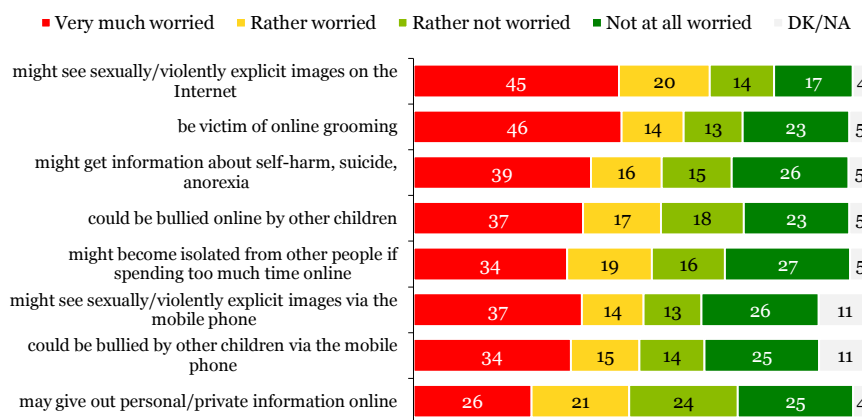
- In almost all countries the proportion of children using the Internet was higher than the proportion having a mobile phone. There were some exceptions:
  - Children were as likely to have a mobile phone as to use the Internet in the Czech Republic (84% of children used the Internet and 81% had a mobile phone), Latvia (both 83%), Bulgaria (both 81%), Slovakia (78% vs. 81%) and Romania (70% vs. 68%).
  - In Luxembourg and Italy, however, 6-17 year-olds were even more likely to have a mobile phone than to use the Internet (75% vs. 88% for Luxembourg and 45% vs. 68% for Italy).
- As for Internet use, mobile phone use increased with age: nearly all parents answering questions about their 15-17 year-old said they owned a mobile phone (94%) – in this group, ownership of a mobile phone was more common than use of the Internet.

## 2. Parents' concerns and awareness about the risks online

### 2.1 Parents' concerns about online risks

- The biggest risk in parents' eyes was that their child might see sexually or violently explicit images on the Internet: 45% were *very* worried and 20% *rather* worried.
- In terms of inappropriate contact, parents were most worried that their child could become a victim of online grooming (60% *very* or *rather* worried); other concerns were that their child could be bullied online by other children (54%) or bullied by others over a mobile phone link (49%).
- Parents were the least worried that their child might reveal personal or private information when using the Internet: only a quarter said they were *very* worried and 21% were *rather* worried.

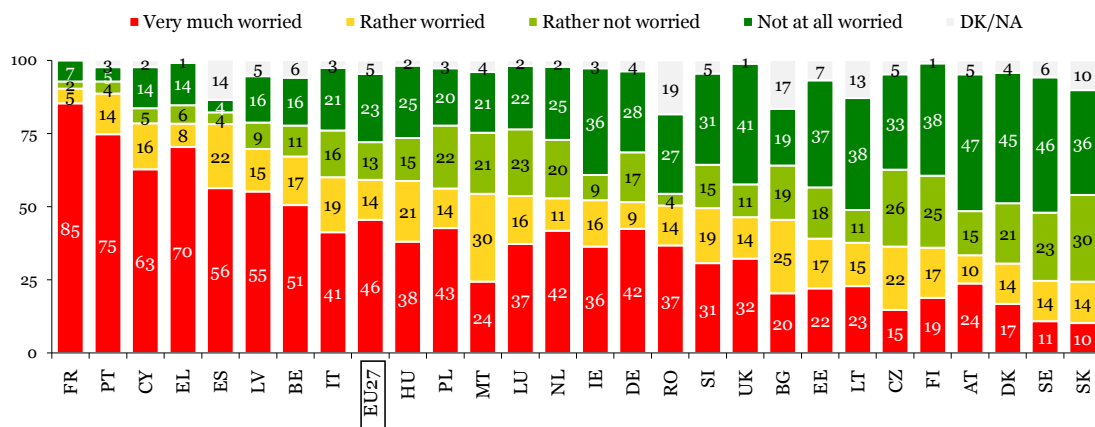
**Chart 6: When your child uses the Internet or a mobile phone, how worried are you that he or she ... ?**



**Q9. How worried are you that when your child is using the Internet or mobile phone, he/she ...**  
Base: all respondents  
% EU27

- Parents in France, Spain, Portugal, Greece and Cyprus worried the most that their child might see inappropriate content, make contact with someone intent on grooming or bullying, or reveal personal information. Parents in Denmark, Sweden and Slovakia had the least concern there.
- *For example*, almost all French and Portuguese parents and eight out of 10 parents in Cyprus, Greece and Spain said they were worried that their child might become a victim of online grooming. At the bottom of the distribution, were Slovakia, Sweden and Denmark with only 24%, 25% and 31%, respectively, of concerned parents.

**Chart 7: How worried are you that your child might become a victim of online grooming?**



**Q9. How worried are you that when your child is using the Internet or mobile phone, he/she ...**  
Base: all respondents  
% by country

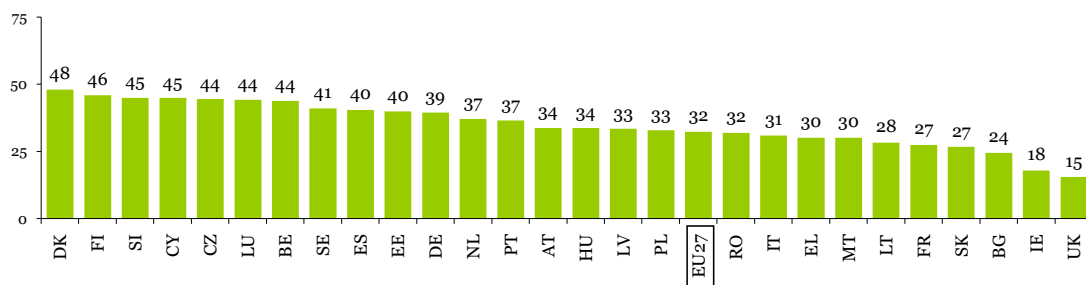


- Parents who did not use the Internet themselves, but who said that their child did use it, most frequently answered that they were *very worried* about the risks faced by their child when using the Internet and mobile phones. Parents who did not use the Internet and who also said that their child did not use it, were only slightly less worried about the risks that their child might face one day.
- Parents who did use the Internet, on the other hand, worried the least about online risks – independent of whether their child actually used the Internet or if they were talking about a hypothetical situation in which their child would start using the Internet.
- *For example*, while only one-third of the Internet-using parents worried that their child might become isolated when spending too much time online, slightly more than four out of 10 parents who did not use the Internet worried about this (43% of the parents whose child used the Internet and 41% of the parents whose child did not use it).
- Parents answering a question about their 6-10 year-old or their 11-14 year-old more frequently said they were *very worried* about the risks their child faced when using the Internet and mobile phones. *For example*, while four out of 10 parents answering a question about their 15-17 year-old were very worried that they might become a victim of online grooming, almost half of the parents talking about their 6-10 year old or their 11-14 year-old were very worried about this (both 48%).

## 2.2 Has your child asked for help?

- The proportion of children who had asked their parent (the one interviewed) for help when a problem (of any kind) occurred using the Internet was the largest in Denmark (48%), followed by Finland (46%), Slovenia and Cyprus (both 45%). Children in the UK, on the other hand, were very unlikely to have asked their parents for help with an Internet-related problem – only 15% of British parents said their child had asked for help.

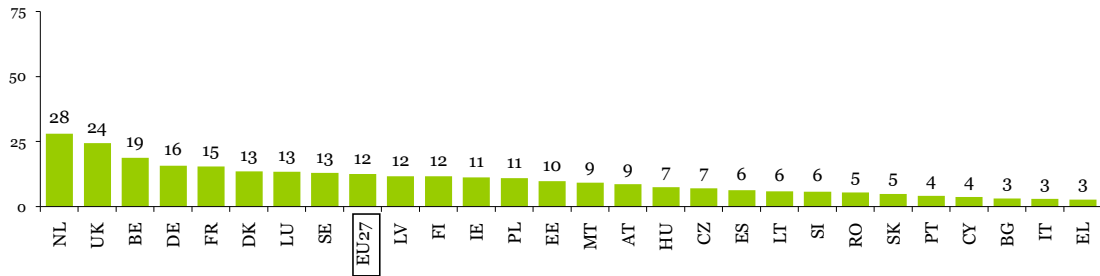
**Chart 8: Has your child asked for your help when a problem occurred using the Internet?**



Q12. Has your child ever asked for your help concerning a situation on the Internet that s/he could not handle?  
Base: parents whose child uses the Internet  
% of "Yes" shown by country

- Those children who had asked for help were most likely to have done so because they had a technical problem, such as a virus on the computer, or when they were browsing the Internet looking for information (46% and 40%, respectively).
- Only a minority of the respondents said that when their child asked for their help with an Internet-related problem, this was due to: contact online by a stranger (4%), harassment (4%) or bullying online (3%), or the existence of sexually or violently explicit images on the Internet (4%).
- Almost three out of 10 Dutch parents (28%) and a quarter of the parents in the UK (24%) said that, when their child asked for their help, this was because they had been contacted by a stranger, were bullied or harassed online or saw violently or sexually explicit images online. In Greece, Italy, Bulgaria, Cyprus and Portugal, on the other hand, less than one in 20 parents mentioned this kind of problem.

**Chart 9: Children asking for help when being contacted by a stranger, having found violently or sexually explicit images, being bullied or harassed**



**Q13. What was the situation in which your child asked your help:**  
*Base: parents whose child asked for help*  
*% of "Yes" shown by country*

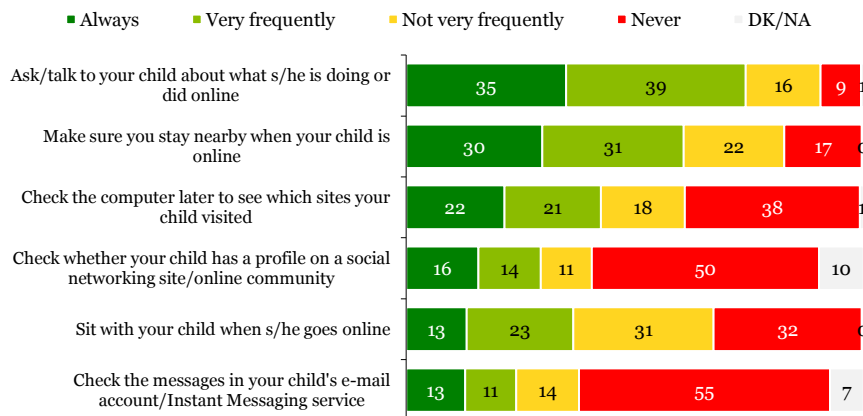
- Older children, who asked their parents for help, more often did so because they were contacted by a stranger, were bullied or harassed online or saw violently or sexually explicit images online (e.g. 7% of the 15-17 year-olds asked their parents for help because they were harassed online compared to 1% of the 6-10 year-olds).

### 3. Parental supervision of children’s Internet use

#### 3.1 Strategies for supervising children’s use of the Internet

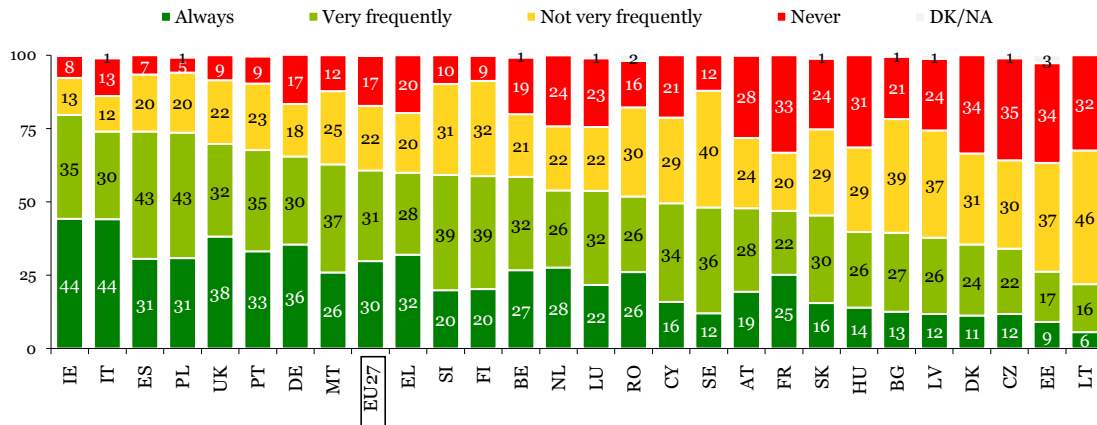
- Three-quarters of parents – with a child who accessed the Internet at home – said they always or very frequently talked with their son or daughter about what they had been doing online. A majority of the parents (61%) took care that they – always or very frequently – stayed nearby when their child used the Internet, while one-third said that they sat next to their child when they used the Internet.
- Parents in almost all Member States were the least likely to regularly check whether their child had a profile on a social networking site or the messages in their child’s email or IM account.
- Note: It should be pointed out that the level of parental supervision might be slightly over-represented in the sample. Since parents do not want to come across as bad parents, they might have answered in a “socially acceptable” way to this question; this may explain why so many of them said they regularly supervise their child’s use of the Internet.

**Chart 10: What do parents do when their child uses the Internet at home?**



**Q6. When your child uses the Internet at home, what do you usually do?**  
 Base: parents whose child uses the Internet from his/her own computer or from the family's computer at home  
 % EU27

- Parents in the UK and some southern European countries – Portugal, Italy and Spain – were more likely to regularly supervise their child when using the Internet (e.g. stay nearby or sit next to their child) and to check what their child had done online (e.g. check the history file or e-mail account). Parents in Lithuania and Estonia, on the other hand, were each time among the most likely to answer that they never supervised or checked their child’s Internet-related activities.
- *For example*, parents in the UK, Spain, Germany, Ireland and Portugal – together with those in Italy and Poland – were the most likely to answer that they always or very frequently stayed nearby when their child used the Internet (between 66% and 79%). Estonian and Lithuanian parents were found at the bottom of the distribution (26% and 32%, respectively).

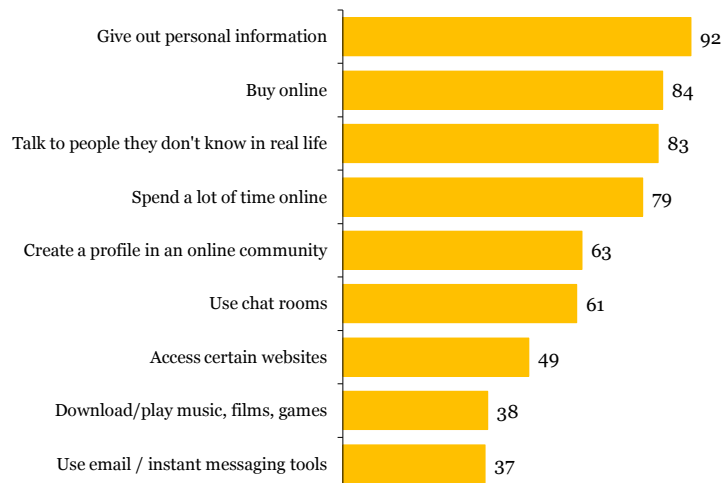
**Chart 11: How often do you stay nearby when your child uses the Internet?****Q6. When your child uses the Internet at home, what do you usually do?**

Base: parents whose child uses the Internet from his/her own computer or from the family's computer at home  
% by country

- Parents who were Internet users themselves said they operated more control over their child's use of the Internet – this was as expected, since most strategies for parental supervision assume that parents know how to use the Internet, e.g. how to check their child's Internet history.
- Parents with a lower level of educational attainment were slightly more likely to check their child's online activities. *For example*, one-third of the least-educated parents said they regularly checked the messages in their child's e-mail or IM account compared to only slightly more than one-fifth of parents in the highest educational category.
- The 15-17 year-olds were subject to less parental supervision than the 11-14 year-olds and the 6-10 year-olds, but this reduction was more noticeable in the supervision of children using the Internet than for the monitoring of children's online activities (e.g. checking the history file).

### 3.2 Setting rules for children's use of the Internet

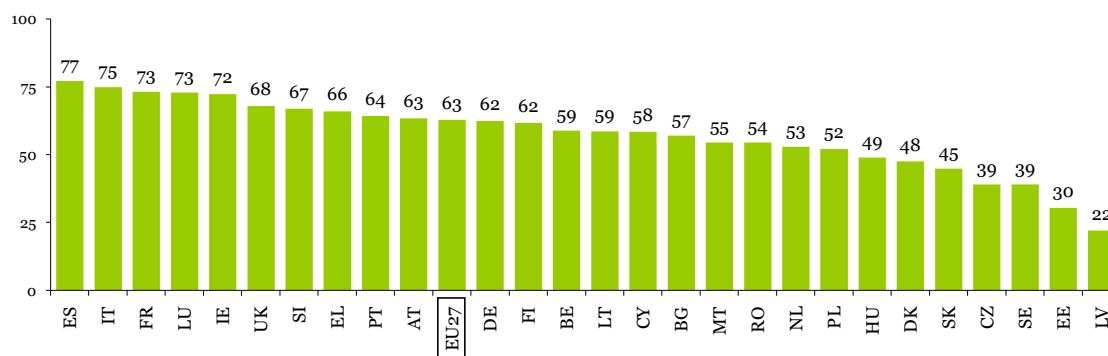
- Parents in all countries mentioned that they had various rules and restrictions when their child used the Internet. *For example*, approximately eight out of 10 parents – with a child who used the Internet – listed online shopping and spending a lot of time online as activities that were not allowed for their child. The smallest numbers of parents – but more than a third – said their child was not allowed to download or play music, films or games and use email or IM tools.

**Chart 12: Which online activities are not allowed?****Q7A. Some parents are restricting activities, while others are letting their allowing more activities to their children online. I will list activities, and please tell for each if you allow them or not:**

Base: parents whose child uses the Internet; % of "Not allowed", EU27

- Parents in Italy, Portugal and Ireland were more likely to set certain rules for their child when using the Internet, while respondents in some eastern European countries – the Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia and Slovakia – were the least likely to specify such rules.
- *For example*, Spanish and Italian parents were the most likely to have rules against creating a profile in an online community (77% and 75%, respectively). Parents in Latvia and Estonia were the ones least often mentioning such restrictions: only slightly more than one-fifth of Latvian parents and three out of 10 Estonian parents did not allow their child to create a profile in an online community.

**Chart 13: Not allowed to create a profile in an online community**

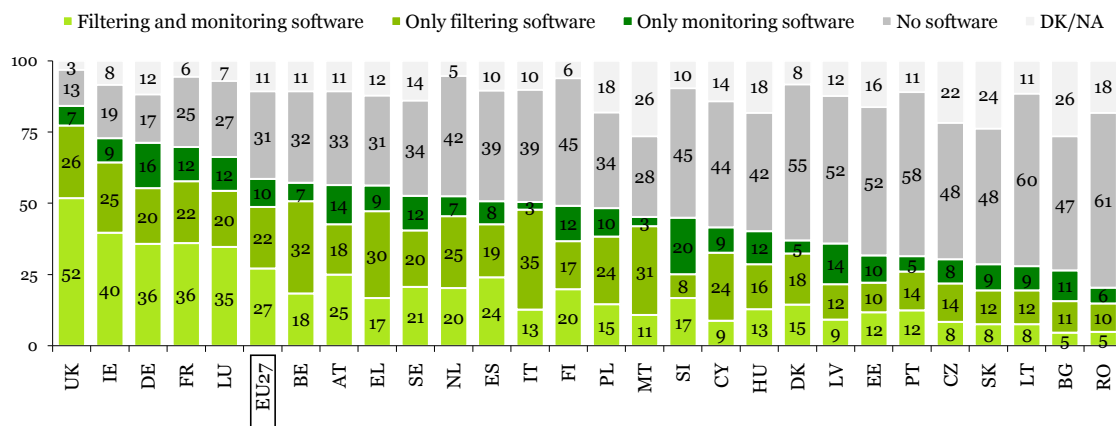


Q7A. Some parents are restricting activities, while others are letting their allowing more activities to their children online. I will list activities, and please tell for each if you allow them or not:  
 Base: parents whose child uses the Internet  
 % of "Not allowed" shown by country

- Younger parents and parents answering questions about a younger child were the most likely to say that they had imposed restrictions on their child's Internet use for each of the online activities listed. For most restrictions on online activities, parents did not distinguish between boys or girls.

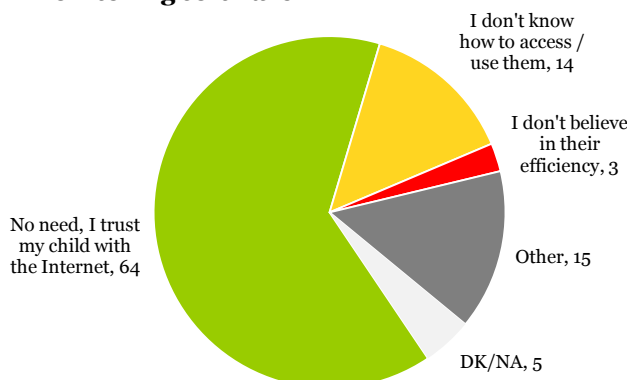
### 3.3 The use of filtering and monitoring software

- Half of the parents – with a child who accessed the Internet at home – answered that they had installed filtering software on the computer that their child used at home. Monitoring software was not as popular, but was still used by almost four out of 10 parents (37%).
- There was considerable variation across countries in the use of monitoring and filtering software: more than half of the British parents used such software compared to only 5% of the parents in Romania and Bulgaria.
- In Romania – and in Lithuania and Portugal – approximately six out of 10 parents said they did not have filtering or monitoring software on their home computer. In Bulgaria – and in Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Malta – more than one-fifth of parents did not know if such software was installed on their home computer (between 22% and 26%).

**Chart 14: Use of monitoring and filtering software**

**Q10. Does the computer – that your child uses at home – have installed any of the following software?**  
 Base : parents whose child uses the Internet from his/her own computer or from the family's computer at home  
 % by country

- Parents who used the Internet frequently (i.e. every day) were the most likely to answer that they had installed filtering and/or monitoring software on the computer that their child used at home (53% and 40%, respectively). The corresponding proportions for occasional Internet users were slightly lower: 44% and 35%, respectively. Respondents who did not use the Internet were the ones who least often said that such software was installed; however, almost one-third of the parents who did not use the Internet (32%) did not know if filtering or monitoring software was installed on the computer that their child used at home.
- Younger parents, those with younger children or with more children in the family were more likely to answer that filtering and/or monitoring software was installed on their home computer. *For example*, more than half of the parents reporting about their 6-10 year-old or their 11-14 year-old had installed filtering software (54% and 51%, respectively) and four out of 10 had installed monitoring software (both 41%) – the corresponding proportions for parents referring to questions about their 15-17 year-old were, respectively, 41% and 29%.
- More than six out of 10 parents – who did not use filtering or monitoring software – simply saw no need for such software since they trusted their child on the Internet. Fourteen percent of the parents who did not use filtering or monitoring software did not know how to obtain or use it. Only a minority (3%) did not use such software because they did not believe in its efficiency.

**Chart 15: Reasons for not using filtering or monitoring software**

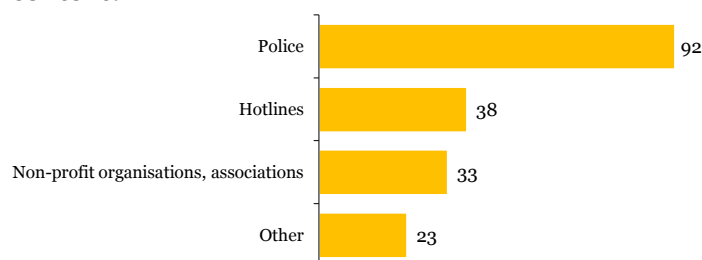
**Q11. Why did you choose not to use filtering or monitoring software?**  
 Base: parents who do not use filtering or monitoring software; %, EU27

## 4. Awareness and information about safety measures

### 4.1 Reporting illegal or harmful content seen on the Internet

- Parents in all of the EU27 Member States most often thought of the police when asked how they would report illegal or harmful content seen on the Internet – 92% gave this response. Four out of 10 parents (38%) would report such content to a hotline set up for this purpose and one-third mentioned non-profit or other associations.

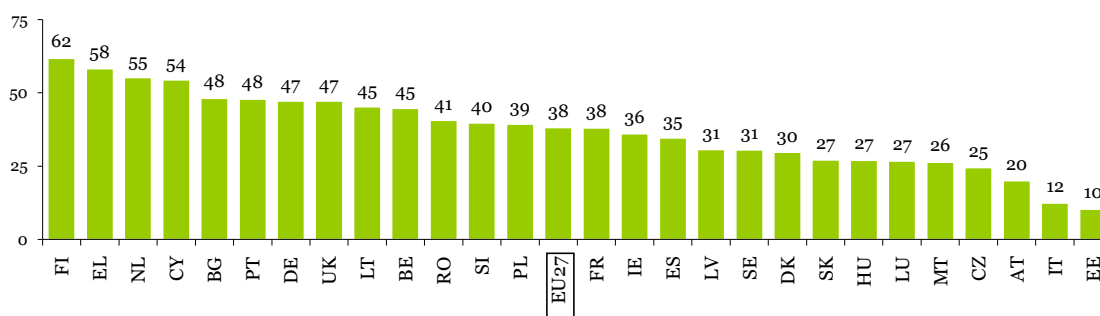
**Chart 16: Where or to whom would you report illegal content?**



**Q16. Where or to whom would you report illegal content (like child abuse material)?**  
 Base: all respondents  
 % of "Yes" shown, EU27

- In only four countries did more than half of the parents say they would call or contact a hotline for reporting illegal content on the Internet: Finland (62%), Greece (58%), the Netherlands (55%) and Cyprus (54%). In more than half of the countries less than four out of 10 parents had the same intention: ranging from 10%-12% in Estonia and Italy to 39% in Poland.
- The Estonian interviewees were also the least likely to say they would report illegal or harmful content found on the Internet to a non-profit organisation or some other association, while Greek respondents were again the most likely to do so (6% vs. 58%).

**Chart 17: Reporting illegal content to a hotline**



**Q16. Where or to whom would you report illegal content (like child abuse material)?**  
 Base: all respondents  
 % of "Yes" shown by country

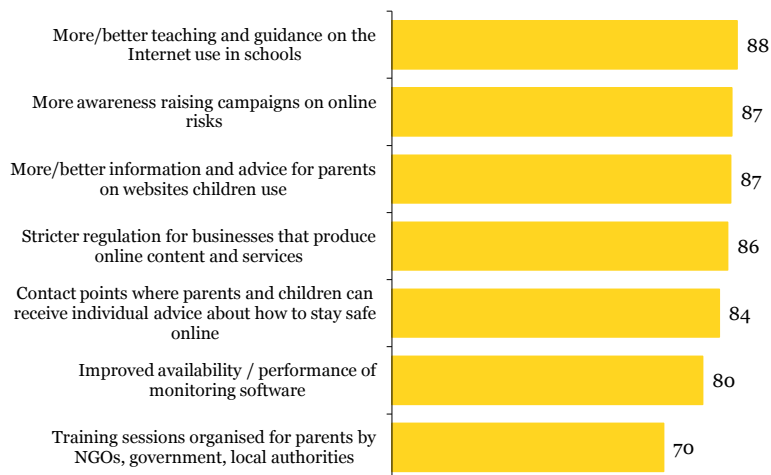
- Parents who did not use the Internet were more likely not to know how they would report illegal or harmful content seen on the Internet. *For example*, almost one-fifth of the parents who did not use the Internet did not know they could report illegal content to a hotline set up for this purpose compared to 12% of the parents who did use the Internet.

### 4.2 Towards a safer and more effective use of the Internet

- For each of the proposed measures or actions to improve Internet safety and its effective use by children – e.g. more awareness-raising campaigns about online risks or more advice for parents about the websites that children visit – a large majority of the parents surveyed agreed that it would contribute to this cause.

- Relatively speaking, parents most often thought that more and better teaching and guidance about Internet use in school would contribute to safer and more effective use of the Internet by children (88%) and least often that training sessions organised for parents by NGOs, the government or local authorities would do the same (70%).

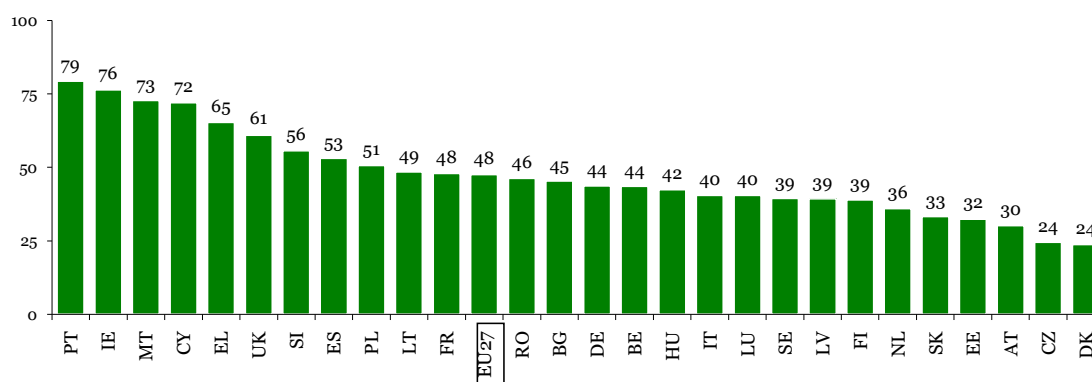
**Chart 18: What would contribute to safer and more effective use of the Internet for your child?**



**Q14. Which of the following do you think would contribute to a safer and more effective use of the Internet for your child?**  
 Base: all respondents  
 % of "Would contribute" shown, EU27

- The countries with the highest level of support for each of the proposed actions were Portugal, Ireland, Malta, Cyprus and Greece: in these countries between 65% and 79% of the parents believed each one would contribute to a safer and more effective use of the Internet for their child.
- The countries with the lowest levels of support were Denmark, the Czech Republic, Austria, Estonia and Slovakia: in these countries not more than one-third of the parents thought that each of these actions would contribute to a safer and more effective use of the Internet for their child (between 24% and 33%).

**Chart 19: Proportion of parents answering that each measure would contribute**



**Q14. Which of the following do you think would contribute to a safer and more effective use of the Internet for your child?**  
 Base: all respondents  
 % by country

- Parents who did not use the Internet themselves, but who said that their child did use it, more often answered that more and better teaching and guidance about Internet use in school, training sessions for parents organised by NGOs and contact points where children and parents could go for individual support would contribute to a safer and more effective use of the Internet by their child.
- Parents answering questions about a younger child were particularly likely to say that improvements in the availability and performance of monitoring software would contribute to a

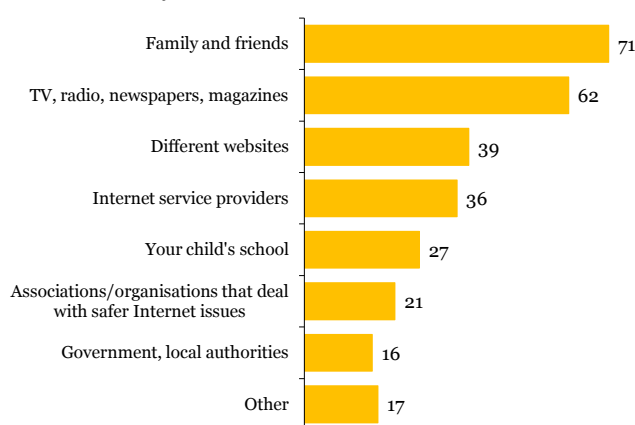


safer and more efficient use of the Internet by their child (80%-82% for a 6-14 year-old vs. 76% for a 15-17 year-old).

### 4.3 Where to get information about the safer use of the Internet

- Family and friends were the most popular source of information or advice for parents about monitoring and filtering tools and safe use of the Internet: 71% of parents had turned to a friend of family member to discuss Internet safety issues. That source was followed in popularity by TV, radio, newspapers and magazines – selected by 62% of the parents.
- Four out of 10 parents had browsed the Internet and found information or advice about safer Internet on various websites, and a similar proportion (36%) counted on Internet service providers (ISPs) to get such information.

**Chart 20: Sources for information and advice about safety tools and safe use of the Internet**



Q15. Where do you get your information and advice on safety tools and safe usage of the Internet from?  
 Base: all respondents  
 % of "Yes" shown, EU27

- There was a great similarity across Member States, with many parents opting for similar sources of advice (family and friends, news media, different websites or ISPs). These choices would be at the expense of potential contact with their child's school to discuss safe Internet use and with associations or organisations dealing with Internet safety issues.
- Regarding the child's age, there were few differences regarding their parents' sources for information about safe use of the Internet; however, parents answering question about their 11-14 year-old were more likely to select their child's school (32% vs. 23% for a 6-10 year-old and 26% for a 15-17 year-old) as a source.