ONLINE EXPERIENCES OF CHILDREN IN BULGARIA:
RISKS AND SAFETY

A NATIONAL REPRESENTATIVE SURVEY
2016, BULGARIA

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Introduction – context and general information

Growing up has never been an easy and straight-forward process. The list of problems and challenges children have to deal with or overcome seems to be endless. The puberty brings the rapid physical changes, which can cause concerns, worries and uneasiness. There are different psychological and emotional changes, as the youngsters try to form new social networks outside their family and assert their role in these new relationships. This process helps the young people to become independent and self-confident, but can also lead to conflicts, rejections, disappointments, distress. Inevitably, the path to independence and adulthood leads through a field of new experiences, some of which may be risky or even dangerous. Wanting to fit in with their peers, many young people experiment with alcohol, cigarettes or even narcotics. The sexualized media environment and pressure to have a certain look or appearance can lead to depression, low self-esteem, eating and sleeping disorders and other psycho-emotional problems. Next on the list are the challenges related to school performance, sexuality and sexual relations, inter-generational conflicts, bullying and other abuse among peers.

Internet and digital technologies should not be seen as another challenge on this list. Rather, they are a tool through which old challenges can appear in a new form. **The more time children spend online, the more risks they face.** A poll, conducted by UNICEF and Ipsos in April 2016 in 25 countries from around the globe,[1] shows that the majority (80%) of children and teenagers are aware that internet hides numerous risks and dangers, and over half (57%) think that their friends engage in risky behaviour online. At the same time, almost 90% of teenage boys and girls believe that they know how to avoid dangerous or risky situations online, and two thirds believe that online bullying or abuse would never happen to them. 59% of interviewed young people think that meeting new people online is either somewhat or very important to them. These results reveal **a considerable potential for risky online conduct of children and teenagers, stemming from their overconfidence that nothing bad can happen to them in the virtual world**, because they are aware of the risks and know how to avoid them.

Another recent study conducted by the Global Kids Online[2] established that on average, 8 in 10 children access the internet on mobile devices like smartphones and tablets. This enhances the development of their technical skills and helps them to become active and independent internet users, but also makes them more exposed to risks like sexual or other harmful or hurtful online content, internet scams, pop ups or harassment. At the same time, help and support from their parents or other cares might not be immediately available.

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[1] UNICEF. (2016). *Perils and Possibilities: Growing Up Online*. New York: United Nations Children's Fund. https://www.unicef.org/endviolence/endviolenceonline/files/UNICEF_Growing-up-online.pdf

[2] Byrne, J., Kardefelt-Winther, D., Livingstone, S., Stoilova, M. (2016). *Global Kids Online research synthesis, 2015-2016*. UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti and London School of Economics and Political Science. http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/gko/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Synthesis-report_07-Nov-2016.pdf
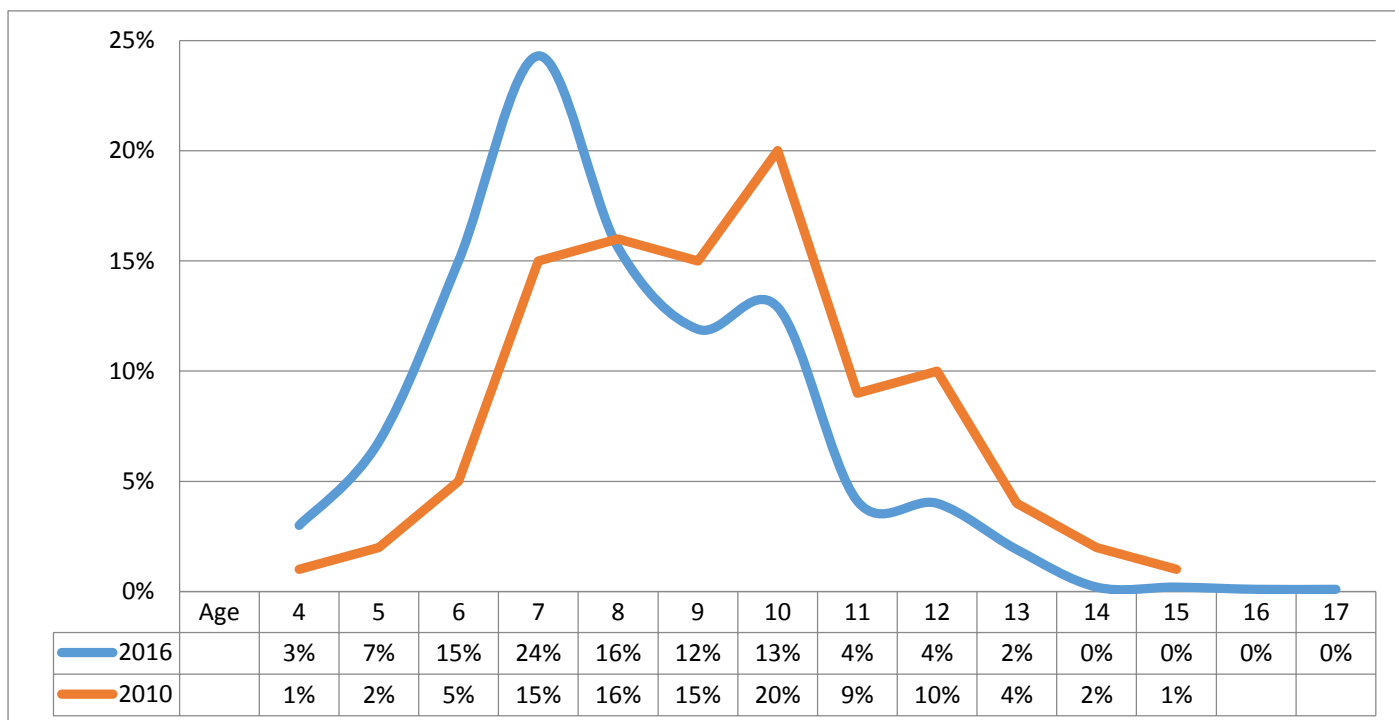
FINDINGS FROM THE 2016 BULGARIAN SURVEY

Internet access

The survey revealed that **almost all (97%) Bulgarian children aged 9-17 use internet**. This is a considerable increase compared to 2008, when (according to the Flash Eurobarometer survey) 81% of children in the country used the Web.[3] The number of internet users among the parents is also very high, with 70% declaring that they are online every day (11.2% never and 8.4% rarely use internet). If we compare this numbers with the data of the Bulgarian National Statistical Institute, which show that in 2015 only 59.1% of households had internet access,[4] it can be concluded that presence of children in the family notably increases the likelihood of internet connection in the home.

The age at which children go online is steadily decreasing, with some children starting as early as 4 (3%) or 5 (6.8%). Almost a quarter (24.3%) had their first contact with the Web at the age of 7, while almost 90% became internet users before they turned 11. **The average age of the first use is 8, while in 2010, it was 9.**

As can be seen from the Figure 1, six years ago the largest share of children entered the digital world, when they were 10. Now the peak period is at the age of seven. The trend of dropping age will almost certainly continue in the coming years.

Figure 1: Children's first internet use

	Age	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
2016		3%	7%	15%	24%	16%	12%	13%	4%	4%	2%	0%	0%	0%	0%
2010		1%	2%	5%	15%	16%	15%	20%	9%	10%	4%	2%	1%		

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[3] Gallup. (2008). *Flash Eurobarometer 248: Towards a Safer Use of the Internet for Children in the EU – A Parents' Perspective*. http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/flash/fl_248_en.pdf

[4] See table Households who have Internet access at home, http://www.nsi.bg/en/content/6099/households-who-have-Internet-access-home

Most of the children, who use internet every day, access it at home (93.4). Significantly lower is the percentage of those who do this in schools (36.7%) or while they are "on the move" (travelling in a car or bus, or walking on the street – 28%).

According to the 2010 EU Kids Online survey, Bulgarian children were in the second place after Sweden regarding the frequency of internet usage, with 83% of children being online every day. The current survey has established that this already high result increased further, reaching 93.4%.

Table 1: How often do you use internet?

	2016	2010
Every day or almost every day	93.4%	83%
Once or twice a week	4.3%	16%
Once or twice a month	0.7%	1%
Less often	1.2%	0%

Online activities of children

Figure 2: Ten most popular online activities of children (% of children engaged in the following activities every day)
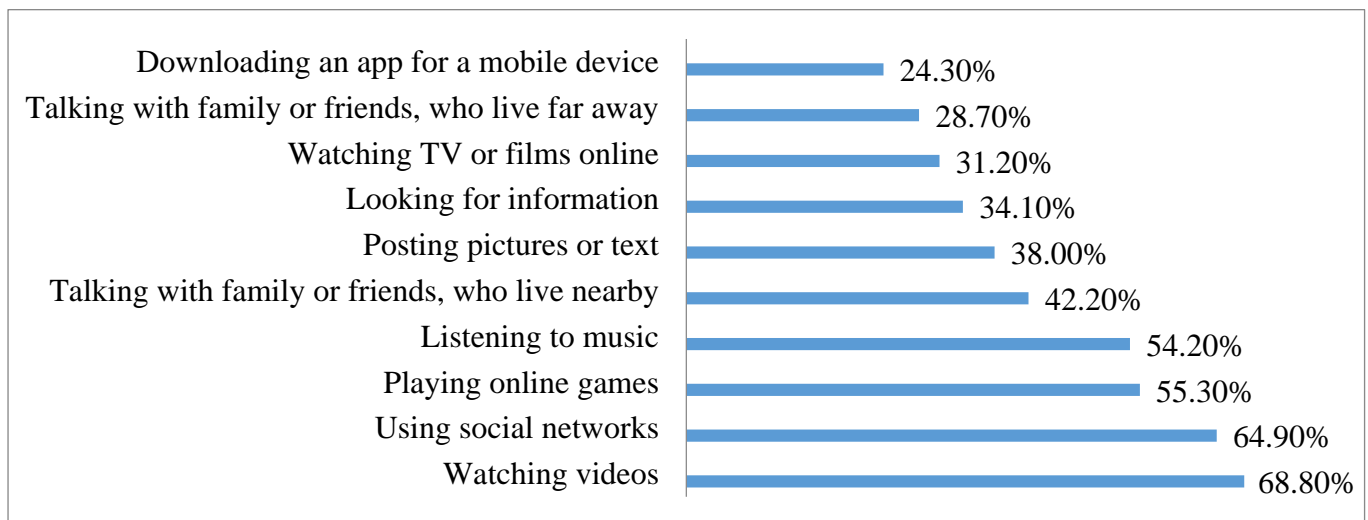
More than half of the children from our sample engage in the following online activities practically every day: watch video clips, use social networks, listen to music and/or play games. Between 30 and 40% publish pictures or texts, use internet for communication with family and friends, watch TV or films, or look for information. Only 22% of children use the Web for activities connected with school and education on daily basis.

Other relatively popular online activities, practiced by about one third of children, include participation in online groups, which share children's interests and hobbies, downloading of films and music, visiting online shops, reading news and checking prices of different goods. These

activities are typically not something children would do every day, but are more sporadic – in most cases done once or twice per week.

Watching video clips online is usually a relatively safe activity, especially among younger children, who tend to visit only the sites they are familiar with, or watch videos in presence or under supervision of their parents. Nevertheless, it also carries risks related to inappropriate content (sexually explicit, racist, violent, extremist or other harmful material) that can be accessed either deliberately or by mistake. Most free video-sharing platforms also target the viewers with aggressive advertising and marketing messages, which can have a deep effect on children seeing them.

Social networks can be used by ill-meaning strangers to establish contacts with children, but the most common risks involving social networks is their use as a tool for online bullying among children and teenagers. Online games, the third most popular activity, are also a widely used channel through which undesired contacts and communication with strangers take place.

All these online activities and the associated risks are discussed in more detail in the following section of the report.

No valid correlations were observed between the place of residence (capital, city, town, village) and the age of first use of internet, use of various types of digital devices and average time spent online. The supposition that there could be certain digital divide due to different standards of living, the presence or absence of possibilities for offline entertainment or educational activities was disproved by the survey findings.

Unpleasant online experience

Before proceeding with the analysis of concrete online risks and dangers, we can look at two general questions about children's negative or unpleasant online experiences. Both questions examine whether children have in general encountered in the internet something that made them feel uncomfortable, upset, ashamed or bothered. Children's concerns or distress were assessed from "first person" and "third person" point of view.

Children were asked whether they agree that there are many things on the internet that are good for children of their age. About half of the children fully agreed with this statement, and 38% partially agreed. Asked to be more specific, they listed games, education materials, music, films, information sites and social networks as the most suitable for children. 11% of them were of the opposite opinion – 7% said that the statement was correct only to a very small extent, while 4% thought that the internet was unsuitable for children of their age. These results are comparable to the 2010 survey.

The question about their personal experiences revealed that over the past one year **one out of every 7 children encountered something that made them feel uncomfortable, scared or embarrassed**. Comparison with the previous survey shows **a negative tendency**, as in 2010 this was the case with one in ten children. The likelihood of an unpleasant internet occurrence increases with the age.

Table 2: During the last year, has something you experienced online upset or bothered you (e.g. made you feel uncomfortable, frightened you, or you felt that was something you were not supposed to see)?

	No		Yes		I do not want to answer	
	2016	2010	2016	2010	2016	2010
All	82.4%	84.1%	14.6%	9.4%	3.0%	6.5%
Boys	83.0%	N/A	14.3%	N/A	2.7%	/
Girls	81.8%	N/A	14.9%	N/A	3.3%	/
9-11	86.5%	88.8%	11.8%	6.9%	1.8%	4.3%
12-14	81.2%	84.8%	14.1%	10.0%	4.7%	5.2%
15-17	78.3%	78.1%	18.6%	11.3%	3.1%	10.7%

Among 146 children who answered positively to this question, 19 said that they were very upset, and additional 49 evaluated this occasion as relatively upsetting. In two thirds of the cases, these were rare incidents, occurring only once or twice during the year. However, 19.2% of children reported that they encounter something upsetting during their internet surfing at least once per month, 7.5% are bothered by what they see online at least once per week, while two children said that this happens every day.

It is very interesting to compare the share of children, who said that in the past year, something they have seen online has upset or bothered them, and the share of parents, who were aware that their children have seen something on the internet that has bothered them. In 2016, **20.5% of all parents replied positively, which is actually more than the share of children (14.6%) who reported an upsetting or bothering online occurrence**. This is a surprising reversal of results compared to 2010, when only 5% of all parents said that they knew about such incidents involving their kids, compared to 9.4% of children who admitted to experiencing something on the internet that has upset them. A possible explanation to this reversal could be that parents have become more sensitive and concerned about the darker sides of their children's online lives.
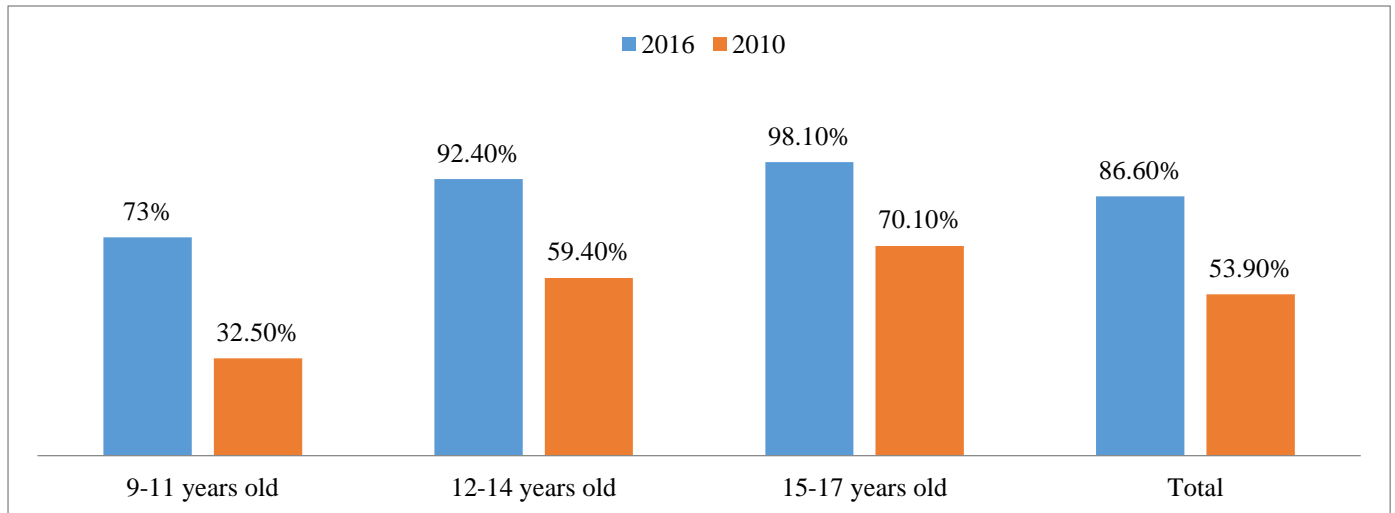
Social networks

The use of social networks is the second most widespread online activity of Bulgarian children (after watching videos), although the share of children, who are not regular social media users is also quite high (23% said that they have not used social media at all during the last month).

Table 3: During the last month, how often have you used a social network?

Never	Very rarely	At least once a week	Every day or almost every day	Several times a day	All the time	No answer
23.40%	3.40%	7.80%	21.80%	17%	26.10%	0.50%

Facebook is by far the most popular social network (frequently used by 71.7% of respondents). Other widely used social platforms are Messenger (used by 53.6%), Viber (50.1%) and Instagram (29.9%). Snapchat (used by 16.2% of respondents), WhatsApp (11.9%), Ask.fm (4.9) and Omegle (2.1%) are less popular.

Figure 3: Do you have a social network profile?

In 2010, 54% of Bulgarian kids had a profile in at least one social network, which was somewhat below the average for the 25 countries from the survey (59%). This has changed dramatically, as now **86.6% of participating children are social networks users**, albeit some are more regular than others (see Table 3).

The increase was especially tremendous in the lowest age group (9-11). Six years ago, roughly 3 out of every ten young children had a social network profile, while now it is the other way around and only one quarter of kids from 9 to 11 do not use Facebook, Viber, Messenger, Instagram or other social application. This age group is particularly vulnerable to potential online abuse. One reason is that they do not yet possess sufficient digital literacy and social skills to safely navigate through the digital world. The other reason is that to circumvent legal restrictions, which require the social network users to be over 13 years old, **children below this age create their accounts by declaring false age**. The practice shows that the age they use is most often above 18, which means that their accounts are not protected against inappropriate content, misuse of sensitive information, unwanted contact, bullying and harassment online. These special filters are available only for users aged between 13 and 18.

The share of social network users increased immensely also in two other age groups. There are hardly any Bulgarian youths over 15 years of age that do not have at least one social profile. While the widespread use of social networks is not a cause for concern by itself, **the fact that one third of all children keep their social profiles public and thus accessible to people they do not know, carries a considerable risk**.

Table 4: You social network profile is…?

Number of children with a social network profile	Public profile, visible by everyone	Partially limited access (visible only by friends of my friends and by people from my network	Limited access (my friends only)	I do not want to answer
All social networks /866/	31.5%	28.4%	34.8%	5.3%
Facebook /604/	33.8%	30.5%	33.4%	2.3%
YouTube /60/	35.0%	20.0%	25.0%	20.0%
Google /59/	25.4%	15.3%	35.6%	23.7%
Viber /51/	9.8%	27.5%	60.8%	2.0%
Messenger /30/	33.3%	40.0%	26.7%	

These results are partially comparable to the 2010 survey, when 30.2% of young social network users also kept their profiles public (20% of profiles were with partially limited access, and 46% were private – access limited only to friends). Especially worrying is the fact that **4 out of 10 Facebook users aged 12-14 keep their accounts public**, exposing their private information, photographs and communication to potential abuse and to inappropriate and unwanted contact (see Table 5). Although the children participating in the survey were not asked to explain the reasons for their privacy settings, we could assume that the youngest children have been advised by their parents to limit the access to their profiles, and that their parents exercise closer control over their children's social networking. In case of older teenagers, explanation could be found in awareness-raising messages they have been exposed to and the already substantial online experience they have acquired. The results therefore suggest that **the age group 12-14 is the most critical one and should be targeted by effective and tailored awareness-raising and skill-building activities**. Of course, this does not mean that other children, especially the youngest ones, should be neglected.

Table 5: Your Facebook profile is…?

Age	Public profile, visible by everyone	Partially limited access (visible only by friends of my friends and by people from my network	Limited access (my friends only)	I do not want to answer
9-11 /168/	32%	20%	44%	5%
12-14 /183/	42%	28%	29%	1%
15-17 /253/	29%	39%	30%	2%

The extent and form of a potential risk depends on what children with a public profile publish on their accounts. Table 6 shows that **the young Facebook users have few restraints when it comes to sharing their photographs and using their full names**. A comparison with the 2010 research reveals an alarming trend – **six years ago children were considerably more cautious** regarding the personal information they post on their Facebook pages.

More than half of the children from the current survey have revealed the name of their school and listed their hobbies and interests on their profiles – a vital information which can be easily misused by an ill-meaning person.
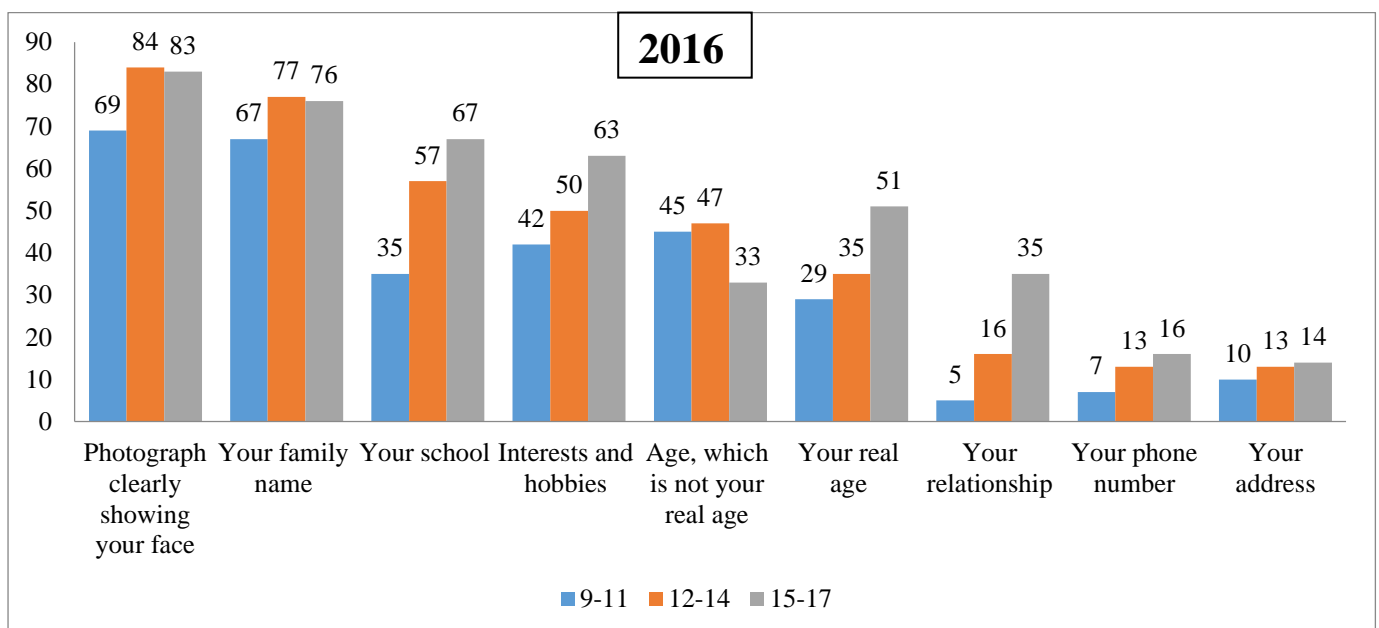
Most children appear to understand that it is not wise to post their home address or phone number on their profiles. However, this is not true for all of them. If we assume that a third of these children have set their Facebook profiles to be seen by anyone, this means that **the most private information of 4-5 out of every 100 children is easily available to everyone browsing the web, including paedophiles**.
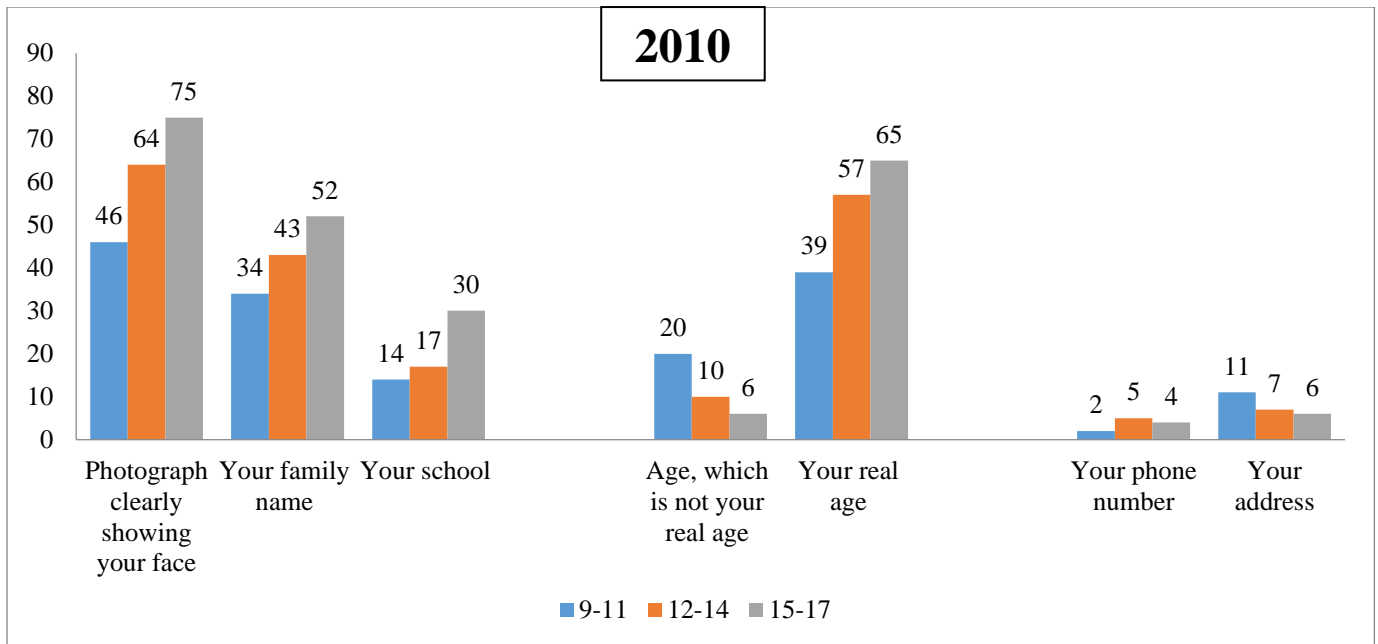
A very interesting observation can be made regarding the age of Facebook users. **The share of those who publically declare their false age has quadrupled – from 10% to 40%. This corresponds with the sharp increase of Facebook profiles created by or for children younger than 13**, which has been discussed above.

Table 6: Which of the following can be seen on your Facebook profile?

	Yes		No	
	2016	2010	2016	2010
Photograph clearly showing your face	80%	65%	20%	35%
Your family name	74%	45%	26%	55%
Your school	55%	21%	44%	79%
Interests and hobbies	53%	N/A	46%	N/A
Age, which is not your real age	40%	10%	58%	90%
Your real age	40%	57%	58%	43%
Your relationship	21%	N/A	77%	N/A
Your phone number	13%	4%	87%	96%
Your address	12%	7%	87%	93%

Figure 4: Is the following information shown on your Facebook profile? (% of children with a Facebook account, who answered 'yes')

2010

Legend: 9-11 (blue), 12-14 (orange), 15-17 (grey)

Category	9-11	12-14	15-17
Photograph clearly showing your face	46	64	75
Your family name	34	43	52
Your school	14	17	30
Age, which is not your real age	20	10	6
Your real age	39	57	65
Your phone number	2	5	4
Your address	11	7	6

Not surprisingly, **the older the children are, the more likely it is that they would share personal information on their profiles.** On the one hand, they are more self-confident and less shy about revealing themselves to the online community, and on the other, their parents mediate and interfere less. As can be seen from Figure 4, there is no substantial difference between the age groups 12-14 and 15-17, when it comes to posting personal photographs and names. This again shows that children aged 12-14 need to be paid a special attention.

Another risky action is **acceptance of friendship requests in the social networks**. 9.4% of all boys and 5.5% of girls indiscriminately accept all requests they receive, while **1 out of 4 children has a habit of becoming online friends with people they do not know personally**, if they have common acquaintances with them.

Table 7: How do you usually respond to online friendship requests?

	I usually accept all friendship requests	I accept a friendship request only if we have common acquaintances	I accept a friendship request only if I know that person	I accept a friendship request only if I know that person very well	I do not want to answer
All /866/	7.5%	25.5%	39.7%	24.7%	2.5%
Boy /448/	9.4%	24.8%	37.7%	25.2%	2.9%
Girl /418/	5.5%	26.3%	41.9%	24.2%	2.2%
9-11 /293/	3.8%	15.4%	37.2%	40.6%	3.1%
12-14 /256/	8.2%	26.6%	45.3%	17.2%	2.7%
15-17 /317/	10.4%	34.1%	37.5%	16.1%	1.9%

The older the children get, the less cautious they become. **Almost 45% of children in age group 15-17 admit to befriending people they have never met in person**. The survey conducted in 2010 returned similar results: 12.7% of children aged 9-11, 36.4% of those aged 12-14, and 49.8% of 15-16 year-olds have added people they have never met face-to-face to their friends' lists or address books. According to the practice of the Safer Internet Centre, children aged 12-16 are most often targeted by paedophiles using Facebook to establish contact with children.

Contact with strangers

For most parents and the wider society, the risk that a child could be approached online by a stranger, who would then abuse them either online or after a subsequent face-to-face meeting, is among the greatest concerns regarding the children's safety on the internet. The previous research suggests that such risks are generally low, and the mediation and prevention measures undertaken by parents and other carers should not impede the children's use of the internet to widen their circle of friends.

As noted above, almost one third of children, who have social network accounts, keep their profiles public and therefore accessible to everyone. Although a mere fact that the child's profile is public is not enough to assume that the child will inevitably be contacted by someone he/she does not know, it does increase the likelihood that could happen. It is interesting to note that **a similar share (one third) of children have been in fact contacted online by someone they have never met face-to-face**. The **gender makes practically no difference in this respect, while the differences across the age groups are large** (see Table 8). A considerable majority of young persons aged 15-17 has communicated online with strangers. In comparison, the share of 13.8% for the age group 9-11 might seem small, but it should not be forgotten that for children that young, a contact with a stranger carries considerable risks and could lead to significant undesired consequences.

Compared to the 2010 survey, we can observe an increase of 'yes' answers – from 28.5% to 33.5%. It is difficult to make straightforward conclusions due to a large share of "I do not want to answer" responses in 2010. However, a very sharp rise in the group of older teens is an undeniable confirmation that **for children older than 15, meeting new people over the internet is becoming a norm**.

Table 8: Have you ever communicated online with someone you have not met before?

	No		Yes		I do not want to answer	
	2016	2010	2016	2010	2016	2010
All	64.2%	63.1%	33.5%	28.5%	2.3%	8.4%
Boys	64.2%	N/A	34.4%	N/A	1.4%	N/A
Girls	64.2%	N/A	32.5%	N/A	3.3%	N/A
9-11	85.0%	76.8%	13.8%	9.8%	1.3%	13.5%
12-14	65.3%	64.3%	32.1%	31.2%	2.5%	4.5%
15-17	37.5%	46.7%	59.1%	45.5%	3.4%	7.8%

Our survey shows that about **20% of children and youngsters went to an offline meeting with someone they communicated with online and who they have never met face-to-face before**. This is a considerable increase from 8% in 2010. For most of them, this was a pleasant event, while less than 6% reported an unpleasant and uncomfortable experience. The age group 15-17 sticks out again. They are not only eager to make new online friends – at this age youngsters are also quite prone to meet their new virtual friends in person. This is something 4 out of 10 did at least once during the past year.

Table 9: During the last year, did you meet in person somebody you have first met online?

	No		Yes		I do not want to answer	
	2016	2010	2016	2010	2016	2010
All	77.0%	91.0%	20.8%	8.0%	2.2%	1.0%
Boys	78.1%	N/A	20.9%	N/A	1.0%	N/A
Girls	75.9%	N/A	20.7%	N/A	3.5%	N/A
9-11	93.0%	97.1%	6.0%	2%	1.0%	0.9%
12-14	75.8%	91.9%	20.9%	6.9%	3.2%	1.2%
15-17	58.2%	83.1%	39.0%	16%	2.8%	0.9%

Despite the low percentage, the youngest children represent an even greater concern, as they are most likely to be bothered by meeting an online acquaintance in person. Among the 400 interviewed kids younger than eleven, 24 had a blind date with a person they knew only from the virtual space.

Overall, 208 survey participants admitted that they made a transition from online contact with a stranger to meeting in person. For a majority of children (72.6%), this experience was a pleasant one, for 16.3% it was neutral, 5.3% (11 children) felt it was somewhat unpleasant, and for 0.5% (1 child) this was a very unpleasant experience. Additional 5.3% preferred not to answer this question, but it can be assumed that in their case as well, the meeting left them with negative rather than positive emotions. In comparison, during the 2010 survey 10% of children, who admitted to having had a face-to-face meeting with people that they first meet on the internet, said that the event upset them. The decrease in 2016 to less than 6% might be due to an increase of awareness about the danger involved.

Online contacts of children with strangers, especially if they are followed by a face-to-face meeting, are rightfully regarded as one of the greatest online dangers, but at the same time they are also among the least frequent. Measures addressing this problem should therefore be appropriate and carefully considered. In most cases, children actually meet other children of similar age, and in majority of cases, they tell someone (a parent, a friend or other person they trust) where they are going and who they are about to meet. That said, there are children who take no precautions when engaging in online communication with strangers or meeting in person adults they do not know. It is essential to talk with children from the earliest age about the risks associated with online and offline contacts with strangers, and to explain them in clear and practical terms what they should do if an adult they do not know tries to contact them (notify the parents, gather and save the electronic evidence, contact the Hotline of the Bulgarian Safer Internet Centre).

Bullying (online and offline)

As shown by the table 11, **a growing number of children and teenagers are affected by bullying**, which is most often committed by their peers. The share of children affected by bullying has visibly increased in all age groups, but most substantially among the older teens. Bullying can be carried out as an act of revenge, hooliganism, meanness or for fun, but in all cases it can result in substantial harm caused to the victims, including deep emotional and psychological trauma.

Although face-to-face bullying is more common compared to online bullying, the latter can be in many ways more destructive than offline bullying, as it practically never stops and there are no safe havens, where victim could seek protection. Online harassment is also easily multiplied, as abusive and offensive images, videos or texts can go viral in a matter of minutes, deepening the victim's feeling of helplessness and hurt the target emotionally. Furthermore, children and teenagers, who are bullied offline, are often abused in the virtual space as well, where they are ridiculed on social network sites and chatrooms, or targeted by offensive and hurtful messages. One of the findings of the 2010 EU Kids Online study was that **online bullying seems to be more widespread in countries where bullying in general is more common and not in those countries, where internet access is more extensive**. That would lead to an assumption that online bullying is not a result of a new technology, but rather a modification of a long-established problem.[5]

Although children's perceptions about how others see them and what they think of them are not a direct evidence for the presence of bullying, they can serve as an important indication of possible abuse. 30% of children from the survey feel that other children are treated better than they are. 26% believe that others think that they are not smart, while 37.5% have a feeling that other kids do not see them as their equals. Finally, 22% say that other children sometimes or often call them with abusive names and offend them.

Table 10: Bad treatment – children's perceptions

	Not true at all	It is true to a small extent	It is quite true	It is completely true	I prefer not to answer
Other children are treated better than I am	66.3%	20.4%	5.0%	5.3%	3.1%
It seems that people think that I am not smart	71.3%	15.7%	6.7%	3.7%	2.6%
It seems that others think that they are better than I am	58.2%	21.4%	12.1%	4.0%	4.2%
Other children call me with abusive names and offend me	73.8%	14.3%	4.7%	2.7%	4.6%

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[5] *Risks and Safety on the Internet*, p. 62.

Almost 30% of children from our survey said that they have been mistreated or abused over the past one year. The gender differences are negligible, but the number of children, who were treated in an offensive and unpleasant way, grows steadily with their age. These findings are comparable to 2010 survey, which also revealed few differences in the share of boys and girls, who have been victims of bullying and a steady increase of bullying incidents from lower to higher age groups.

The practice of the Safer Internet Centre shows that most often online bullying starts at the age 10-12, when most children become active users of social networks. At this age, the motivation for bullying is often a desire to have fun at someone else's expense. But as the children grow up and start forming romantic relationships or looking for their place in the social circles of their peers, bullying can be used as a tool to humiliate a rival, to take revenge on a former or unanswered love interest, or to assert one's place in the peer-group hierarchy.

Table 11: During the last year, has someone behaved towards you in an abusive or nasty way?

|	No		Yes		I do not want to answer	
	2016	2010	2016	2010	2016	2010
All	68.6%	75.3%	28.7%	19.6%	2.7%	5.1%
Boys	68.9%	N/A	28.4%	N/A	2.7%	N/A
Girls	68.3%	N/A	29.0%	N/A	2.7%	N/A
9-11	74.3%	77.8%	24.0%	19.9%	1.8%	2.6%
12-14	67.9%	75.0%	29.2%	20.0%	2.9%	5.0%
15-17	62.2%	73.0%	34.1%	19.1%	3.7%	7.8%

For most children, who answered the above question with "yes," this unfortunate incident was a one-time occurrence. However, **almost 30% are treated badly on regular basis**, ranging from at least once per month to daily bullying.

Figure 5: How often did someone treat you in abusive or offensive way?
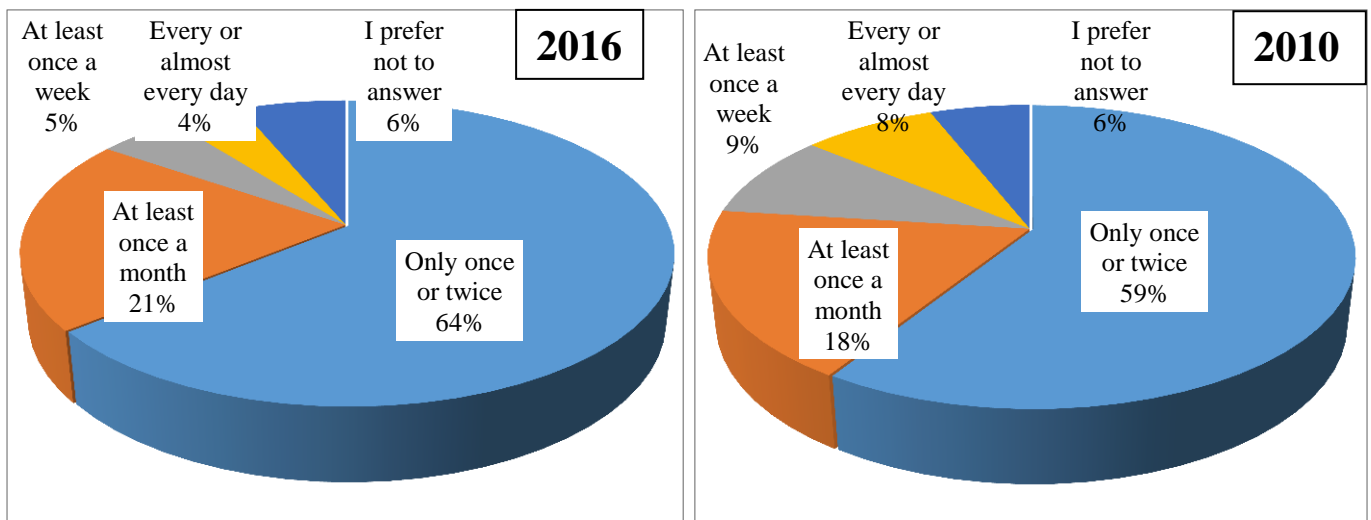
In most cases, the abuse occurred face-to-face (72.5), but online bullying is also very widespread (38%). The sum of all answers in Figure 6 is higher than 100%, because some children are bullied both online and offline.

Figure 6: Bad treatment – real versus virtual
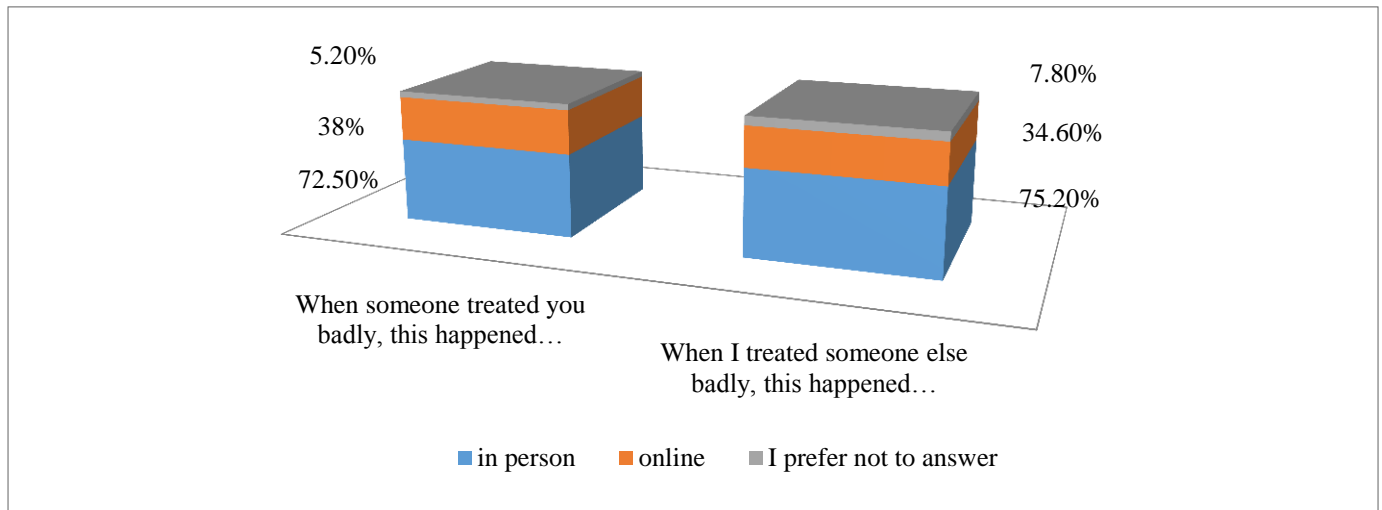
15.3% of children admit that they have insulted, abused or bullied others. This is a rather standard and expected result, as children and young people are usually less inclined to admit that they have behaved in such a way. Again, the face-to-face abuse/bullying occurred twice more often compared to online abuse (75.2% compared to 34.6%).

Inappropriate online content

Among the most common online risks for children are websites featuring content not suitable for minors and especially for young children. About one quarter of all survey participants have seen violent online materials, including images and videos of murders and executions. A similar share has encountered online hate speech, although different studies suggest that children and young persons are not always able to recognise or identify hate speech, making it probable that the real number is actually higher.

An important health risk for minors are websites promoting ways for rapid weight loss, which were seen by one out of every four participants. The websites propagating suicide as the only solution and escape from "the miserable life" were encountered by a relatively small minority of children. However, these sites can be extremely dangerous and damaging if seen by emotionally unstable children and teenagers. For this reason, the Safer Internet Centres and the International Association of Internet Hotlines INHOPE take great care to remove and block similar sites, while Facebook has an instrument for peer support of Facebook users sharing suicidal thoughts.

In 2016 study, the share of children, who were exposed to an upsetting online content, has visibly increased.

Table 12: During the last year, have you seen Internet pages or online discussions on the following subjects?

	No		Yes		I do not want to answer	
	2016	2010	2016	2010	2016	2010
Ways how to physically hurt yourself	80.2%	86.5%	17.8%	7.5%	2.0%	5.9%
Ways how to commit suicide	86.9%	90.7%	11.4%	4.8%	1.7%	4.5%
Ways how to rapidly lose weight	71.8%	74.7%	26.1%	19.3%	2.1%	6.0%
Hate speech attacking certain groups or persons (e.g. people of different skin colour, religion or nationality)	70.8%	72.4%	26.9%	19.8%	2.3%	7.8%
Use of narcotics	78.5%	85.4%	18.8%	7.5%	2.7%	7.1%
Images with blood and violence (e.g. killings and executions)	72.4%	N/A	25.3%	N/A	2.3%	N/A

Among the six topics listed in the table 12, scenes of violence like killings and executions were identified as the most upsetting – 45.5% of those who have seen them said they were very or exceptionally upset. About one third were upset by the websites connected with the use of narcotics or sites promoting ways for committing suicide. The least disturbing are the websites promoting weight loss (52.9% were not affected at all by such sites, while 15.3% were very or exceptionally upset).

Figure 7: During the last year, have you seen internet pages or online discussions on the following subjects?('yes' answers)
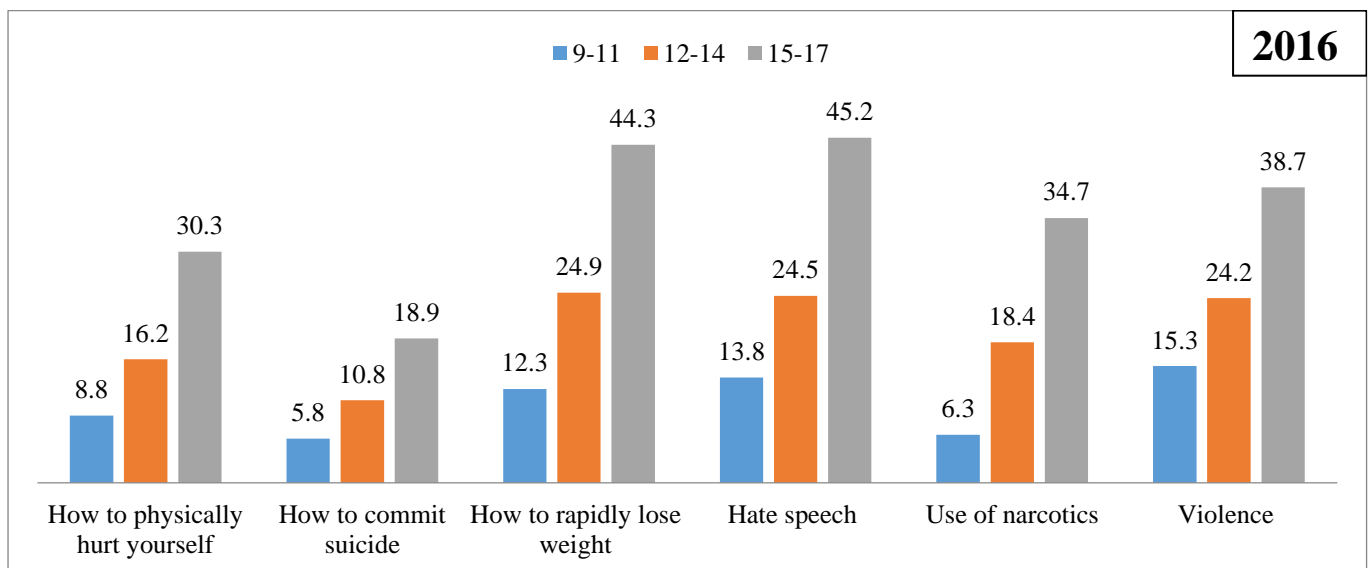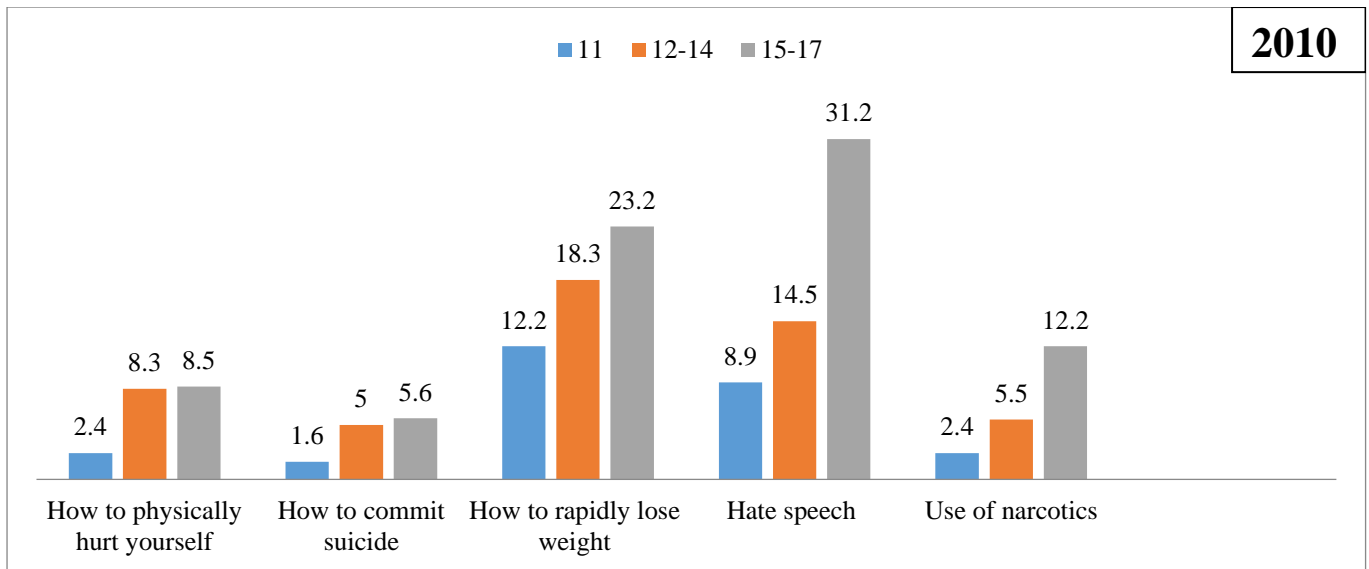
Division of the above results according to age groups shows that **the share of "yes" answers approximately doubles from 9-11 to 12-14 group, and then again to 15-17 group**. This is understandable, as younger children tend to visit predominantly sites they are familiar with, and are also subject to more strict parental mediation and control. As they grow older, parental mediation decreases, while curiosity and range of interests grow, leading the children to new and often inappropriate and unwanted online territories.

One specific type of inappropriate online content children and teenagers most often come across, either intentionally or unintentionally is **pornography – seen by 35.1% of participants during the last year**. Pornography might be very shocking and disturbing for children, who end up seeing such images and videos accidently – while looking at other websites and opening a deceiving link. Many teens probably deliberately visit pornographic sites, driven by their natural curiosity about sex and sexuality, but even they are not immune to a range of potential negative effects (feelings of guilt and shame, confusing perception about sexual relations, unrealistic expectations).

Table 13: During the last year, have you seen pictures or videos with sexual content (online, on TV, in magazines)?

	No	Yes	I do not want to answer
All /1 000/	59.2%	35.1%	5.7%
Boy /511/	57.9%	35.6%	6.5%
Girl /489/	60.5%	34.6%	4.9%
9-11 /400/	80.5%	15.3%	4.3%
12-14 /277/	57.8%	36.5%	5.8%
15-17 /323/	34.1%	58.5%	7.4%

Compared to 2010, we can observe a notable increase in exposure to inappropriate online content. In the previous survey, only 20% of participating children said that they have seen websites with sexual images over the past 12 months.

As seen in the table 13, **the gender differences are negligible, while the exposure to sexual images increases rapidly with age** – from 15.3% for 9-11 age group to almost 60% for those aged

15-17. Most children (71.8%) have seen pornographic or erotic materials online, through their smartphones, tablets or computers, but TV is also a frequent source of these images (57.8%). Overall, encounters with pornography are not a pleasant experience for children, as only a small minority admitted liking it. For almost half of the participants, seeing sexual content made them feel somewhat, quite or very uncomfortable.

Figure 8: If you have seen sexual materials, how did you feel when you saw them?
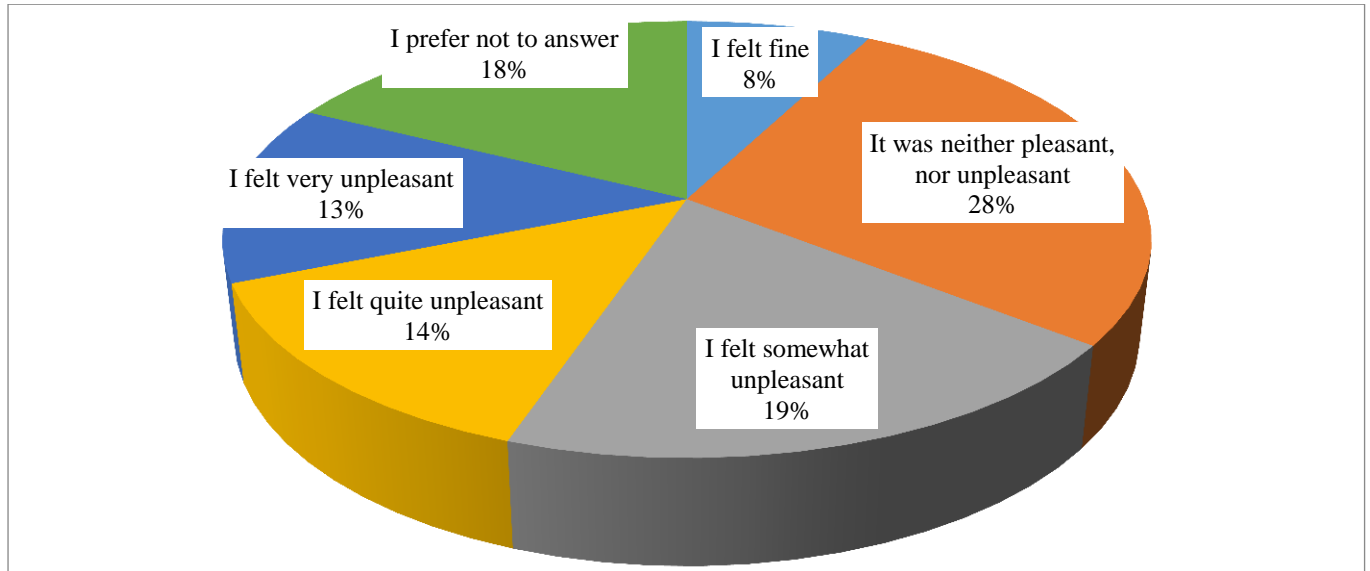
Sexting and sexual harassment

Sexting is a term describing sending messages, pictures or videos with explicitly sexual content. A sexting message often consists of a nude photo, but videos of sexual intercourse or masturbation are also common. While it carries a particular risk, sexting practiced by consenting adults is not a problem. However, when minors are involved, sexting might quickly cross the thin line between innocent flirting and production and distribution of child pornography. Furthermore, if such pictures or videos are shared with other people or posted online, they can lead to real and virtual bullying and to grooming and extortion by paedophiles.

Table 14: During the last year, have you received messages (text, photo, video) with sexual content?

| | No | | Yes | | I do not want to answer | |
	2016	2010	2016	2010	2016	2010
All	85.0%	74.8	10.5%	12.4	4.5%	12.8
Boys	86.3%	N/A	9.0%	N/A	4.7%	N/A
Girls	83.6%	N/A	12.1%	N/A	4.3%	N/A
9-11	95.3%	81.3	2.0%	4.1	2.8%	14.6
12-14	84.8%	76.9	10.5%	10.2	4.7%	12.9
15-17	72.4%	69.6	21.1%	18.5	6.5%	11.9

105 children (46 boys and 59 girls) from our sample said that over the past year, they received messages containing sexual pictures, videos or text. For about half of them (53.3%), this was incidental – it only happened once or twice. One third of these children said that they receive sexual messages regularly (18% at least once per month, 10.5% at least once a week, and 3% every day). The remaining 15 percent preferred not to answer.

The comparison of the results from 2016 and 2010 surveys is a bit problematic due to a very large share of "I do not want to answer" options in 2010 (see Table 14). A tentative conclusion is that the practice of sexting appears not to be spreading among children and young people in Bulgaria, but remains relatively stable, affecting 10-12%.

Nevertheless, sexting is an important and serious problem. **For every second child, who received a message with sexual content, this was an unpleasant experience.**

Figure 9: If you have received messages with sexual content, how did you feel when you saw them?
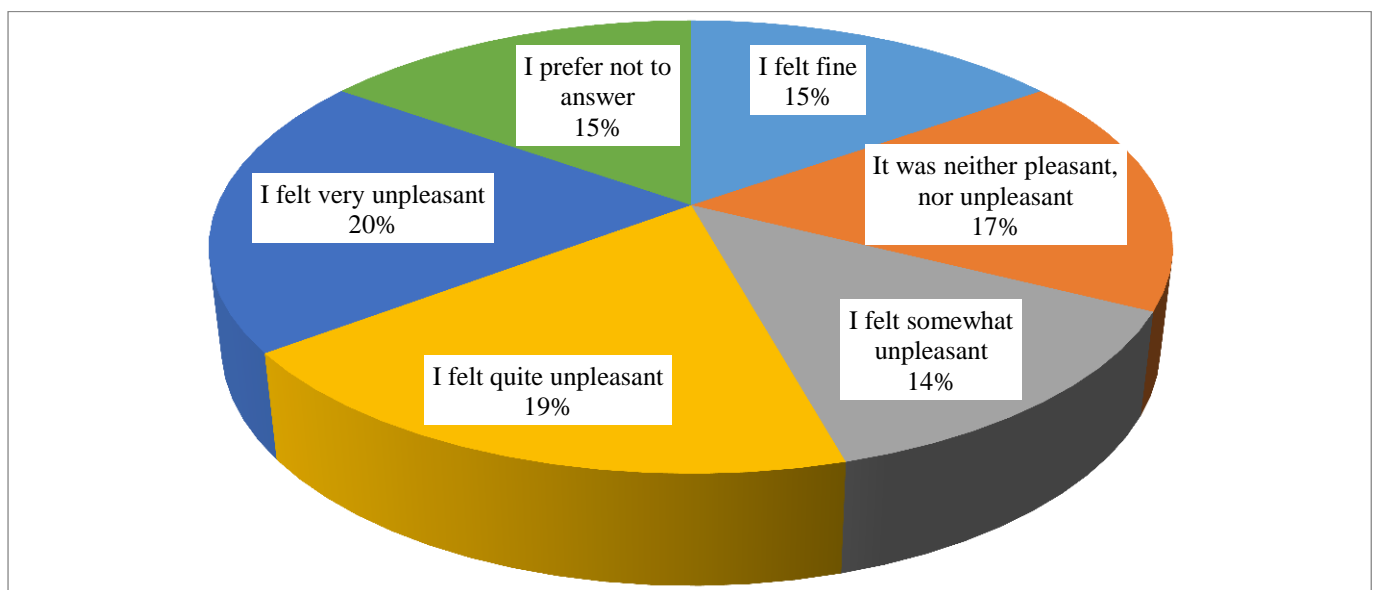
19 children (9 boys and 10 girls) said that they uploaded or sent to someone else a message containing sexual pictures, videos or text. 3 of these children are younger than 11, 4 are aged 12-14, and 12 are older than 15. Asked how often they send or upload sexual content, the children provided the following answers: every day (2 children), every week (2 children), every month (5 children), once or twice during the last year (5 children). 5 children preferred not to answer this question.

25 children (2.5%; 6 boys and 19 girls) declared that during the past year, they were asked by someone to share a personal information of sexual character. Most of them (19) were older than 15, but such request was addressed also to 2 children aged 12-14 and 4 children younger than 11. In 44% of these cases, the children did what was asked from them. This event has greatly upset 7 children, while 3 said that they were somewhat upset. Slightly fewer children (19; 10 boys and 9 girls) were asked to talk about a sexual act. 4 of them were younger than 11, while 12 were older than 15. Almost half of them (47%) agreed to do what was asked.

Figure 10: In the past 12 months, have you sent or posted a sexual message (example: words, pictures or video) of any kind on the Internet?
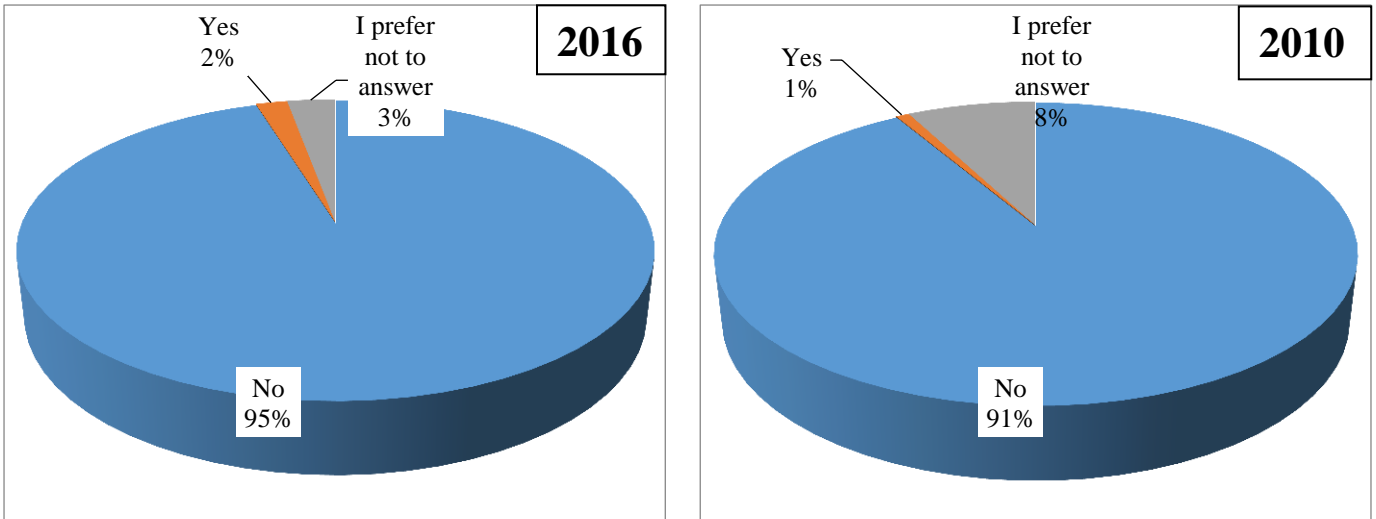
15 children (4 boys and 11 girls; 3 younger than 11, 1 aged 12-14, and 11 older than 15) were asked to send someone a picture or video on which they were naked or which depicted their intimate parts. **Six of these children complied and sent their nude photo/video**.

Figure 11: Number of children, who...
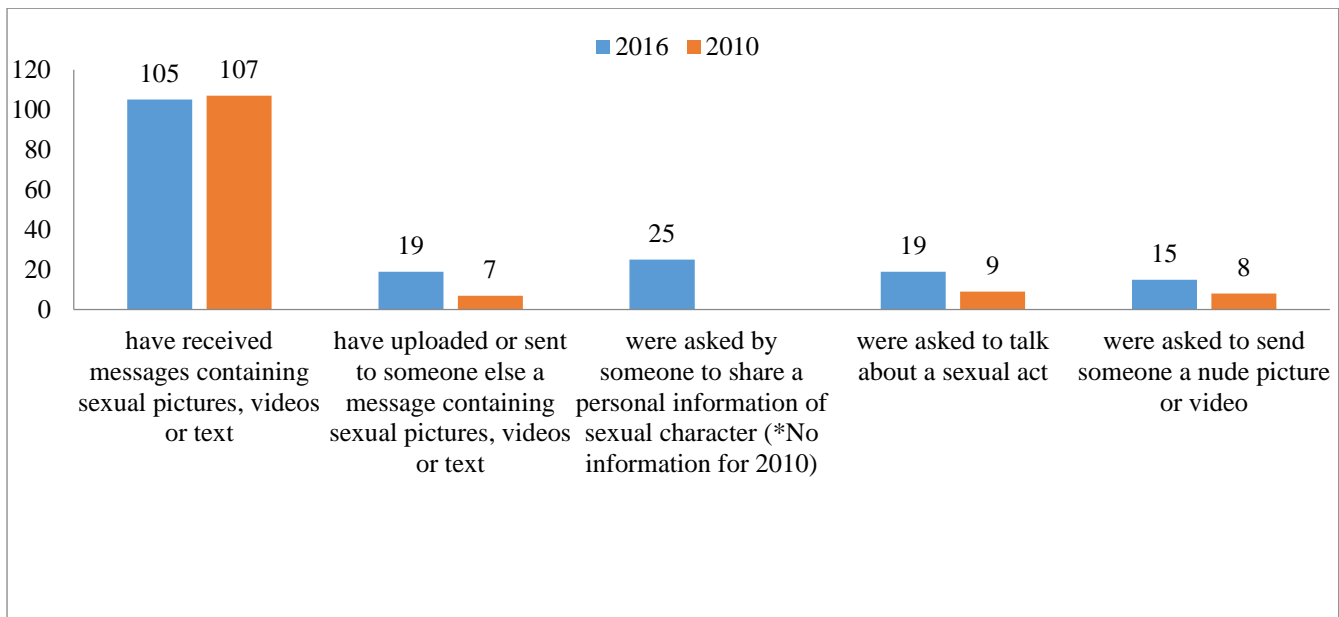
Other negative online experiences

Every fourth child declared that the device they use was infected with a virus. Abuse / theft of personal information or online identity is not widespread, being reported by less than 6% of children. Here again **the share of children affected by the above listed problems increases proportionally with their age**. It is interesting to note that all these events have been quite distressing for children (between 40 and 47% were very or exceptionally upset). The only exception is the last situation (I spent too much money on online games) – 56.5 were not affected at all, while

only 8.7% were very upset. However, the sample (23 children out of 1000) is too small to make definite conclusions.

Table 15: During the last year, have any of these things happened to you?

	No		Yes		I do not want to answer	
	2016	2010	2016	2010	2016	2010
Someone used my personal information in a way I did not like	92.1%	89.3%	5.9%	3.9%	2.0%	6.7%
Device I use (e.g. Smartphone, tablet, computer) was infected by a virus	72.1%	46.1%	26.1%	44.4%	1.8%	9.5%
I was cheated online and I lost money because of that	96.5%	94.3%	1.5%	0.7%	2.0%	5.0%
Someone used my password to obtain my personal information or to pretend to be me	92.5%	89.2%	5.6%	5.1%	1.9%	5.7%
Someone created a webpage or materials (video, photos) ridiculing and offending me	95.2%	N/A	2.0%	N/A	2.8%	N/A
I spent too much money on online games or purchasing things through applications	94.0%	N/A	2.3%	N/A	3.7%	N/A

A comparison with the 2010 survey shows that no significant changes have occurred – with one exception. The share of children, whose devices were infected by a virus, has decreased almost by half. This could indicate that children and their parents now take a much greater care to install different anti-virus programmes and keep them updated and that in general, more attention is being paid to keeping the devices clean and safe.

Excessive internet use

The **opinion that children spend excessive amount of time in front of a screen and that they become addicted to digital technologies is quite widespread among parents** and often promoted in media. Although this view is also supported by some researchers and psychologists,[6] it is not completely valid. One of the most widespread concerns is that children neglect face-to-face communication at the expense of online conversation. Numerous studies, however, show that the most active social network users also maintain the most active real life social contacts and

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[6] See for example Kardaras, N. (2016). *Glow Kids: How Screen Addiction Is Hijacking Our Kids -- And How to Break the Trance*. New York: St. Martin's Press; Strohman, L. K, Westendorf, M. J. (2015). *Unplug*: *Raising Kids In a Technology Addicted World*. Lulu Publishing Services.

interactions.[7] They perceive digital technologies as extension of their social environment and a comfortable way of being permanently in touch with their friends and acquaintances.

That being said, the excessive internet use can in some cases cause serious disruptions and impede the normal development of children and teenagers. When this happens, it is almost certain that the child is experiencing a grave emotional or psychological problem, as he or she uses internet as a refuge to hide from the outside world. **The excessive internet use is therefore a symptom, not a cause of problems, but it is important to monitor it, as it can be a crucial warning sign regarding the child's wellbeing**.

Table 16: During the last year, have any of these things happened to you?

2016	Never	Almost never	Sometimes	Often	Very often
I have gone without eating or sleeping because of the Internet	62.9%	14.4%	18.0%	3.5%	1.2%
I argued with family or friends over the time I spend online	52.1%	17.7%	23.8%	4.5%	1.9%
I feel I have to frequently check my device (telephone or computer) to see if something new has happened	43.6%	13.5%	20.0%	13.5%	9.4%
I tried to spend less time online, but I did not succeed	65.0%	15.4%	13.8%	3.9%	1.9%
My school grades got lower because of the time I spend online	72.3%	14.6%	10.1%	2.1%	0.9%
I believe that the amount of time I spend in the Internet is causing me problems	69.4%	14.7%	12.0%	2.2%	1.7%

2010	Never / Almost never	Sometimes	Often	Very often
I have gone without eating or sleeping because of the Internet	64.8%	27.6%	5.6%	1.9%
I felt bothered when I cannot be on the Internet	32.1%	37.5%	19.6%	10.8%
I caught myself surfing when I'm not really interested	53.7%	32.2%	9.9%	4.1%
I tried to spend less time online, but I did not succeed	53.3%	29.8%	11.5%	5.4%
I spent less time than I should with family, friends or doing schoolwork because of the time I spent on the Internet	63.3%	24.9%	8.7%	3.1%

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[7] Boyd, D. (2014). *It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens*. Yale University Press.

The results show that excessive internet use is not a significant problem. The only relatively high number of answers "often" and "very often" was given to the question "I feel I have to frequently check my device," but this urge is less a symptom of addiction to the virtual life than an understandable desire for communication and socialisation, typical for teenagers. It is interesting to note that 10% of participants aged 15-17 have been arguing with their families or friends over the time they spend online (in comparison, this was reported by 7% of those aged 12-14, and 3% in the 9-11 group).

In 2010, the Bulgarian children ranked third among the 25 participating countries regarding the self-reported excessive internet use, with 44% of children experiencing one or more forms of excessive use (in comparison, the average result for the 25 countries was 30%).

Prevention, protection and support

Family and friends represent the most trusted support network for the children, who have experienced something negative online. They most often turn for help, advice or support to their mothers (or other female carer) – 47%, fathers (or other male carer) – 23%, brothers or sisters – 12%, or a friend of a similar age – 36%. Additionally, 11% of children have turned to other adults they trust (for example a teacher), while 18% preferred not to share the experience with anyone and to deal with it alone.
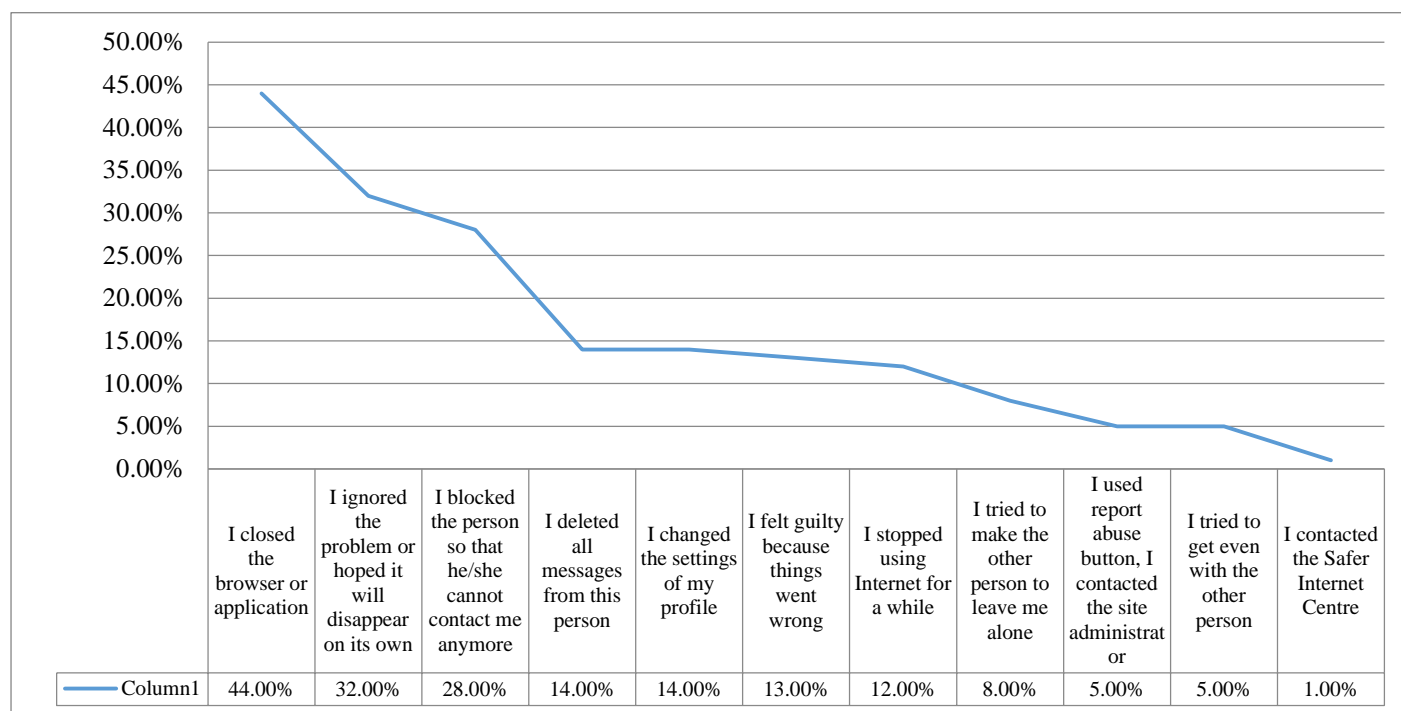
Table 17: When you are bothered about something, you talk to your...

	2016	2010
mother or father	70%	71.2%
friend	36%	51.3%
brother or sister	12%	16.3%
nobody	18%	3.5%
teacher	4%	7%
other trusted adult	4%	18.6%
someone else	3%	4.9%
prefer not to tell	2%	2.2%
someone whose job it is to help children	1%	0.5%

Before looking for help and support from other people, children often try to deal with the problem on their own. The Figure 12 presents the most popular strategies for handling online incidents. **The four most popular responses are based on a similar premise – the hope that the problem may somehow go away.** Almost half of the children instinctively close the unpleasant, disturbing or unwanted website or application, or they ignore it hoping that the problem is a temporary one and will disappear after a while. A similar tactic is preferred in case of unwanted or abusive communication with another person – blocking and deleting the messages. Only a small minority of children have reported the problem to the site administrator and even less have contacted the Safer

Internet Centre (this is not surprising, given that 82.5% of survey participants have not heard about or do not know what SIC is – see Table 19 below).

Figure 12: What did you do the last time when something upset or disturbed you online?

	I closed the browser or application	I ignored the problem or hoped it will disappear on its own	I blocked the person so that he/she cannot contact me anymore	I deleted all messages from this person	I changed the settings of my profile	I felt guilty because things went wrong	I stopped using Internet for a while	I tried to make the other person to leave me alone	I used report abuse button, I contacted the site administrator	I tried to get even with the other person	I contacted the Safer Internet Centre
Column1	44.00%	32.00%	28.00%	14.00%	14.00%	13.00%	12.00%	8.00%	5.00%	5.00%	1.00%

According to parents, the children become more capable to deal with things that bother or upset them online as they grow older, hence they need less help from their parents. **The age of 9 is the borderline at which the parental mediation sharply increases, but when the children turn 12, it starts gradually to become less intensive**.

Table 18 (question for parents): When your child uses internet, do you…?:

	All parents		Parents of children aged 9-11		Parents of children aged 12-14		Parents of children aged 15-17	
	2016	2010	2016	2010	2016	2010	2016	2010
Talk with your child about what he/she should do if something upsets him/her online	39.8%	60.6%	43.8%	65.0%	38.6%	62.0%	35.9%	53.7%
Help your child when something upsets or bothers him/her online	27.3%	23.3%	34.5%	28.3%	23.1%	21.6%	22.0%	20.0%
Show him/her how to use Internet in a safe way	36.1%	68.8%	47.0%	78.9%	33.2%	70.7%	25.1%	55.2%
Explain him/her why some web pages are appropriate and inappropriate	35.0%	65.2%	42.5%	75.7%	34.3%	68.2%	26.3%	49.8%

The comparison between the two surveys displays an alarming decrease in the parental mediation and support. While in 2010, about two thirds of parents talked with the children on issues related to online safety, now just over a third engages in such conversations. This is another factor with a very negative influence over safe and positive internet use among children.

On a more positive note, over half of the children are aware of buttons for blocking unwanted contacts (29.3% have already used this option to prevent someone from viewing their profiles or communicating with them) or for reporting inappropriate online conduct (14% have actually reported such a case). Unfortunately, the website of the national Safer Internet Centre, along with its Hotline for reporting and Helpline for consultations are not widely known among children, which means that more effort will need to be invested in awareness-raising and increasing the Centre's visibility.

Table 19: Have you seen any of the following things online?

	I don't know what this is	No, I have not seen it	Yes, I have seen it	Yes, I have used it	I do not want to answer
Button for blocking (the unwanted users)	12.5%	14.8%	42.9%	29.3%	0.5%
Button for reporting (the inappropriate conduct)	18.3%	25.6%	41.6%	14.0%	0.5%
Helpdesk or other possibility for contacting the site administrator	27.9%	34.5%	32.1%	5.0%	0.5%
Website of the National Safer Internet Centre Safenet.bg	39.3%	43.2%	14.6%	2.2%	0.7%

Conclusion: Potential for risks

The 2016 survey and especially the comparison with its 2010 predecessor have brought four several important issues that need urgent attention from experts involved with promoting and providing safe and positive online environment for children, as well as from teachers and other educators, policy-makers, ICT businesses and last but not least – children and their parents.

The survey has established that **97% of Bulgarian children aged 9-17 are active internet users**, which is a considerable increase compared to the previous survey. **More than half of them are online practically every day.** This means that practically all children above 9 are potentially exposed to a variety of online risks and dangers. Furthermore, the age at which children enter the digital world is steadily decreasing. In 2010, most typical age of the first online experience was 10, in 2016 a quarter of all children became internet users, when they were only 7 years old.

- **10% of children from the survey have picked up their first digital device when they were 4 or 5**. The younger age at which children start to actively use digital technologies is an important factor making them more vulnerable to various online risks and potential harm. At

this age, their technical abilities are considerably more developed than their social skills, digital literacy and abilities to recognize and avoid risky online behaviour.

- **The number of children who say that during the past year, they were upset, bothered or frightened by something they have seen online, increased from 10% to 15%.** The older the children are, the more likely it is that they will come across inappropriate online content. However, the share of children, who have seen upsetting web pages has visibly risen in all age groups, including in the youngest one.

- Social network are the second most popular online activity and **children without a profile in at least one social network are a clear minority** (13%). Compared to 2010, the share of young social networkers has increased dramatically – from 54% to 87%. The number of youngest users (9-11) has more than doubled and now, three quarters have at least one social network profile (most often Facebook).

- The potential for risk associated with social networks is further increased by the fact that **a third of the children keep their profiles public and thus visible to anyone**. In 2016, children are considerably more willing to post personal information on their social network accounts than they were in 2010. Most often they post photographs clearly showing their faces, their names, schools and hobbies. Fortunately, they are more careful with their phone numbers and home addresses. However, this sensitive information of about 5% of children is freely available and can be accessed by everyone on the Web, including potential predators.

- **One third of children has been contacted online and has communicated with someone they have never met face-to-face**. The gender makes practically no difference in this respect, while the differences across the age groups are large. A cause for further concern is that one in every five children proceeded to meeting in person somebody they have previously "known" only from internet. Compared to the 2010 survey, we can note that a significantly larger share of older teens is willing to move from virtual to real contact, which indicates that **for children older than 15, meeting new people over the internet is becoming a norm**.

- The incidents involving different kinds of online bullying are another risk a growing number of children are exposed to. **The share of children, which have been victims of online abuse, has risen from 20% to almost 30% in the past six years**. Both surveys revealed that there are no differences between boys and girls, but the older the children of both genders are, the more likely it becomes that they could be treated in an offensive and unpleasant way. Among the children, who have been victims of bullying, almost 30% are treated badly on regular basis. Face-to-face bullying is almost twice as common as online bullying.

- While **sexting** (sending and receiving messages with sexual context) is not a negligible issue (it **affects about 10% of all children and over 20% of older teenagers**), the results of 2016 survey are comparable to 2010, which means that the practice of sharing sexualised texts, pictures or videos is not spreading. Nevertheless, sexting is an important and serious problem. For every second child, who has received a massage with sexual content, this was an unpleasant experience.

- Like all internet users, children are at risks of infecting their device with viruses or other malware. Less than half of the children say that they know how to look up information on safe use of their smartphone or tablet. This problem is reasonably most pronounced among the younger children (9-11). On the other hand, a notable decrease of such incidents from 2010 to 2016 gives credence to assumption that both **the children's parents and the children**

themselves now take a much greater care to keep the devices protected by different anti-virus programmes.

- Unfortunately, installing anti-virus protection is quite often the only way in which parents mediate in the way their children use the digital devices. A thorough analysis of the survey data and a comparison between the results from interviews with parents and interviews with children confirm the findings from numerous other studies – namely, that in most cases, the children's technical skills surpass the abilities of their parents. The survey shows that **the share of parents, who** find time, and are interested, informed and confident enough to **talk with their children on various aspects of safe, positive and constructive internet use, has decreased almost by half compared to 2010**.

Recommendations

1. **Digital literacy education in all stages of education process**: The continuously increasing share of children are becoming active digital users before they start going to the first grade. The need to build and enhance their digital and media literacy as early as possible is therefore an increasingly urgent task. It is essential to introduce elements of early digital literacy training with enhanced focus on online safety even in preschools. The ICT education in primary school at present mostly underlines technical skills, while online safety, critical understanding and evaluation of information, netiquette and other social skills for safe and responsible use of digital technologies are underrepresented. The potential for constructive and beneficial inclusion of digital technologies into a classroom and educational process has also been only modestly exploited to date.

2. **Targeted programmes and actions for the critical age group (12-14 year-olds)**: The survey has shown that in several areas, this age group is the most risky one. On the one hand, parental mediation and supervision decreases substantially compared to the group of younger children. At the same time, the natural curiosity and the urge to experiment and explore both online and offline can expose these children to potentially dangerous situations. 12-14 year-olds therefore need special attention in the form of trainings, awareness-raising and information campaigns. These need to be tailored to their needs and interests, and communicated in way and language they can easily relate with.

3. **Develop and promote social network platforms for the young people**: Despite the fact that the age limit for use of the most popular social networks is 13, considerable majority of children below this age have at least one social network profile (most often Facebook). The current debates whether to increase the access age to 16 will only deepen the problem. It is beyond doubt that restrictions will not keep the children away from what is their second most popular online activity. Instead, they need to be provided with accessible and attractive alternatives with enhanced safety settings, preventing the youngsters from posting sensitive information about themselves and their peers.

4. **Involve more children in various peer-to-peer training programmes**: Some of the most widespread and typical risks associated with the use of digital technologies are connected with online interactions of children and young people (various forms of online bullying, sexting, sharing of illegal or inappropriate content). The practice has shown that the most effective way for teaching the children how to use digital technologies in a safe and responsible way is through mediation of their peers. Training of young trainers should be undertaken in a partnership

between NGOs, schools, state institutions and corporate actors to achieve best and lasting results.

5. **Promote and assist parental involvement and mediation**: While the generation of digital natives is struggling to find the proper balance between opportunities and dangers in the digital world, many of their parents feel powerless, incompetent or too busy to help them out. In addition to efforts aimed at helping children to master the skills of digital and media literacy, considerable attention needs to be devoted to helping and empowering parents, so that they could meaningfully participate in stirring their children's boats through the stormy waters of the digital ocean.

6. **Enhance the visibility and recognisability of Safer Internet Centre and other similar institutions and programmes**: The survey has shown that only a small minority of children know about and even less have used the services or assistance of the Safer Internet Centre. The experience and established partnerships with schools, businesses and institutions need to be used to better promote the Centre and its programmes, and additional efforts need to be put into building new partnerships and enhance the visibility.

Methodology

In September 2016, the Applied Research and Communication Fund, coordinator of the Bulgarian Safer Internet Centre in cooperation with the MarketLinks agency conducted a national representative survey titled "Online Conduct of Children in Bulgaria." The survey, which is a part of the larger European-wide research "EU Kids Online 2016-2017," examined how children and young people engage with the internet and digital technologies in their everyday lives. A total of 1000 children and 1000 parents were interviewed across Bulgaria. The researchers visited families in their homes and conducted two comprehensive face-to-face interviews – with one child and one parent. The parents were interviewed not only about the online behaviour and habitual use of internet by their children, but about their own internet use as well. The interview questionnaires were initially developed by the *EU Kids Online* research network and updated by the *Global Kids Online* network.

Figure 13: Demographic data of children (number of interviewed children = 1,000)
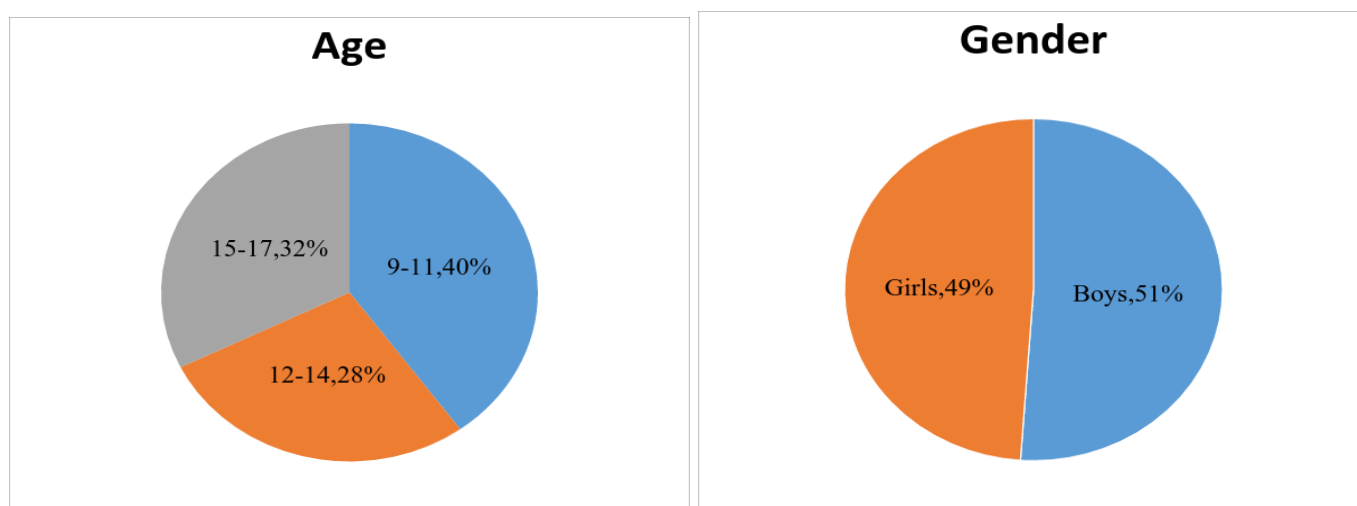
The design of the sample was a multistage cluster random sample stratified by region and place of residence (capital, city, medium-sized city and small town), combined with quota of ethnicity. The study divided the children into three age categories based on the assumption of differences in habitual use and skills: children aged 9-11, children aged 12-14 years and children aged 15-17 (see Figure 13).

Since adults were interviewed in their capacity of parents, they are also divided into categories according to the age of their children. Among 1.000 parents interviewed 79.4% were women (72% were mothers) and 20.6% were men (18.2% fathers). All 1000 interviewed families had at least one child aged between 9 and 17, but out of this group, 130 families also had children less than 9 years of age. In these cases, parents were also asked specific questions related to the younger children to obtain additional insights about what children younger than 9 do online.

The child surveys took about 45-60 minutes to complete, and the parent surveys took about 15-20 minutes to complete. The survey covered several important themes: children's access to internet and their online practice; their online skills and abilities; their digital environment; parental support and mediation; and issues dealing with risks and safety. Different demographic data and information on family and social surroundings were also gathered. The Bulgarian Safer Internet Centre used the results from the survey to produce three reports. The first report focuses on the online risks the children and young people are exposed to in the digital world. The second paper covers the topics of parental mediation. The third report focuses on children's digital and media literacy skills.

Where appropriate and where comparable data were available, these reports juxtaposes the results from the 2016 survey with the research, conducted by the EU Kids Online during spring and summer 2010 in 25 European countries, including Bulgaria.

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