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Save the Children



Familiar strangers

Report on the online friendships of children and young people in social media



<http://ec.europa.eu/saferinternet>

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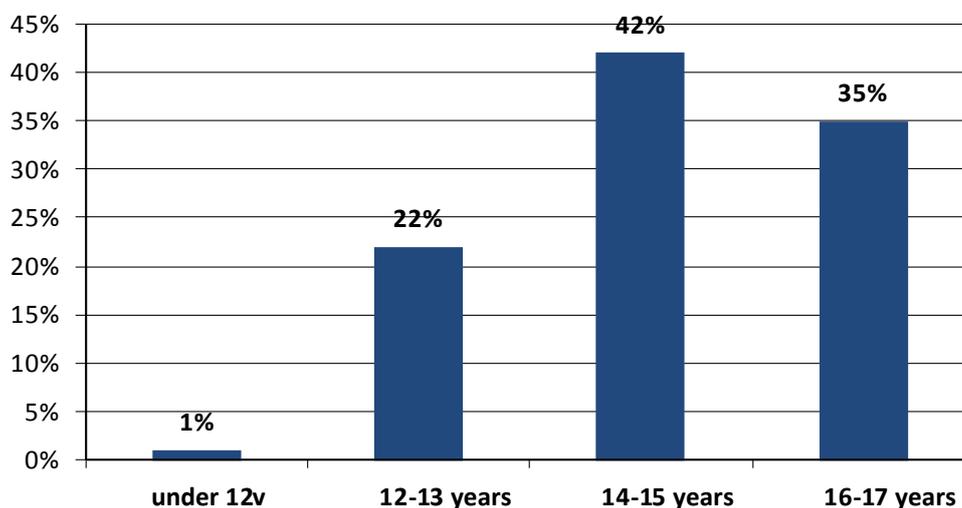
In September 2010 Save the Children carried out a survey of the experiences of children and young people concerning the acquaintanceships and friendships they establish on the internet. The survey brings together information on children's and young people's positive and negative experiences concerning online friendships: how common such online contacts are, how close friendships are established and maintained online, the sorts of things discussed with online friends, and how online friendships differ from real life friendships.

The survey reached a total of 1 227 children and

young people. Survey respondents were members of IRC Galleria and users of Suomi24, which are social media communities frequented by young people. The target group sought was predominantly web users under the age of 18, who comprised 778 (64%) of the respondents.

An 'online friend' in the poll referred to someone who a young person has become familiar with on the internet, but who is not known to them in real life. The primary aim of the survey was to reach young people in their own online environment and to learn about their experiences of online friendships in their own words. The results of the survey reflect the experiences of respondents who frequent popular online communities and cannot be generalised as relating to all young people.

Survey respondents by age group (778)



The majority of the 778 respondents were girls, comprising 78% (607 respondents). 22% (171) of the respondents were boys.

Of the young people who took part in the survey:

- 76 % use the internet in their own rooms at home;
- 79 % use the internet every day, for an average of 2-3 hours a day. A fifth of respondents use it for up to 4-5 hours a day;
- 77% use the net predominantly for instant messaging and skypeing with friends, and 67% for updating their own, reading or commenting on other's internet profiles, websites or blogs;
- Respondents use either private services for messaging (such as MSM messenger) or public chat services on average for 1-2 hours a day (42%), while some do so for 3-5 hours a day (31%);
- 56% sometimes or often use mobile phones to access the internet. 20% of respondents had surfed the web on their friend's phone;
- 86% could envisage making friends with a new person online, and 42% also found that it was easy to get to know new people online;
- 81% have friends online who they have never met in real life;
- 63% had swapped phone numbers with their online friends, and 56% had swapped photos; Just over half of respondents had used webcams in their conversations with online friends;
- over 90% mentioned that they know the names, age, gender and place of residence of their online friends;
- 64% had met or could envisage meeting the people they had met on line in real life;
- 90% mentioned that meeting their online friends had been "just as I thought it would be".

Social media as part of everyday life

For many children and young people social media are an important means of communicating with friends. Social media are being increasingly used as channels for establishing new friendships.

Various online communities and chat services provide a favourable terrain for getting to know people. According to young users of the IRC Galleria and Suomi24 websites, the positive aspects of getting to know people online are that it is easier to meet likeminded people and anonymity. For the young respondents there is a lower threshold for initiating conversation because there is no need to first of all talk face-to-face. Just over 80% of young people had, according to the survey replies, made new friends online.

The majority of the respondents use the internet every day. Most time spent online is used for socialising. Instant messaging services, such as MSN messenger and different social networks and media such as IRC Galleria, Facebook and YouTube, are especially important to young people. Various sorts of blogs and online forums also attract young people to talk about different subjects and points of interest.



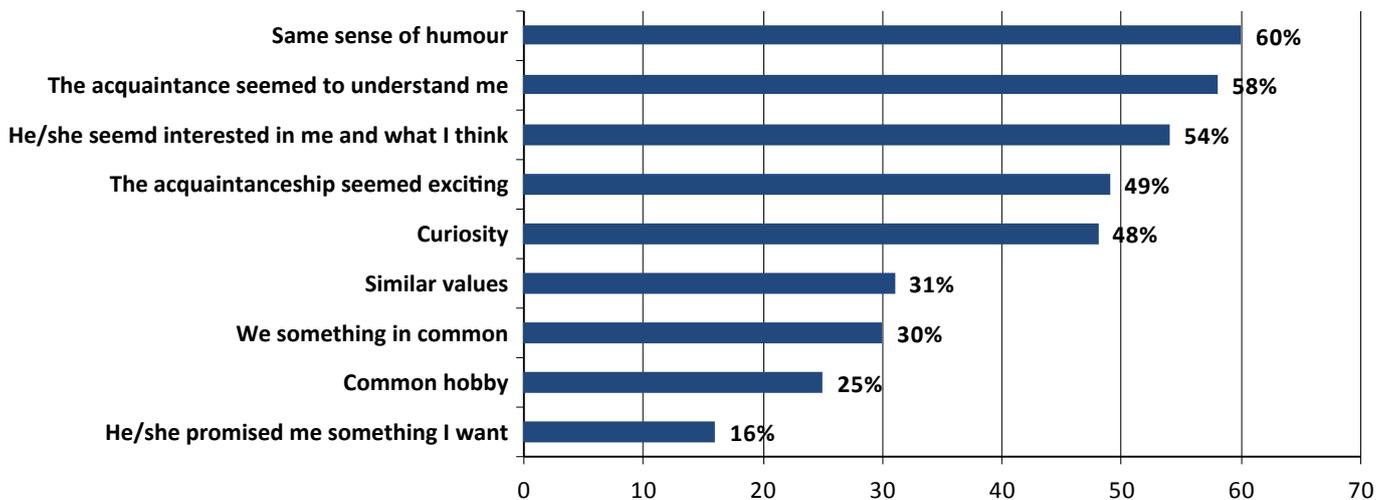


“All you do is write ‘Hi’ and the friendship begins :-D”

According to young people, it is easy to get to know people online. The first contact with a new person can come about through just about any online community or service: friendships may start up by writing to an on-line forum or in connection with playing games online. Sharing the same sense humour, a feeling that an online

friend understands the young person and the experience of the online friend showing an interest in the young person and his/her thoughts, become strong motivations to pursue contacts after the initial one. Also, the excitement and curiosity about a new person influence the young person's desire to get to know their online friend better.

What prompted you to keep in touch following the initial contact? (about 632)

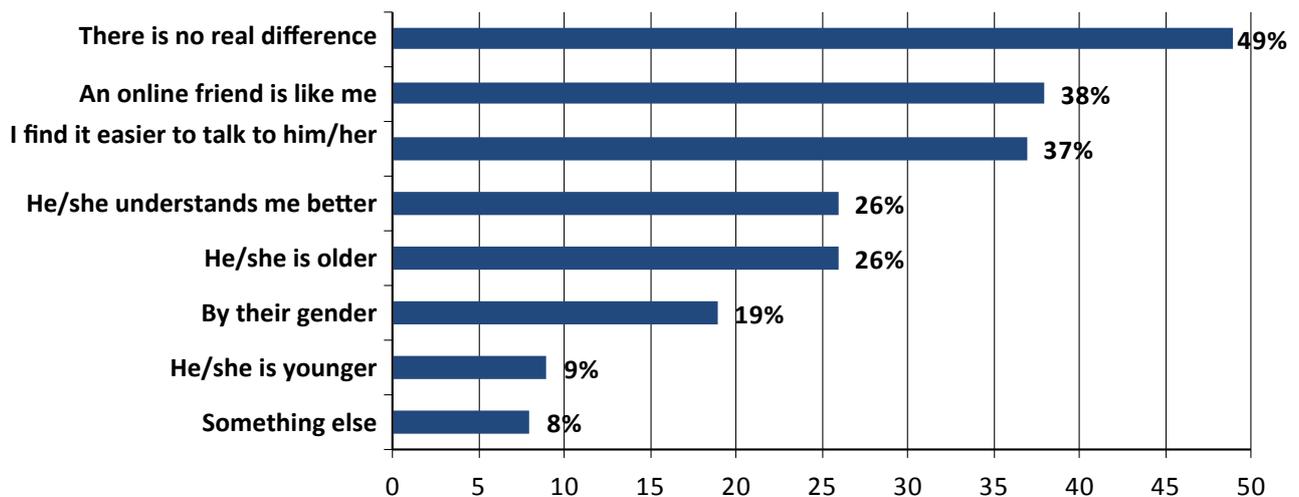


The things discussed with an online friend may be “anything” – ranging from school and hobbies to friends and specific feelings. Talking about friends and music emerged as the favourite topics of discussion with online friends.

Nearly half of the young people surveyed feel that they can talk confidentially about any subject with their online friends. Only 7% of respondents felt that they could not trust their online friends. For the majority of

respondents there is no real difference between real-life and online friends. Over a third of the young people nevertheless feel that it is easier to talk to an online friend than with friends in real life. It is often felt that an online friend is more similar to oneself. The online friends of nearly a third of the young respondents are older than their real-life friends.

How does an online friend differ from real-life friend? (about 632)

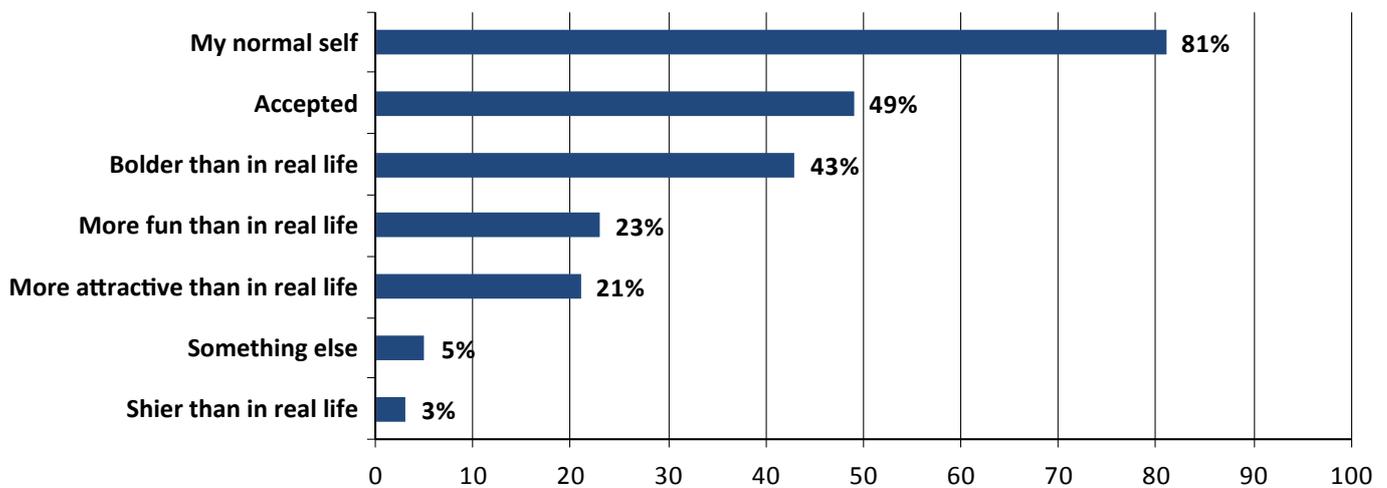


“There are no preconceptions about one another, and appearance is insignificant”

According to the respondents, the relative sense of anonymity felt online offers the scope and freedom to “be yourself”, and you don’t need to think “do I look stupid or am I blushing?” The majority of the young people surveyed feel that they are their normal selves when dis-

cussing over the web, but many mention that they can be more open online than in real life. There is less of a feeling of social pressure in cyberspace, “it doesn’t matter if you mess up” and the internet is felt to be a “tolerant” place.

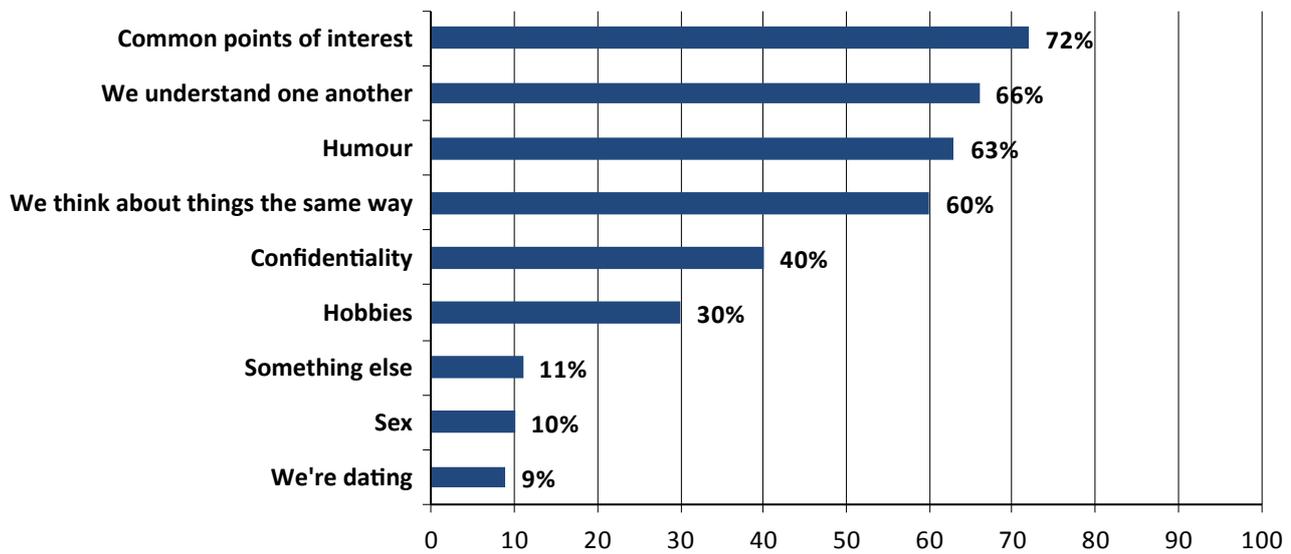
When I chat with an online friend I feel (about 632)



Nearly half of the young people feel more accepted and bolder in online social situations than in real life. A fifth of the young respondents also felt that they are more attractive and more fun when interacting online than in real life. According to the respondents, anonym-

ity brings self-confidence. Many of the young people find that when interacting online there is the time to think in peace and to work out what to say: "I can always explain my pausing to think by saying that I went to the fridge to get something to drink."

What do I have in common with my online friend (about 632)



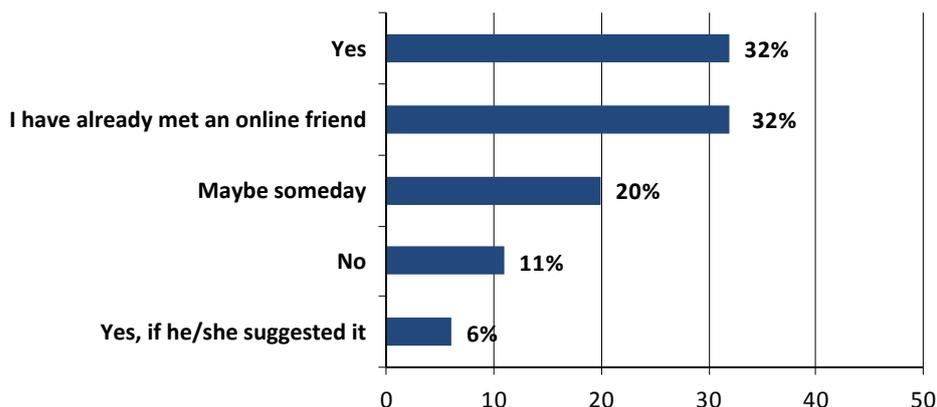
According to the young respondents, the essential factors that seal and sustain online friendships are having common points of interest, mutual understanding, similar sense of humour and the feeling that they think about things the same way as their online friend.

An online friend may also play the part of confidant: over half of the young respondents feel that they can say or talk about things with an online friend that they would not say or talk about with others. A majority gave the reason for this confidence in online friends as anonymity – "no one online knows the so called 'real me'" – and the fact that online friends are not part of real-life social

environments: "you don't have to fear that they'll spread things to other friends because they don't know them."

82% of respondents said that some of their online friends had suggested meeting face-to-face. As online friendships deepen, most young people think about meeting an online friend in real life. A third of respondents have considered meeting online friends in real life. A similar number said that they had met online friends face-to-face. Nearly half had told their parents about their planned meetings with online friends. 8% of respondents had told no one about such prospective meetings.

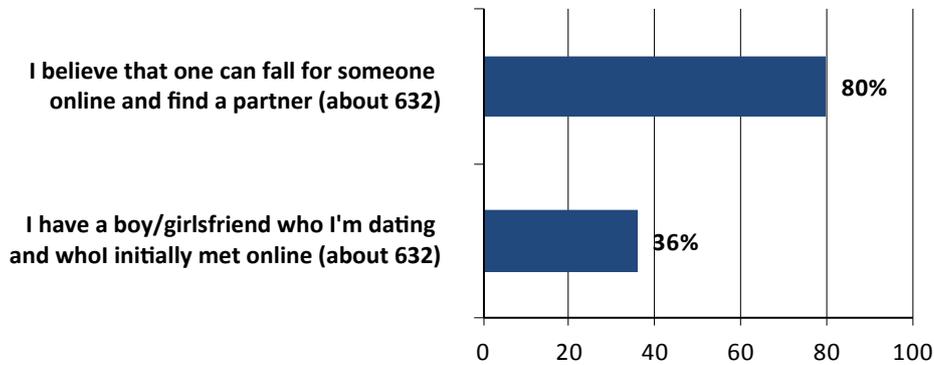
I have considered meeting an online friend face-to-face (about 631)



“Online it’s the character you go for”

Nearly 40% of the young respondents said that they met their boy or girlfriend online. In some cases it may be that the object of their affections was already known by sight, for example at school, but that the first steps at getting

acquainted were taken online. The majority (80%) of respondents believe that it is perfectly possible to fall for someone online and to find a romantic partnership.



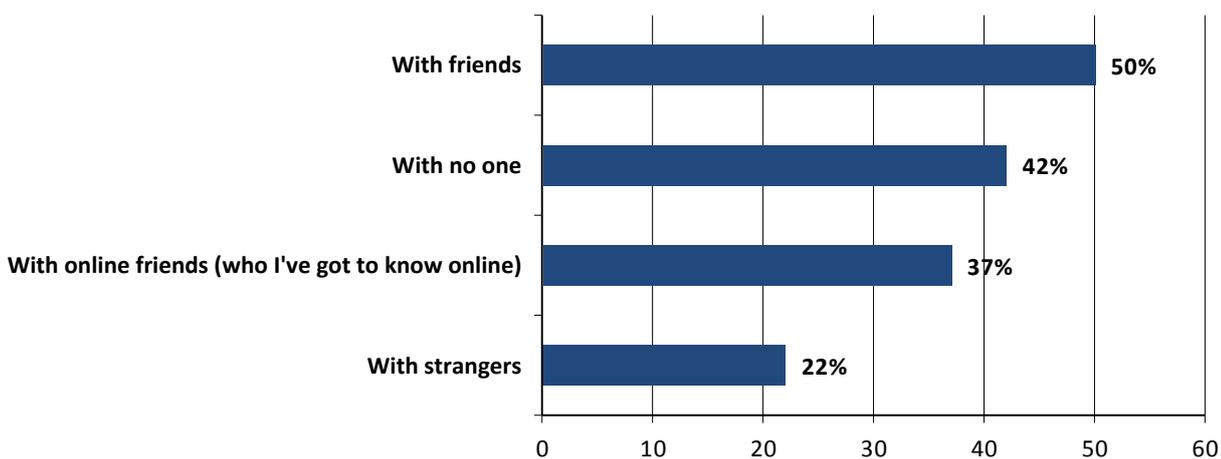
Young people view the internet as improving and expanding the chances of finding someone to date. “There are greater opportunities to find interesting people than in a small neighbourhood”, “It’s easy to find and become close with similar people – you don’t find them here in the back of beyond”. Some of the young people questioned the possibility of a “real relationship”, though others thought that falling for someone was possible. A longer geographical distance in real life is hard to overcome: “well, you can (have a crush on someone) but it would be pretty dumb if they live 100 km away”.

Based on the answers given by the young respondents falling for and getting to know someone is felt to be as genuine and serious as in real life: “You love the person not their body”, “You don’t have to be afraid that you’re

being listened to for how you appear but for what’s inside. When you know someone from inside maybe it’s easier to accept their appearance if it’s not quite the ideal man.” Many young people also find themselves one way or another bolder at dating online: “Online I’m more open, more sure of myself, more talkative and more interesting.”

Apart from finding a romantic partner, matters concerning sex and sexuality have also preoccupied the young adolescents surveyed. Sex was the most common subject of conversation for nearly a third of respondents. As a rule sex is discussed online with real-life friends. Nearly 40% of the young people surveyed have discussed sex with online friends. A fifth of respondents had discussed sex with strangers online.

I have discussed matters concerning sex via internet (about 632)





An open follow-up question on the content of what was discussed was asked of those young respondents who had talked about sex online. On the basis of the 380 replies, the subjects of discussion are various, from losing one's virginity to sex toys and sex positions. Subjects mentioned in the answers included one's own and others' experiences, sexual orientation, gender roles, fantasies, masturbation, the right size of genitalia, affairs, oral sex and different ways of having sex, pornography and contraception. Many young people commented that they only talk about sex with good friends or with their girl or boyfriend. On the other hand, for some young people the internet is a place where they have the courage to talk about the kinds things to do with sex that they would not discuss in real life: "Generally things that I wouldn't even talk about with my friends."

Just over a tenth of respondents had sent revealing photos or videos of themselves to online friends and strangers. The majority of respondents (80%) nevertheless declared that they had not sent, and never would send, intimate images of themselves over the web.

Nearly a third of respondents have sometimes had a strange or unusual feeling about an online friend. Based on answers to open questions, the young respondents felt and interpreted this to be, depending on the case, either positive – "unusual in a good way" – or negative "distressing", "too close", "propositioned everything". The

respondents were asked separately about propositions that felt distressing or unpleasant. A fifth of those who replied to the question had received distressing or unpleasant proposals from online friends. Based on the (131) answers to specific questions, it is clear that these proposals almost without exception concerned sexual propositioning. The young respondents were asked for their brassiere size, to undress and for sexual companionship: "And this man was this buddy for spending boring evenings, but then he suggested meeting, for sex, and I really wouldn't have wanted to do anything with him. And the man was 14 years older than me and anyway it would've been illegal." Requests to be seen via webcam also appears to be common, according to the replies, and many online friends suggest "webcam fun". "Put your webcam on and be in your underwear and so on :D", "Looking at sex and masturbation by webcam", "sex, yes online sex and real sex too – begging for a blowjob etc."

Many of the young people mention in their comments clear and direct ways to tackle an online friend who turns out to be unpleasant: "he asked for my phone number. I deleted him from my list of friends on Facebook.", "(he) suggest something via the web, BUT I'm not going to do anything ... pathetic AND after this these types are not on my list of friends", "... but it's not a problem as you can get rid of them".

Summary

- Getting acquainted online is easy. A sense of humour, mutual understanding and shared interests sustain acquaintanceships made online. The internet offers an ideal way to meet likeminded people.
- The relative degree of anonymity makes it easier to get to know people online. There is a lower threshold for initiating conversation with a complete stranger. Many young people feel bolder, more accepted and more fun in online interactions than in corresponding situations in real life. When you don't have to think about how you appear or sound in such interaction, you can focus on the content instead of external factors.
- An online friend can assume the role of confidant: because they are not known in real life, it is easier to talk about difficult matters. On the other hand, meeting an online friend in real life is by no means out of the question for the majority of young people.
- The majority of the young people surveyed (80%) believe that it is possible to fall for someone and find romantic partnership online, and over a third of respondents said that they had met their current partner online.
- Young people talk about sex with strangers in addition to in real life: over a fifth of the young people had talked about sex with strangers online, and nearly 40% had done so with online friends (acquaintance made online).
- A fifth of young people had experienced unpleasant or embarrassing proposals from online friends. The majority of young people have smart strategies for dealing with unpleasant and unwanted contacts. Online friends who started to be a nuisance are deleted, blocked or ignored.

Save the Children's recommendations to educators and parents

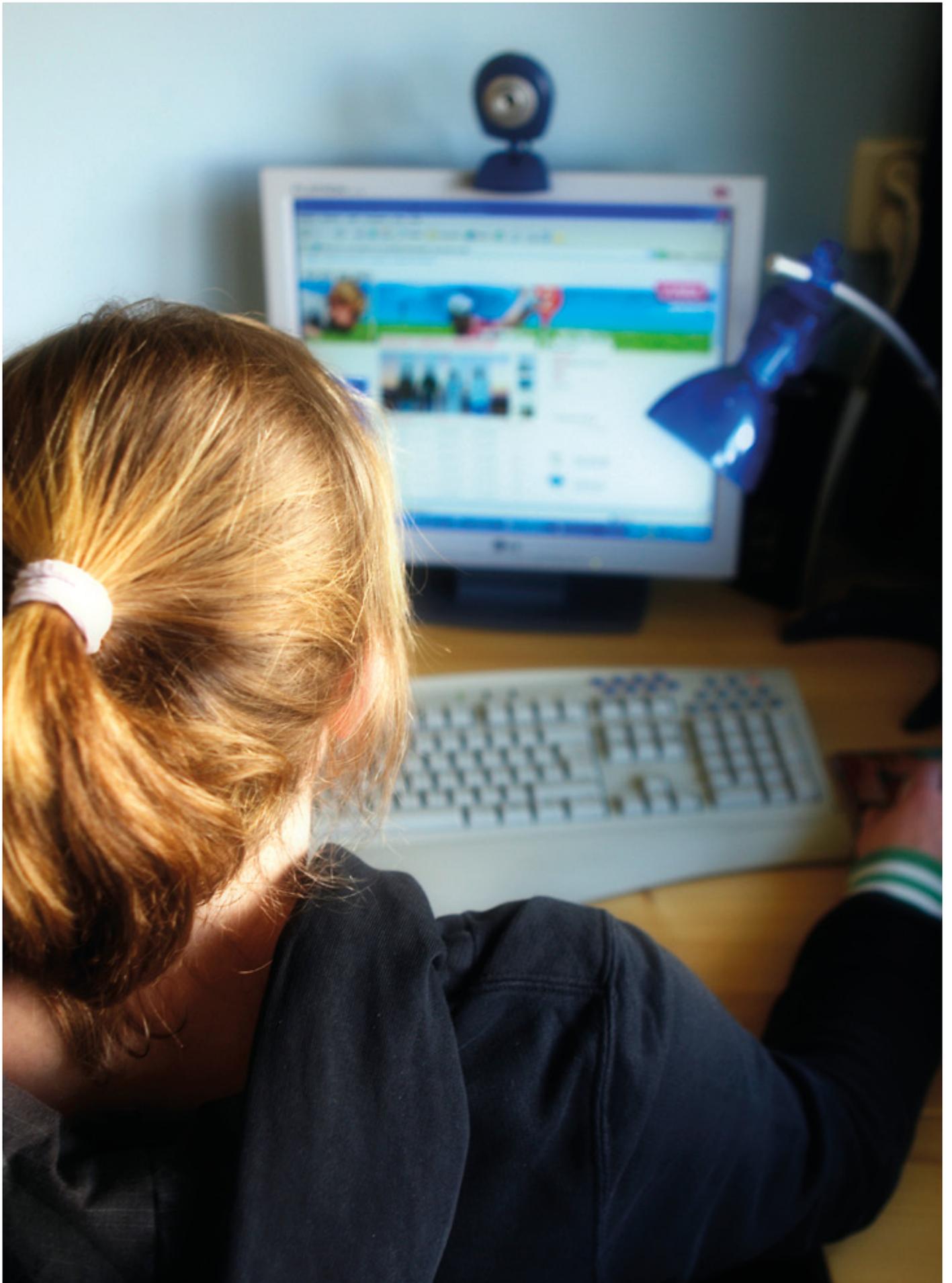
Save the Children recommends that educators and parents without preconceived biases find out about and take a positive attitude to the online life of young people, and bear in mind that the internet is important to the young.

While most young people's online relations are to do with ordinary everyday relationships, school, hobbies, it is usual for young people to establish new relationships over the internet. Such online relationships may be an important part of a young person's daily social life. It is for this reason that Save the Children encourages parents to ask young people about how things are online when asking how things are in general. Most online friendships encountered and established by young people are positive and enrich their lives, but parents should nevertheless try to remain aware of who young people are in contact with online.

Save the Children points out that it is good to go through matters related to internet security and the protection of privacy with young people. Online acquaintanceships may basically be something completely different from how they appeared initially. It is therefore important that young people have the opportunity to tell an adult about and to receive understanding concerning disappointment in an online relationship: such disappointment may for a young person be as great as in real life. It is also essential to remind young people that once material is put on the web it is impossible to delete it entirely, and that copied and downloaded it acquire a life of its own after it has seemingly been erased from their own web pages or profile.

Save the Children considers that one cause of concern is the sexual harassment and abuse directed at children and the young, which a fifth of the survey respondents had experienced from online acquaintances. Though the majority of young people are able to firmly thwart unwanted contacts, we may nevertheless ask whether they in general need to be subject to sexual propositioning. A distinctive feature of the responses to the survey was that young people feel that it is necessary to explain why sexual propositioning from a stranger or online friend felt embarrassing or unpleasant. "Sex. It's quite embarrassing when you're in a relationship", "webcam fun, personal stuff, to do with sex etc. So from people I couldn't care less about", "I was 12 when some guy called wanking". Many young people felt that some explanation or reason was needed for embarrassing and unwanted experiences of sexual propositioning, as if such propositioning over the internet was not sufficient cause for embarrassment (embarrassing **because** I'm in a relationship, embarrassing **because** I couldn't care less about them, or embarrassing **because** I was only 12).

It is the job of educators and parents to make sure that children are aware of their rights, including in cyberspace. There is no need for sexual harassment to be tolerated on the internet any more than in real life.





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Save the Children

Pelastakaa Lapset ry - Save the Children Finland is a national organisation founded in 1922, which fights for children's rights in order to immediately and permanently improve children's lives in Finland and all over the world. Save the Children is the world's leading independent organisation for children. 29 national organisations are working together to deliver programmes in more than 120 countries around the world. Save the Children's vision is a world in which every child attains the right to survival, protection, development and participation. Save the Children's mission is to inspire breakthroughs in the way the world treats children, and to achieve immediate and lasting change in their lives. For more information, please visit www.pelastakaalapset.fi/en

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