Making the Internet
a safer place

European Commission
Information Society and Media

Using the Internet and other online technologies should be as safe as possible, particularly for children. The Safer Internet plus Programme is determined to make online environments safer by fighting illegal and harmful online content and conduct, ranging from racism to bullying, grooming and child abuse material. Over the years 2005-2008 the EU spends more than € 45 million to make the Internet a safer place.

A Eurobarometer study from 2007 showed that the use of the Internet and mobile phones has become almost self-evident for Europe's young generation, and that they in general know both the risks of using the internet and mobile phones and the precautions to take. However, when facing trouble online, minors will only ask for adult help as a last resort.

The Eurobarometer survey from 2005 showed that 60% of parents set rules for their children's Internet use, but most only set rules about what sites not to visit and how much time to be spent online. Two out of three parents think their child knows what to do if a situation on the Internet makes him or her uncomfortable.

FROM POLICY TO ACTION

Illegal and harmful content and conduct have concerned lawmakers, industry, parents and teachers, ever since the Web put unregulated content only one click away from any Internet-connected PC.

While the international context is complex, the EU has set certain standards across Europe, clarifying many legal issues.

However, risks related to Internet use cannot be tackled by legal measures alone, and can be greater than parents realise.

With broadband access growing – both via PCs and 'third generation' (3G) mobile phones – and as the Internet becomes an increasingly important part of children's lives, these risks are not likely to diminish without concerted action.

Since 1999, the EU has funded activities at national and European level to promote a safer use of Internet and other online technologies, particularly for children.

SAFER INTERNET *PLUS* PROGRAMME

The €45 million Safer Internet *plus* Programme (2005-2008) supports co-operation among different actors from mobile operators to child welfare NGOs.

The programme has a wide scope, covering technologies as diverse as 3G mobile phones, online games and chat rooms. It deals with content ranging from child abuse images to racism.

The EU stimulates development and exchange of best practices; it also facilitates co-ordination of activities between different member states.

The Safer Internet *plus* Programme focuses on:

i) Fighting against illegal content

How **illegal** content and conduct is actually defined depends on the country – what is illegal in one country can be protected as free speech in another. Illegal Internet content may be produced in one country, stored in a second and accessed in a third, complicating law enforcement.

The Safer Internet *plus* Programme co-funds "hotlines" throughout Europe, contact points where members of the public can report illegal content to the police for action.

The European **hotline network** set up by the Safer Internet *plus* Programme is unique. It would not exist without EU funding. It has already been welcomed by some non-European countries like Australia, Canada, Korea, Taiwan and the USA.

ii) Tackling unwanted and harmful content

Harmful content is content which could cause physical or psychological harm to children. Definitions vary from one culture – and one person - to the next.

Some content is sent to users against their wish. A large portion of all **spam** contains advertisements for pornography, some clearly illegal in all circumstances.

It is important to provide parents and users with tools to limit the amount of unwanted and harmful content they receive, such as filters, and help them manage the content when they receive it.

A benchmarking study assessing the effectiveness of available filtering technology was launched in November 2005. The results so far indicate that many filtering solutions are effective in blocking pornographic content, but other challenges remain, particularly for content generated by Internet users themselves.

The Safer Internet *plus* Programme also facilitates discussions, co-operation and exchange of best practices in the field of rating and classification of content and services. The aim is to increase industry engagement and enable adults to better identify potentially harmful content for children.

iii) Promoting a safer environment

To facilitate exchange of best practices and encourage dialogue, the Safer Internet *plus* Programme has set up the **Safer Internet Forum.** The Forum is a platform for discussion and co-operation between industry, child welfare organisations and policy makers on issues concerning Internet safety for children.

In February 2007, as a result of an initiative taken by the European Commission, the mobile industry agreed on a European Framework for safer mobile use by younger teenagers and children.

This pan-European code of conduct focused on classifying content and providing parents with control over access to content, raising awareness of safer mobile use and reducing circulation of illegal material through mobile phones.

iv) Raising awareness

There is overwhelming agreement that awareness on the safe use of Internet is needed among many audiences, particularly teachers, parents and children. To make best use of available funds and reach the largest possible number of people, the Commission supports multiplier organisations.

A **European network of 'awareness nodes'** has been set up. This network currently co-ordinates activities in 24 countries. The nodes ensure the exchange of best practices and carry out awareness actions, like training teachers, parents and children in safer use of the Internet. They provide information material and arrange campaigns in close co-operation with other parties at national, regional and local levels.

The network also organises the **Safer Internet Day,** which has taken place in early February each year since 2004, and includes countries outside Europe. 56 countries took part in this event in 2008.

NEXT STEPS

The European Commission recently proposed that a new Safer Internet programme be adopted to further enhance the safety of children in the online environment.

The proposed new programme will build on the successful activities of the Safer Internet *plus* Programme and will continue to support actions to raise awareness of safer use of online technologies. It will also gather more knowledge about how children use online technologies.

In addition, it will focus on dealing with grooming for sexual abuse, bullying, and reducing illegal material online.

With a budget of €55 million, the proposed programme will run from 2009-2013.

The proposal will go through a process of co-decision in the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union. The final adoption of the programme is expected early in 2009.

For further information:

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