

Children and the Internet

A conversation with Stefan Warth and Silke Schneider*

In a study you have found out what 6- to 16-year-olds are able to do on the Internet as well as how they use it. How did you go about this?

Warth: In 2009 we conducted the qualitative study "Children and the Internet" in Germany.¹ In 2010 there was an additional study, both qualitative and quantitative, on this topic.² Why did we ask about the skills, competencies, and needs of children in relation to their Internet use? There are other studies such as the one by mpfs³ in which children of different ages have been sorted together in age groups like 6-13 or even 6-16 years. We consider this to be too superficial, since the differences within the target group are very large: a 6-year-old is just learning to read his or her first words, while this is no longer a problem for a 12-year-old who is even starting to learn a foreign language. These differences along with many others are exactly what we wanted to work out in our study.

We interviewed a total of 40 children in guided interviews lasting 1 hour. There were 10 children in each of the age groups 6-7, 8-10, 11-13, and 14-16 years. The main findings, among other things, are that we can now judge more precisely which age group can solve which particular task on the Internet (see ill. 1 – use cases).

Schneider: We thought about it for some time and investigated at which points problems in the use of the Internet might occur. In some cases, we already knew from other studies that children may have difficulties with labels, for example in the registration process. It is interesting to learn at what age children manage which particular tasks and where we need to provide additional support with audio or written descriptions,

	6-7 years	8-10 years	11-13 years	14-16 years
X Problem not solved				
● Problem solved with help				
√ Problem solved independently				
Data input	●	√	√	√
Write e-mail	X	●	√	√
Registration	X	●	√	√
Upload picture from CD-ROM	X	X	●	√
Online game with instructions	X	●	√	√
Send e-card	X	●	√	√
Download		●	●	√

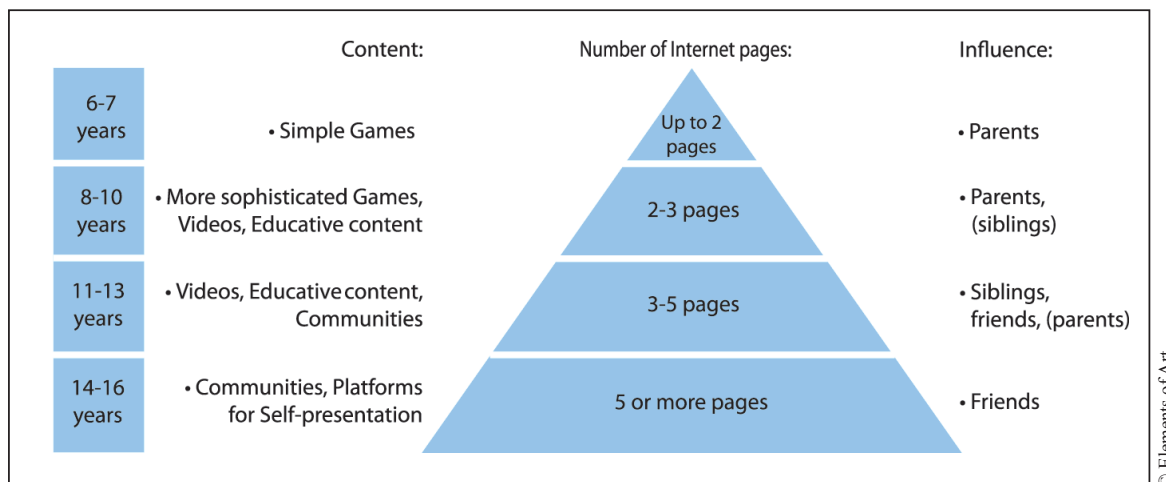
Ill. 1: Children's Internet skills according to age

or need to choose a clearer concept. We were also able to fall back on our experience in recent years, since we have been creating Internet pages for the target groups and conducting usability tests in separate projects with children for years.

What about the Internet skills and interests in the various age groups?

Warth: The 6- to 7-year-olds first have to acquire these skills. Typically, the children's first contact with the Internet occurs at this age. Parents usually introduce children to the Internet, act as gatekeepers, but also as aides if the children cannot manage the usage on their own, since reading and writing abilities at this age are still not quite developed. Children aged 8-10 become somewhat more independent as far as reading and writing are concerned. The focus is still on playing and games, but at this age, children are already doing research for school, for example for homework or pre-

sentations. Watching videos on the Internet also plays an important role: YouTube is a frequently visited page. The parents are no longer as active as gatekeepers as they are for younger kids, but they continue to recommend Internet pages. At this age, the topic of communication does not play a role yet. Communication only becomes an issue in the so-called "hinge group" of 11- to 13-year-olds. At this age, German children move on to secondary schools and, as a result, a large part of their social setting also changes. Parents recede into the background as sounding boards, as gatekeepers, as multipliers. Most things now pass through friends or brothers and sisters. Therefore, children's skills are also developed further (see ill. 1 and 2 – use cases and content use). At this point, the various communities are starting to be interesting. The topic of communities has less to do with the Internet in particular – from a developmental-psychological standpoint,



III. 2: Children's influences and Internet usage according to age

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children at that age begin to find out who they really are or wish to be. Today, these steps in the development of identity are, in many cases, reflected in Internet communities. Kids create a profile, and there also tends to be a bit of make-believe. Children often have several profiles in order to test which identity is most successful with their peers. This form of playful search for identity, however, also took place previously or is taking place even today in other social settings, for example when children meet at the annual fair or go out together.

Dealing with one's identity in communities is second nature to the 14- to 16-year-olds. They use the Internet freely and independently. The parents barely have any influence. A lot occurs in a teenager's circle of friends. For German kids, well-established English skills also play a role, since many teenagers use Internet games and other content that can be found on English-language pages.

Based on these findings, how can we make the Internet more user-friendly for children?

Warth: One has to adapt to the skills and competencies of the respective age group as well as to their needs, desires, and expectations concerning webpages. An age-appropriate, attractive design and age-related content are also part of this. Sometimes, we have customers who wish to appeal to

6- to 16-year-olds with their website. In such cases we have to say: This is not possible. You can, for example, create pages for 6- to 10-year-olds and develop offers for 11/12- to 16-year-olds. But reaching everyone at the same time with the same content and the same design will not work.

Where do children acquire their knowledge of the Internet, that is, both their skills in using it and their knowledge of actual web-sites?

Schneider: In 2010 we conducted an online survey among 600 parents in Germany asking how they would assess their children's Internet competencies, how they knew which webpages were being used, and what influence they exerted on their children.⁴ Children become familiar with their favourite Internet sites by trying them out or from fellow students' and friends' recommendations – but the greatest influence comes from their parents and from older brothers and sisters. From them they obtain actual tips on webpages for school or for play. The parents have confidence in these webpages because they are familiar with them or because they have confidence in a certain brand or TV station. They pass these URLs on to their children and sometimes set up "favourites" for them so that the children only have to select them in the browser. The parents know most

of the webpages themselves from surfing the Internet, but they also receive tips from other parents or from magazines. In some cases I was really surprised to see how big the parents' influence actually is. With age, this influence declines continuously: after years of explaining to their children that they need to be careful, the parents are now able to see the success of their efforts in that the children are indeed careful. Consequently, they develop confidence and allow their children to surf the Internet freely, that is, with the parents no longer present. With older children, parents often set time limits. They tell the child "You can only be online for half an hour or 1 hour". But laying down limits or making restrictions in terms of content surely applies mostly to primary school children.

Children mainly use the Internet at home, but school work seems to play an important role. How does this interplay work?

Warth: The fact that school is an impetus behind the use of the Internet does not necessarily mean that children surf a lot at school. They use the Internet for school, but do so mainly at home. This is something that we would criticise: although the technical requirements are present in some cases, the Internet is still a relatively marginal topic in German schools. Schools could do an excellent job by

providing Internet competencies for dealing with the Web and its content. This is, however, done relatively seldom in Germany. Nonetheless, children enthusiastically go online at home; in the same way that we adults used to look things up in an encyclopaedia or a dictionary, children today use Google and search the Internet for information to help them with their homework and presentations. This is precisely the decisive factor why children use the Internet from age 8 and beyond, but the topic of games, videos, or chat/communication is not far behind.

Is it true that the Internet has replaced television for children?

Warth: Once again, we have to distinguish according to age groups: what younger children do on the Internet today may be comparable roughly with reading picture books or playing in the real analogue world – the only difference is that it takes place online now. The Internet offers wonderful opportunities: something is moving on the computer screen and that alone fascinates children. They, of course, continue to watch television. Also, German children aged 6 to 10 enjoy visiting Internet pages from television channels, mainly because of the characters – they are familiar with them and it is very appealing if there are good Internet resources available where they can play with their friends from television.

Among older children, on the other hand, for the last 2 years, the Internet has overtaken television in the intensity of use,⁵ since for them the topic of communication on the Internet is most important. They want to chat and establish contact with other people in communities. Today, this is also occurring more and more often in mobile form, and will become a more important topic in the future. In a few years probably, the television set will no longer be in one corner of the room and the computer in the other, but there will rather be a media

unit through which one can use both of them.

The trend is that already 3- to 6-year-olds have their first experiences with the Internet. Furthermore, in EU comparison, German families rank in the middle with 75 % Internet use,⁶ while in the North European countries 90 % of families have access to the Internet. What does this mean for the skills and interests of children? Will 6- to 10-year-olds be more competent regarding the use of the Internet in 2020?

Schneider: We assume that Internet skills will remain more or less the same because today's 6- to 10-year-olds are already "digital natives" who have grown up with the Internet. It will continue to be the case that children, until they move on to a secondary school, will mainly get on the Internet in order to play, since this is simply fun. This can, of course, mean that the user interface becomes more intuitive, that is, easier to use, and that TV and Internet continue to merge.

Warth: In the Scandinavian countries the technical requirements are already more developed than in Germany, particularly as far as broadband is concerned. In this regard, Germany still needs to catch up. But this has no effect on the Internet competencies but rather on the content. That is, the percentage of moving pictures or animated elements, which need certain technical requirements to be met, will continue to increase. The competencies themselves will not change substantially. But one thing is very important to us: we do not believe that children should use the Internet exclusively. Parents should pay close attention to make sure that their children do not hang around in front of the computer screen the entire day, but rather that they play outside as they have done up to now, thus gathering experience from a number of sources. But we do think that the Internet is a very, very good medium

that offers great opportunities through moving pictures and interactivity and which can support the development of children through age-relevant and educational content. ■

NOTES

¹ Elements of Art GmbH; Phaydon research+consulting (eds.) (2009). *Kinder im Internet – Vom virtuellen Spielplatz zum Alltagsbegleiter. Eine qualitative Studie über Erleben, Nutzung und Fähigkeiten von Kindern und Jugendlichen im Internet*. Mönchengladbach: EoA.

² Elements of Art GmbH, Iconkids & Youth; SUPER RTL; IP Deutschland (eds.) (2010). *Die Lieblings-Websites der Kids – Entstehung, Zusammensetzung und Entwicklung des Relevant Set im Internet*. Mönchengladbach: EoA.

³ Medienpädagogischer Forschungsverbund Südwest (ed.) (2011). *KIM-Studie 2010. Kinder und Medien, Computer und Internet. Basisuntersuchung zum Medienumgang 6- bis 13-Jähriger*. Stuttgart: mpfs.

⁴ Elements of Art GmbH, Iconkids & Youth; SUPER RTL; IP Deutschland (eds.) (2011). *Die Bedeutung der Eltern bei der Internetnutzung der Kinder*. Mönchengladbach: EoA.

⁵ cf. for example Medienpädagogischer Forschungsverbund Südwest (ed.) (2010). *JIM-Studie 2010. Jugend, Information, (Multi-)Media. Basisuntersuchung zum Medienumgang 12- bis 19-Jähriger in Deutschland*. Stuttgart: mpfs.

⁶ European Commission (ed.) (2008). *Towards a safer use of the Internet for children in the EU – a parents' perspective*. In: Flash Eurobarometer report 2008, no. 248, p. 11. Online document: http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/flash_arch_en.htm (last access: 14.2.2011)

* Shortened version of a conversation between Silke Schneider and Stefan Warth of Elements of Art (EoA), an Internet agency for children's marketing and youth communication, Mönchengladbach, Germany, and



Dr. Elke Schlote (IZI). Stefan Warth, Certified Sports Scientist (Media and Communication), is Head of Marketing & Sales at EoA. Silke Schneider studied media pedagogy and communications and is responsible for market research and PR at EoA.