

Connected Children

ITALIAN PRE-ADOLESCENTS AND NEW MEDIA

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1. Premise

The numbers of studies that investigate media consumption by younger people have multiplied dramatically in recent years. This increased interest has been spurred by a number of factors. Overexposure to media (newspapers, television) now enjoyed by new communications tools (ranging from the mobile phone to recent internet applications) demand, in turn, functioning social and educational checks and curbs. On the other hand, marketing strategies employed by companies in this sector (manufacturers, services and contents providers) target what they see in minors as a potential new market in that they present needs that will have to be met by adults. Between these two systems – the operating agenda of the media and marketing objectives – one can even conceive of a relationship: in fact, traditionally, technology's social penetration finds precisely in the paratextual function of the media a functional way of furnishing the technology itself with accompanying subject matter that assist in guaranteeing its adoption.

All of this results in the production of noise or din. A din from which not even research can extract itself, to the extent that it feeds the flow of discussions and eventually ends up generating entropy, rather than supplying keys to an understanding of the types of behaviour involved.

With this knowledge at hand, we would like to assign a very precise task to the results of the research presented here. That is, of speaking with educators in a way so that few, yet absolutely clear, things are said. Anticipating a few of the data that we'll see emerge below, we can attempt to organize them within three summary assertions:

- the media form a part of what our youngsters perceive as normality. A fact that is neither reassuring nor apocalyptic: more simply, it is a methodological yardstick for those working or acting as educators. Let's stop thinking of the media as tools: in spite of all their benefits and defects they nevertheless form an integral part of their day-to-day life (as, after all, they do in ours as well);
- the problem lies not only with the media, but also with the activities involved. Adolescents don't become more inappropriate or less ethical because they have a mobile phone; rather, it is the mobile phone that creates the conditions within which their practices, whether inappropriate or not, can be expressed. Let's stop blaming the media and shift our attention to the entire system that links them to the habits of the subjects involved: it is only via these habits that the media can be properly placed within their useful or practical contexts;
- true responsibility lies with the adults. This involves two types of responsibilities, as is highlighted by our research results. On the one hand, we have cultural responsibilities: the ways in which adults behave and portray themselves affect youngsters' formation of their own way of portraying themselves; youngsters' cultural structures are in some ways reflections of those elaborated and spread by adults. And on the other hand, we have educational responsibilities: the persistence of serious concerns, the prevalence of negative portrayals, all point to the operation of a system that associates the absence of known certainties (I fear what I don't know) with the inability or impossibility of an educational presence (I am afraid because I know I am not in control).

With these three assertions or indications we believe we can begin to emerge from the din, simultaneously pointing out how to once again approach educating youngsters as well as the way out from the loop that creates a Catch-22 situation between the market interests and the discursive processes of the IT apparatus.

2. The survey

The Connected Children Survey aims to reflect on the significance of new media¹ among pre-adolescents and to build up an educational intervention plan through the definition of an up-to-date framework of their media demands and needs and, more specifically: usage habits, the significance new media takes on within their lives, and the types of attitudes they adopt with respect to potentially risky behaviour. Three aspects are involved – usage, significance, and attitudes – that serve as reference points that enable the protection of activities in this field, and to enter educational contexts via initiatives suited to the media climate and to children's needs (needs which are not always easy to detect).

The work programme aims to produce a classification of the overall context, aimed naturally at defining the relationship young people maintain with new media, understood above all as spaces for socializing and getting to know and interacting with peers, in order to delineate with greater care the significance of media today and the attitudes that youngsters adopt when they find themselves having to deal with online relationship problems.

An analysis of the survey results serves therefore to form a reserve in which behavioural profiles can be gathered, stored and defined.

3. An initial analysis of the data collected: the questionnaire

The number of questionnaires upon which the survey was based came to a total of 1,373 (of which 51.13 % were completed by boys and 48.87% by girls) and cover an age group target of 11 to 14 years, reached between January and May 2008. As is often the case when it comes to educational research on media usage, the quickest and least disruptive method of reaching those interviewed is through schools; these do not actually constitute the object of the research as such (we are not interested in what adolescents are doing with media while at school), but rather as the site of enlisting and finding those available to take part in the survey. To be specific, 18 schools within Italy were involved in the survey (as listed in the table below)

1 The concept of “new media” has probably already become outdated as a research term. It in fact presupposes that it can be differentiated from some hypothetical “old media”. It also involves an impracticable exercise because the phenomenology of the tools currently available present a scenario in which even “older” media have attained new forms and new kinds of a presence (is television viewed on a mobile phone a new or old medium? And digital television? Or a web-radio?). We nonetheless retain, in the report, the term “new media” because it is what has by now entered within common usage as a way of defining those types of media (from the mobile phone, to the Internet with all its applications, and video games) which, more than any others, form part of the younger people's habits, modifying with respect to recent times in ways that television undoubtedly functioned previously as the main role-player in consumption.

which in one way or another are representative of the nation's schools (even though the survey did not have as its scope the intention of constructing statistically significant images, but rather of depicting mental landscapes and profiles of the youngsters' media usage).

Region	Town	School
Lazio	Rome	IC "De Curtis"
Lazio	Civitavecchia	SMS "Francesco Flavioni"
Lazio	Rieti	IC "Angelo Sacchetti Sassetti"
Lazio	Rieti - Capomoro	IC "G. Pascoli"
Abruzzo	Chieti	SMS "Chiarini De Lollis"
Marche	Falconara M.	SMS "C. G. Cesare"
Marche	Ancona	SMS Pinocchio Montesicuro
Marche	Porto Potenza Picena (MC)	IC Raffaello Sanzio
Sicily	Agrigento	IC "Anna Frank"
Sicily	Canicattì	IC "G. Verga"
Sicily	Gela (CL)	IV Circolo di Gela
Emilia-Romagna	Bologna	IC n. 8 "Guinizzelli" di Bologna
Emilia-Romagna	Formigine (MO)	SMS "A. Fiori"
Lombardy	Rescaldina)	IC D.Alighieri
Lombardy	Castronno (VA)	SMS "De Amicis"
Piedmont	Bricherasi	IC Caffaro
Piedmont	Verbania	SMS "Ranzoni"
Piedmont	Vignone	Scuola primaria di Vignone
Abruzzo	Pescara	SMA Montale Michetti
Tuscany	Ponte Buggianese (PT)	IC "Don Milani"
Puglia	Matera	IC Grassano

Table 1 – Schools involved in the survey

The questionnaire allows us to define of a number of central aspects which are listed below in order of appearance:

- the *dimension of type of usage* (user/non user) and the frequency of use, an aspect that can help better explain certain replies relating to behaviour and attitudes adopted regarding mobile phone and internet use;
- a *typology of activities* in which youngsters are involved (sms, downloading and uploading materials, photos, just to cite a few examples);
- The *motivations* behind new media use (and consequently what significance these take on in youngsters' lives);
- the types of *behaviour* youngsters believe to be common among their peers with respect to certain paradigmatic or risky situations (encounters with persons met online, exchanges of inappropriate materials, requests made by adults).

Let's make a start by looking the first of these aspects.

3.1 The context of mobile phone an internet use: what are youngsters doing and what is motivating their actions?

The mobile phone, like the Internet, represents a means of communication and of socializing that has by now become so widespread, even among pre-adolescents, that they can in effect be considered a natural extension of the individual and social lives of the users. The data confirm this depiction as 43.48% of those surveyed claim they have been using mobile phones since one to three years, 37.34% since four or more years, only 15.01% since less than one year, and the numbers of non-users are very low indeed – only 3.29% claim to have never used one. The latter data represents a minority which is nonetheless very interesting in terms of a deeper analysis of the survey results (the non-users in our survey are 11- and 12-year-olds; in only two instances were 13- and 14-year-olds found in this category, and they were for the most part boys).

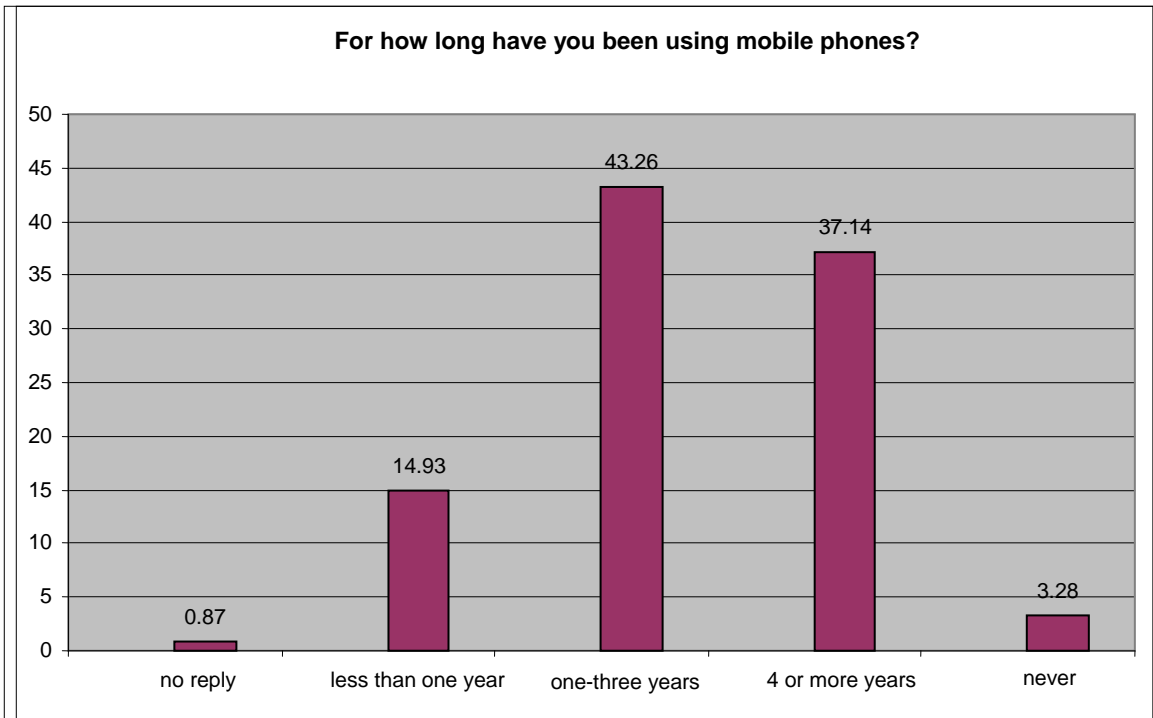


Fig. 1 – Mobile phone use: the temporal scale

The situation with regard to the Internet is very similar in its distribution levels, while with lower percentages and a greater number of replies: 25.15% have been surfing the Net for less than one year, 36.9% since three years, a good 26.14% since over four years and 8.3% claim to have never used the Internet.

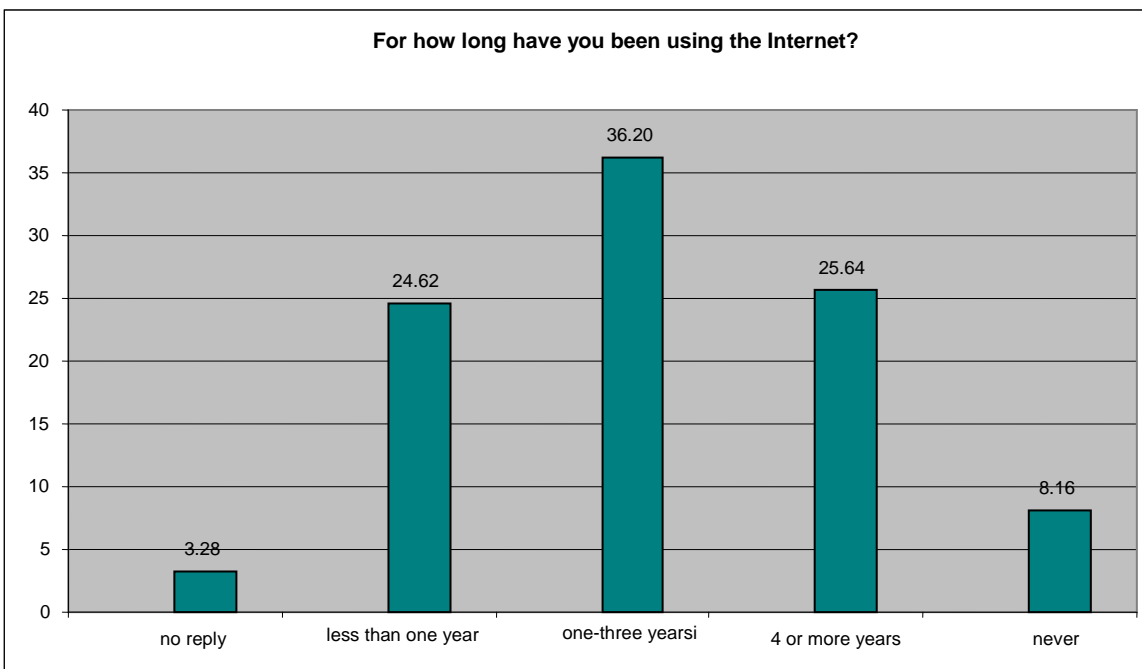


Fig. 2 – Internet use: the temporal scale

With respect to the activities youngsters engage in when using mobile phones or the Internet, we see a confirmation of analyses obtained previously (*Mediappro, Il senso del fare mediale*²).

Mobile phones and the Net function as social connectors, they are used to hear from friends, to keep always in touch with others and share feelings.

Photos and videos become important for youngsters as a means of capturing memories, a function that seems to be more important for them and go beyond their entertainment value. In the case of the mobile phone, isolating the highest figures in terms of frequency of use (some times and often) we come across an interesting picture which puts SMS text-messaging at first place (30.1% and 45.5%), followed by the exchange of images (24.7% and 18.3%), and photos and videos (in this instance the mobile phone substitutes the digital camera and becomes a means of capturing important or fun moments to be shared with friends); there were few responses regarding mobile phone use for game-playing or downloading ring-tones.

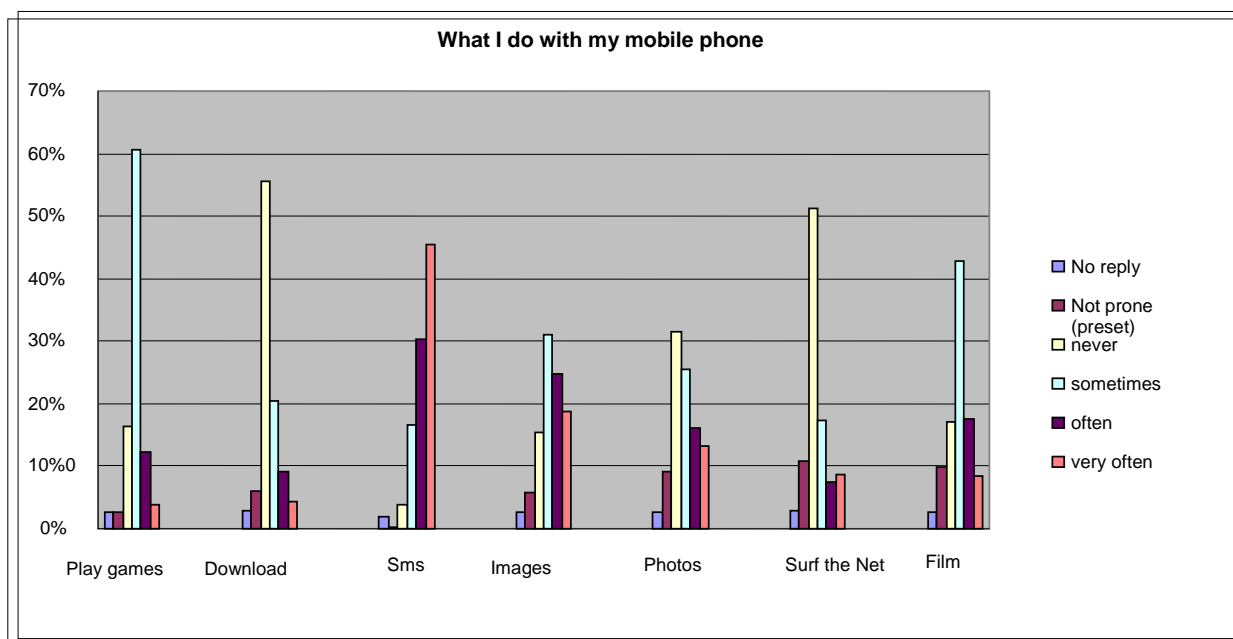


Fig. 3 – Mobile phone use: activities

As expected, the use of mobile phones for surfing the Internet is less widespread. However, the motivations) help explain the situation: 7.5% surf using their mobile phones sometimes, 8.6% often and most often because of time/space issues (to be free from the physical limitations of a connected PC), and therefore in order to be online not only when and where they wish, but also because they lack active connections at home. Far less widespread was the response that lack of control/supervision was a primary motivation, an aspect that was present but represented by a smaller percentage figure.

² See <http://www.mediappro.org>. For research data see also: P.C. Rivoltella. *Screen Generation*, Vita e Pensiero, Milan 2006. For the second study, see L. Messina, P.C. Rivoltella (edited by), *Il senso del fare mediale*, Erickson, Trento 2009.

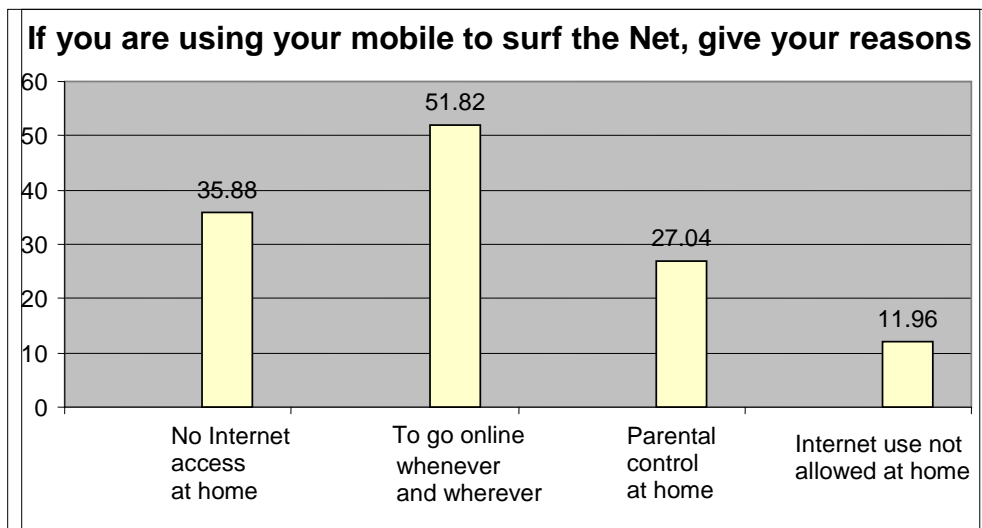


Fig. 4 – Use of mobile phones for internet access: motivations

On the other hand, the motivations that bring youngsters to use their mobile phones for filming or taking photos are essentially grouped within a playful context involving sharing: taking photos and making videos is fun and a pass-time that allows one to capture memories of entertaining or unusual occasions (the aspect characterised by memories referred to above). At the opposite end, the mobile phone is not seen as a functional tool in affirming or defending citizens' rights by, for example, thinking of using the camera to report wrong-doings, whereas the camera's use as a function of one's mobile to play practical jokes and to provoke is in the minority, even if more frequent among boys, who claim (in the few cases identified) to also make use of mobile phones as reporting tools. The reference to the dimension of identity is one that recurs significantly and will be brought up again at the end of this report.

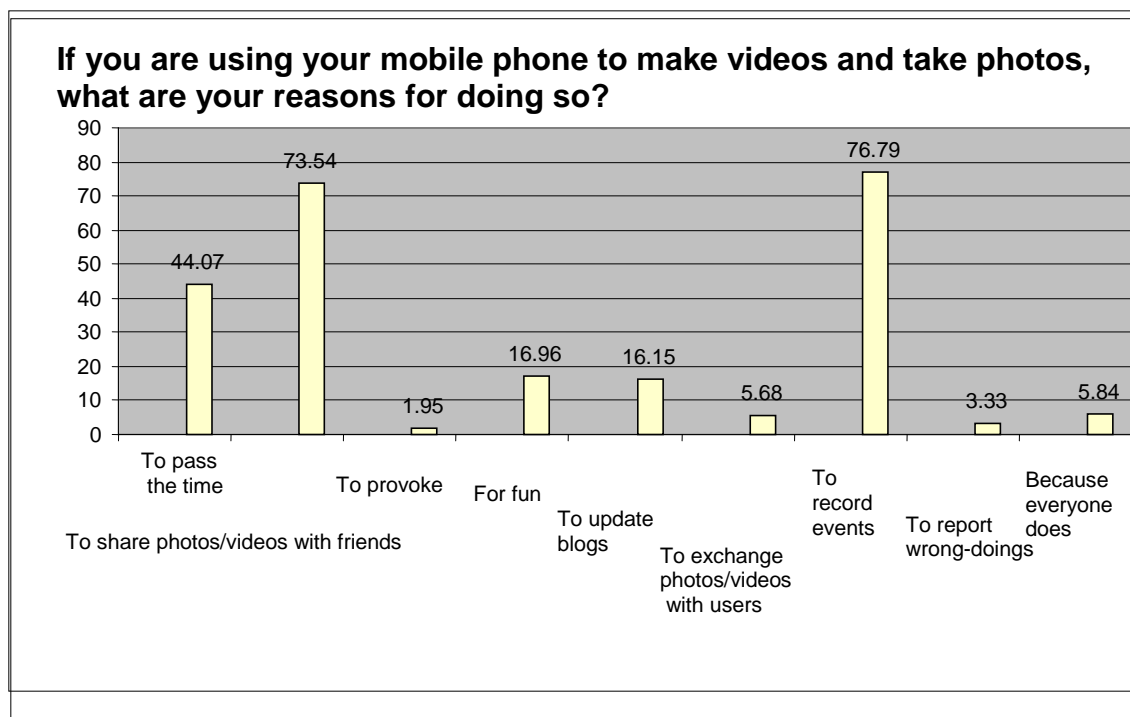


Fig. 5 – Use of mobile phones for making videos and taking photographs: motivations

Turning now to the Internet, there clearly emerges a dimension centred on socializing and a substantial presence of youngsters on social networks: 38.2% have personal profiles posted on social networks (as opposed to 42.1% of youngsters who don't), 9% don't know and 10.6% did not reply. The most highly-frequented social networks are MSN Messenger, a meeting place definitely favoured by youngsters, followed by Habbo, Netblog, Chatta.it and Badù, but the margin between MSN and the others is very considerable, confirming its absolute popularity.

The motivations reveal that for 74.4% of those surveyed the use of social networks is tied to keeping in touch with habitual friends; for 50% it has to do with widening the scope of their acquaintances, confirming what we have been claiming for some time now on a number of fronts: online socializing tends to qualify itself as an extension of an existing social network rather than an alternative world that replaces physical or 'real' relationships. This is a factor that many parents seem to tend not to take into consideration.

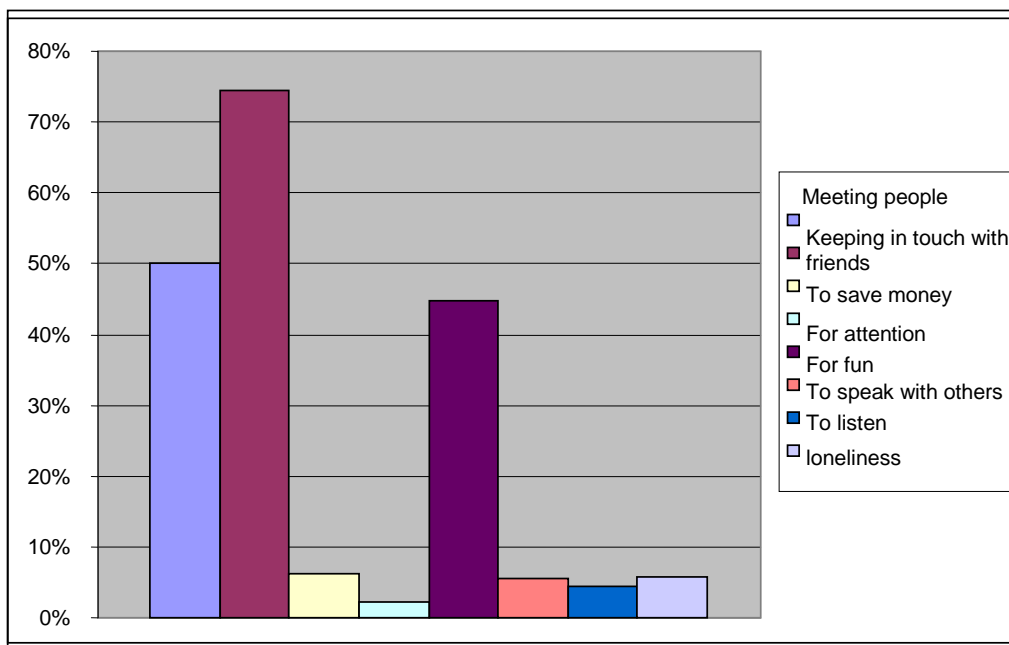


Fig. 6 – Social networking: motivations

Staying on the theme of socializing, we find that blogging is very widespread, with higher figures compared to earlier surveys conducted by CREMIT (32.4% of youngsters have blogs, compared to 18% at the end of 2006). The boys and girls see it as an opportunity to have some fun (72.6%) and meet others (44.2%) – once again, relationships are the real crux of the matter – but also a space in which one can speak freely (22.5%). Lower (but in any event definitely significant) are the percentages attributed to the issues of loneliness and attention-seeking (11.7% and 12.3% respectively), that attribute to blogs the task of supplying an emotional dimension that is lacking. Although this data is certainly not pathological, it is nonetheless interesting to note just how important the affective sphere is for adolescents, even when online (adding up the figures relating to

opportunities to attract attention and interest, to speak and be listened to, and fight loneliness, we reach some considerable areas of consensus).

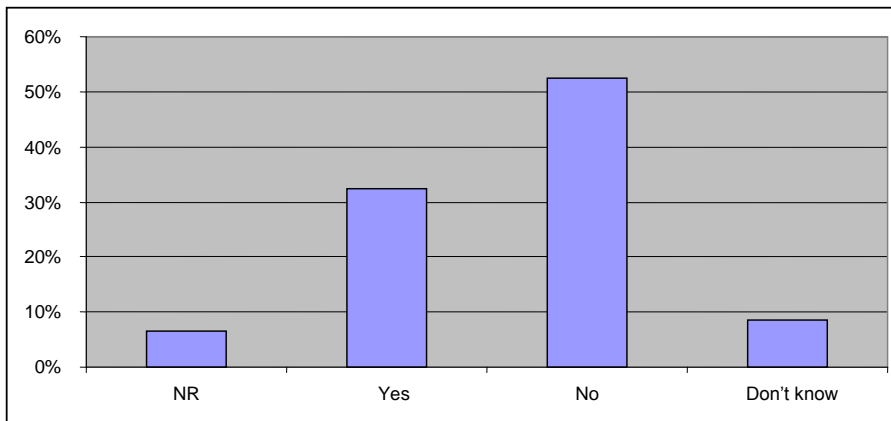


Fig. 7 – Do you have a blog?

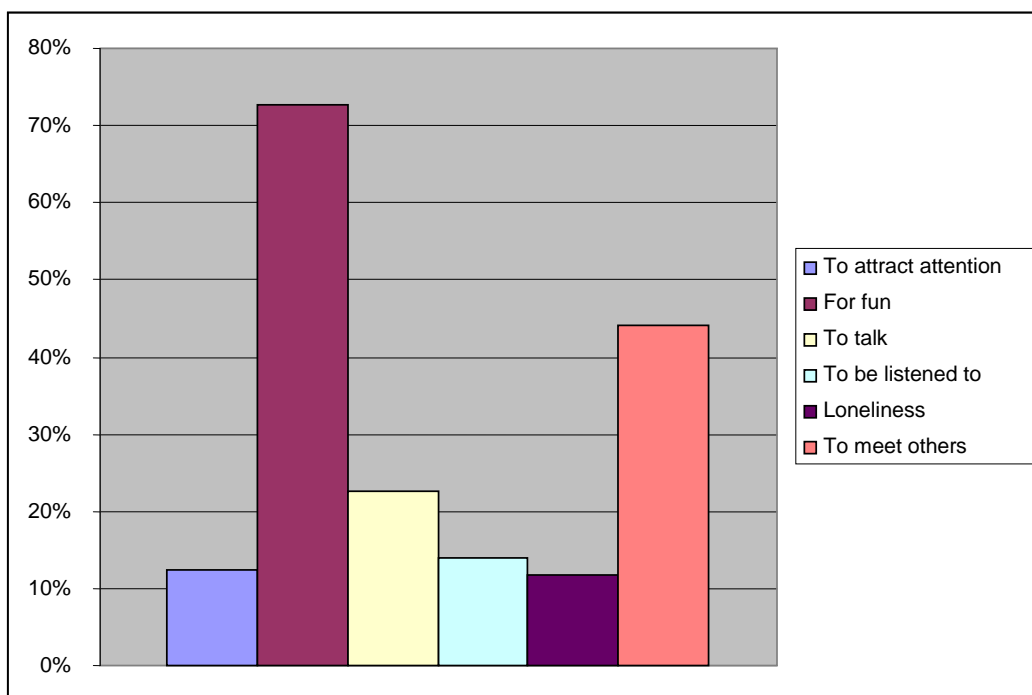


Fig. 8 – You have a blog: motivations

We'll let the bar chart below provide a synthesis of the activities carried out online, as we are not able to emphasise significant differences between the data and the situation already described by the research for some time now.

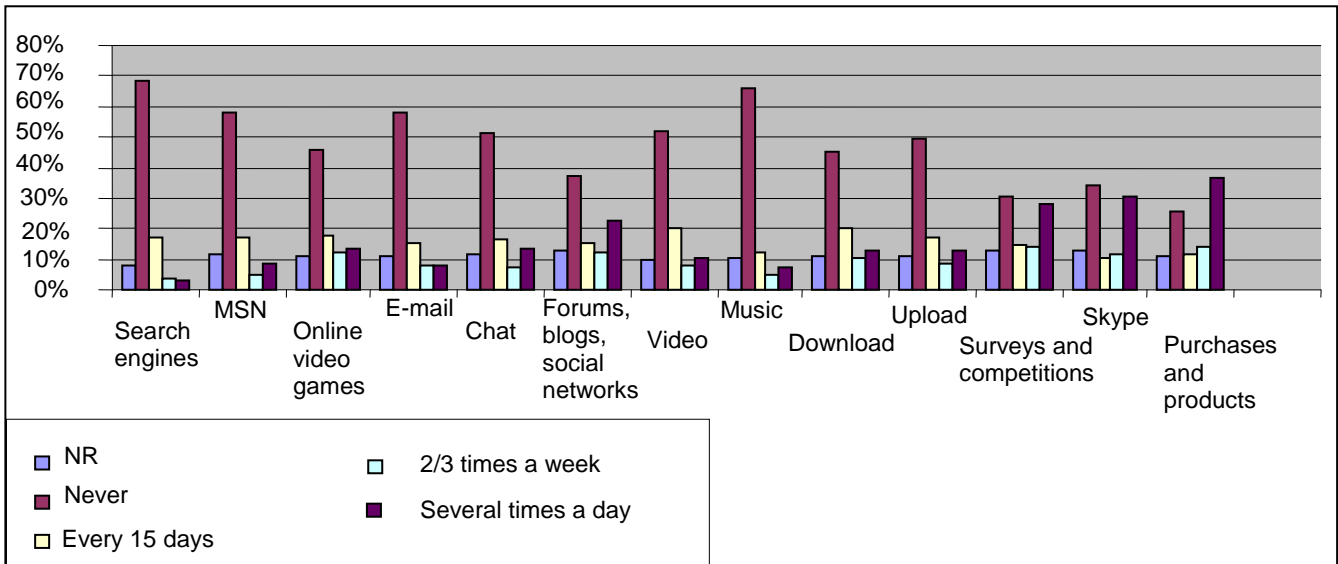


Fig. 9 – Internet use: activities

3.2 Youngsters’ views on the Web

With regard to opinions expressed about the Internet, the dimensions specified (dangerous/safe, controlled/free, violent/non-violent, difficult/easy, inappropriate/appropriate, useless/useful) reflect the subject-matter characterising the onset of this study and which for a few years now has been circulating with respect to the significance of the Web in youngsters’ lives. The Internet is useful, albeit not as a tool (as it is for adults, for example) and easy to use. Any extreme judgements (that it’s entirely dangerous/entirely safe, for example) tend to find less consensus, in the sense that youngsters most often find themselves in situations somewhere between the two extremes. The exception, of course, is the dimension in which the Web’s usefulness and easiness are seen as disproportionately positive, and even in this case it is overly represented in a positive light.

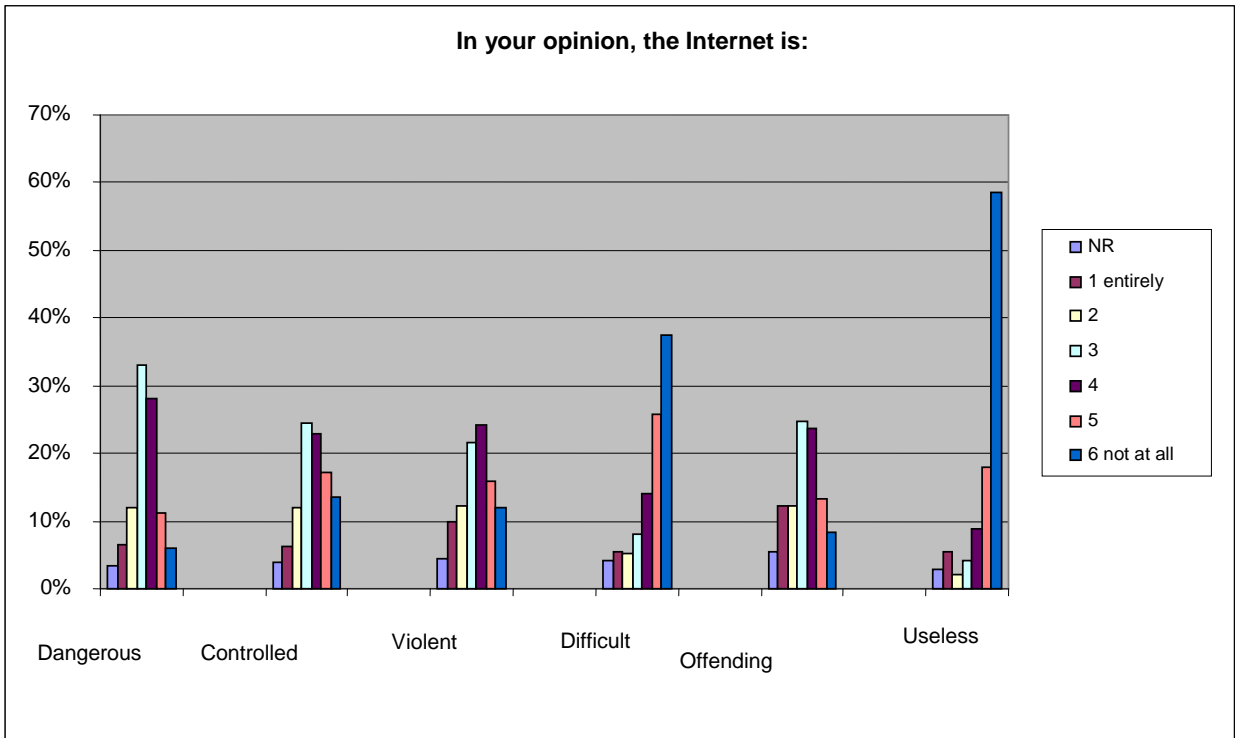


Fig. 10 – Opinions about the Internet

The Internet is described as an environment characterised by habitual relations, ones that are both important and necessary (useful for keeping in touch with peers, making new friends, and for expressing oneself). The identity aspect is decisive, as social networks, blogs and chat rooms present opportunities for individuals to represent themselves, express their personal experiences, and identify with others. The youngsters surveyed tend, as seen in the replies gathered, to use representative images of themselves, chiefly personal photos (40.8%), photos taken together with friends (24.1%) and photos of celebrities with whom they're prone to identify with (23.5%).

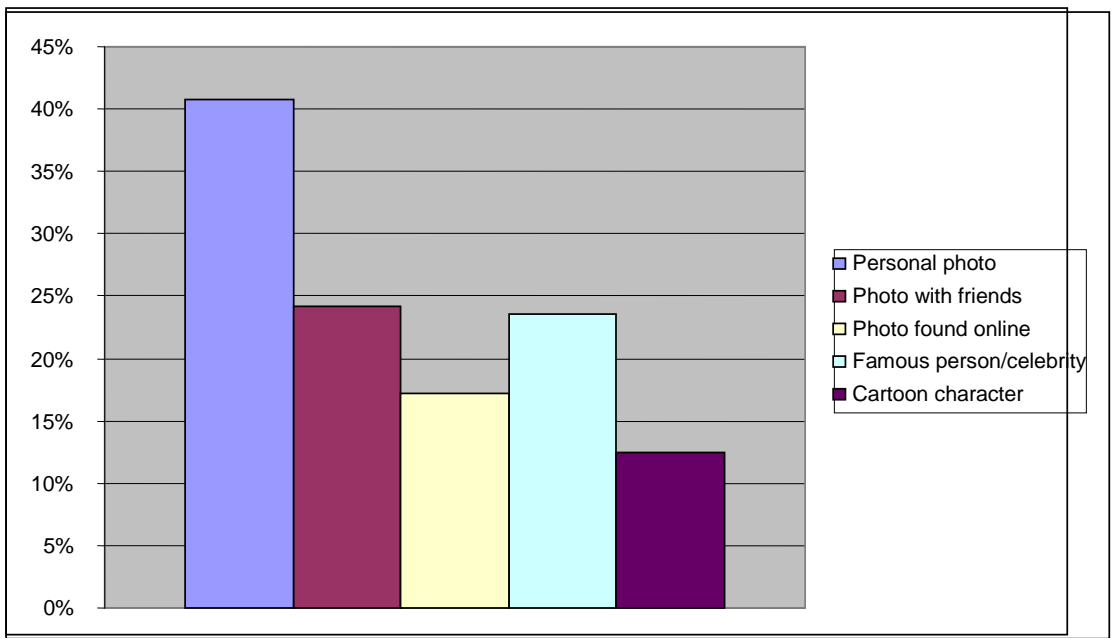


Fig. 11 – Types of images used to present oneself online

The choice of personal images is determined by the intention of making oneself known and above all to make one's interests known to others (45.3%), to make friends with those who share one's own passions (50.2%), and only secondarily to arouse (3.6%) or capture attention (16.1%). Why post photos of other persons rather than my own precisely when I intend to meet others and, above all, others that share my tastes and passions? One's sense of identity once again becomes the central issue.

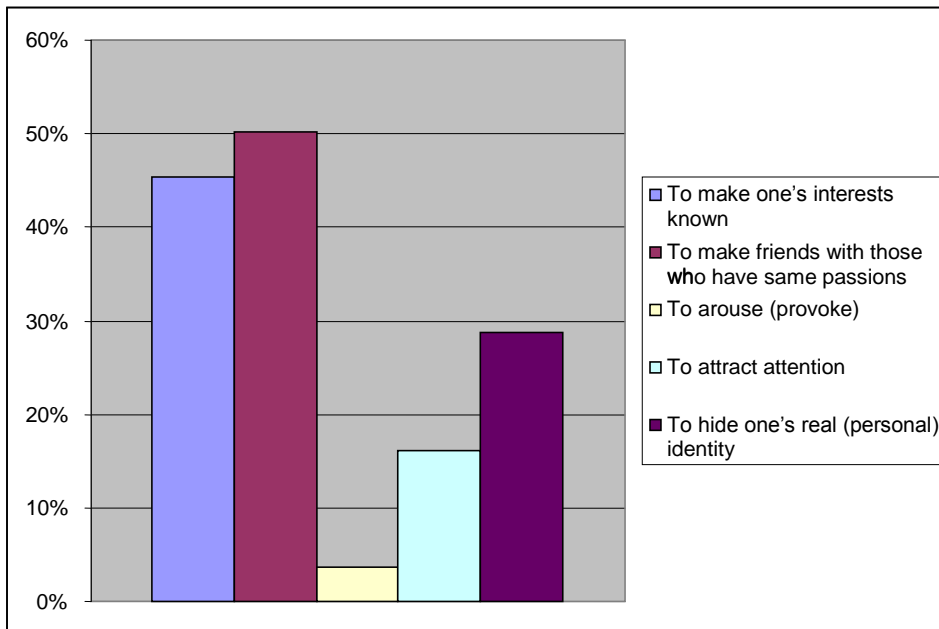


Fig. 12 – Images used to present oneself online: motivations

In the case of images that are not personal ones (such as cartoon and animation characters, photos of representative animals or objects which were chosen by 28.8% of those surveyed to hide their true identity), the choice is determined by a desire to appear better (7.4%) and not reveal one's real identity (17.3%), a degree of privacy that personal photographs clearly can not guarantee.

We cannot, however, fail to note a certain incongruity with regard to the opinions that emerged in response to the next question, in which the youngsters were asked to express their opinions on certain types of behaviour or attitudes of their peers when online.

3.4 The risk dimension

The risk aspect with regard to the Internet deserves clarification. That which is risky for an adult is often not so for youngsters, for whom online risk takes the form of a virus, a slow connection or other indicators that are quite far from what parents and families define as risky behaviour. Having said this, we should also remember what emerged from a question already commented on above to do with opinions about the Internet: the youngsters claiming to consider the Internet definitely dangerous represent a minority, “somewhat dangerous” and “safe on average” were responses that were agreed on in identically equal proportions.

In this light, we can attempt to define more precisely the thoughts and personal experiences of youngsters. We’ll turn back a moment to show what youngsters do online, according to those surveyed (the question posed was the following: “In your view, how often do youngsters your age who are online...”, followed by a list of items that define as many activities or kinds of behaviour relating to the spheres of socialising, personal relationships, risks, online relationships with adults, and pornography).

52% claim that their peers pretend to be someone else, 46.7% state they post unauthorised photos, 51.5% that they say untrue things, 41.8% that they chat with adults without being aware of it (a percentage that drops to 34.4% in the case of chatting with adults while aware that they are talking with persons not their own age), 34.7% that are searching for pornographic materials, and 41.28% who receive invitations from strangers. We’ll let the figure below provide a synthesis of all of the proposed items, having noted which issues drew the greatest consensus.

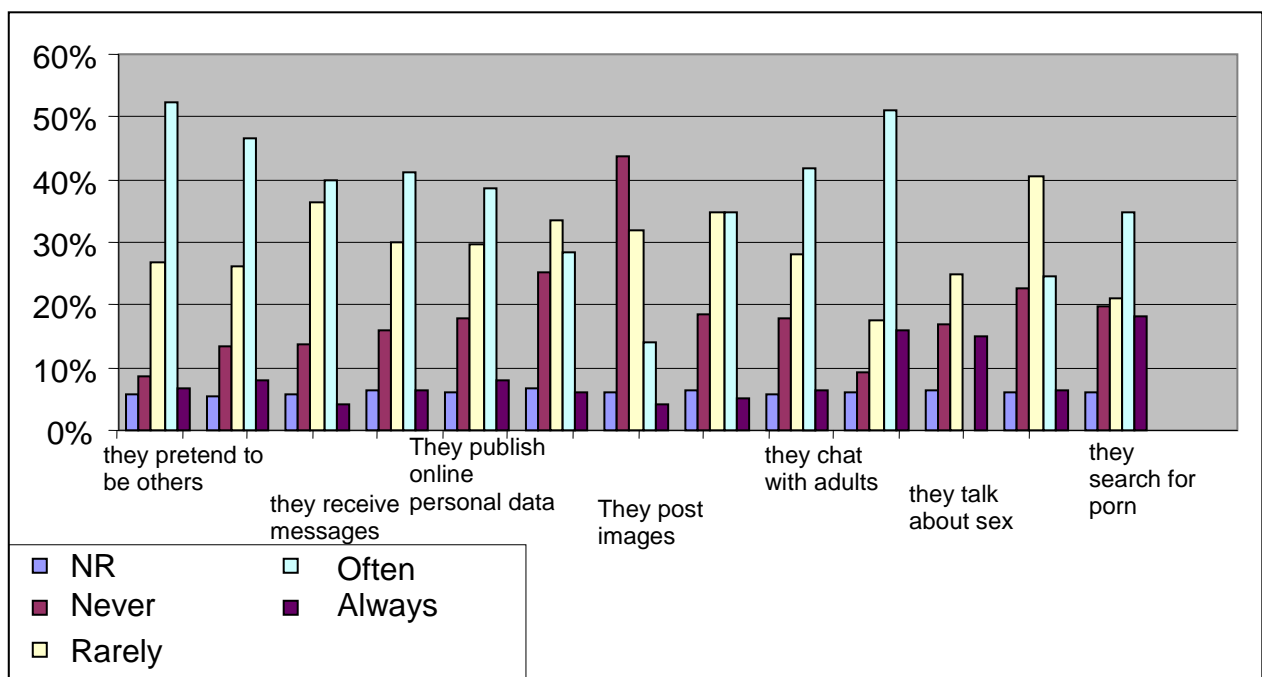


Fig. 14 – In your view, youngsters your age when online...

The data is certainly of considerable interest and can be interpreted in a number of ways. The first comes about as the registering of a “normality” that the rest of the studies carried out depict with regard to the presence of technologies in the lives of youngsters that seems to contrast with the percentage representing those who believe that the behaviour of their peers are actually inappropriate and not always correct when interacting with technology. One could ask one’s self: but then, are the youngsters who they say they are, or those who populate their portrayals? Another possible interpretation could place blame on the imaginary concerns of the media (made up by paedophilia, pornography and cyber-bullying) the portrayals that youngsters create and make known, thereby explaining the disparity between these portrayals and the normality that seems to emerge from the rest of the study. But basically, perhaps, the two sets of data are not contradictory and the effective possibility of inappropriate or unethical behaviour actually confirms the status of normality: precisely because mobile phones and the Internet have become normal, inappropriate practices typical of adolescents are also manifested through these.

The situations listed have affected the youngsters surveyed or their groups of friends, as shown by the next question. In 25% of cases, youngsters found themselves in situations similar to those indicated, while 67.6% replied in the negative and 7.4% abstained. This is an important matter, especially when compared with what the youngsters claim to have done, or not done, on certain specific occasions that follow the same patterns as situations described previously.

In any event, the majority of the youngsters didn’t speak to anyone about their experiences, or at best only with their friends, while only in very rare instances did they confide in siblings, and in the absolute minority of cases did they turn directly to their parents (in instances where photographs were requested in exchange for money the percentage of youngsters who turned to their parents became slightly higher in comparison to the rest of the illustrated situations).

These results stimulate reflection, especially in terms of possible interventions within the educational context. In this context interventions should be devised from the point of view of reinforcing dialogue within the family unit (something that is lacking in many situations, especially when it comes to New Media), by empowering parents with new and greater competence. It’s not enough to tell youngsters to speak with their parents if they find themselves in situations that make them feel uncomfortable; clearly, a more sophisticated and convincing awareness-raising strategy is required both for families and at schools. And yet, this is still not enough. If, in fact, in those situations considered to be risky (by us adults), like those posed by the questionnaire, youngsters’ handling of and response to risks, in terms of assumed modes of behaviour, show that they have relied on peer groups or, as in the great majority of cases, have managed the situation entirely on their own, the need to come up with interventions aimed specifically at these individuals obviously becomes the top priority.

Such interventions must begin with the presupposition that not all youngsters are exposed to online risks in the same way, for the most part they are equipped with the resources needed to respond and properly manage these situations in an adequate fashion; those more at risk to problems such as online victimisation, for example, and exposure to or active involvement in paedo-pornography, are those who are often already

living in difficult conditions, in which an adult reference point is either lacking or totally absent. In this sense, the strengthening of the individual's capabilities on the one hand, and of his or her peers on the other, could well represent one of the most effective responses available. Because peers often represent the only point of reference turned to by these individuals, if they were in a position of being able to do it, they could actually take on a role of "checking" and providing the guidance that is often lacking at home.

With respect to prohibitions or bans, a theme associated with the risks and potential problems encountered in managing Internet use, we cannot show that by prohibiting use of, for example, MSN and chat rooms, is an aspect that is entirely absent or, at the least, less widespread in family contexts, if we consider how the large majority of those surveyed claim not be prohibited by their parents when it comes to most aspects of their online activities.

We are faced with an interesting situation, to be examined from two different perspectives that merit a greater in-depth analysis: the absence of prohibitions is symptomatic of a trust in one's child's abilities to manage on his/her own; freedom is a result of the absence of family members who are either disinterested or incapable.

Surely, it could also pertain to a new stage in the diffusion of new media, to which the initial reaction could easily be that of concern and fear (which often leads to prohibition) but is then followed by a new phase of adjustment once it's been established that chat rooms, MSN, and blogs are not necessarily places of perdition, but of encounters with others.

4. Lines of approach for intervention

In conclusion, let's try to define some lines of approach that can form a framework within which we can reorganize educational intervention and the promotion of campaigns that help further and enhance the subject's own sense of responsibility. Obviously, the changes affecting what significance the Internet now has in everyday life must also necessarily affect the language with which one approaches the theme and, above all, modify the interventions on the operational front.

Mobile phones and the Net function as social connectors, they help youngsters communicate with their friends, to always keep in touch and exchange feelings (photos and videos made with mobile phones become important for them as a means of recording and sharing, enabling them to capture memories of entertaining or unusual occasions). At the same time, in confirmation of a line of approach that emerged during our latest studies, the use of social networks is tied to contacts with established friends; for the majority of those surveyed that was the primary motivation, therefore socializing online tends to style itself as an extension of a pre-existing social circle.

The Internet is useful, but certainly not in an exploitable sense. Extreme judgements of the Internet: (entirely dangerous/entirely safe, for example) rally far smaller consensuses, and youngsters find themselves more frequently in intermediary positions, with the exception of the concept based on an unbalanced positive view of its usefulness and its easiness to use, the latter also over-represented from a positive view.

The identity dimension is crucial, precisely in view of new media's social role since social networks, blogs and chat rooms present opportunities for youngsters to represent themselves and communicate their personal experiences, to create/form their own identities. To be there and to be is also derived from the Net, as a space within which one can communicate and express one's own identity. That is why youngsters tend to use images showing themselves, personal photos and photos taken together with friends. As the Web is a place for encounters and socializing, it becomes only natural to think that posting a true image of yourself won't necessarily expose you to risks, but is communicating who you are and allowing you to be yourself.

Managing the risks: we need to reconsider some of the stereotypes and prejudices that denote the ways in which we communicate with boys and girls about the risks related to internet and mobile phone use and the types of conduct to adopt. Minors are "active explorers", and it is precisely due to their need to know, their natural curiosity and the excitement and sensations aroused in them (sexual growth and development) both externally (messages coming from the world of the media, marketing, and peer groups) that they can find themselves in contact with persons, situations and materials not suited to their levels of growth and development³. But many of the scenarios that tend to be proposed to those who are in the process of growing up can be perceived by them as unrealistic and not credible, and the most likely outcome is that they won't be heeded. We risk rendering all these efforts useless if, for example, we represent strangers encountered online solely as people who chat and hook up with inexperienced minors in order to abuse them. This is not the reality in which boys and girls live in, and generally speaking it is not the only reality. It is true that, as is the case in real life, potentially abusive adults on the Internet make use of every possible tool to seduce his/her victims, but the effort we must make is to equip boys and girls not with a fear of strangers, but rather the competence needed to be in a position to read, decipher and respond on their own in a safe and effective way to online solicitations, especially when it has to do with managing relations with others. In more general terms, this is the kind of educational work in which schools and families play a fundamental role. And all the more so today, with the spread of wireless and mobile phone connections (destined to grow with time), distance youngsters even further away from parental supervision.

It is a role that must above all aim to foster in minors a secure base which, by empowering their intra-psychic and emotional dimensions, helps them to feel equipped to steer the events within their own lives, and in this way also be able to deal with adverse situations.

The need for dialogue within families, an aspect that we have brought up on numerous occasions, but which here emerges in an even more evident way: when it comes to unpleasant or unclear situations, most youngsters will not confide in anyone, or at most with their friends, while the instances in which they decide to confide in siblings are very rare, and those who turn directly to their parents make up the absolute minority. This empty space needs to be filled with meaning, or friends and peer groups are to remain a youngster's only reference points. It is from this aspect that we also derive the necessity to restructure interventions on the theme of safety/responsibility, not only therefore on the evolution of technology in our

³ Alberto Pellai – Resources for parents and teachers, www.stop-it.org

everyday lives and in our usual social ambit (its significance, as we've pointed out above), the words that were plausible decades ago are now proven to be inadequate in meeting today's challenges.

The absence of bans imposed by families. The issue demands the adoption of a interpretive model: does it have to do with expressing a sense of trust in one's child's capacity to manage his/her own affairs? Or is freedom the outcome of a family's absence, whether due to showing a lack of interest or of competence? Or is the Internet no longer such a novelty as to arouse reactions of concern and fear (which often lead to bans) and that in this case we find ourselves in a new phase of adaptation with regard to the medium. We have three different hypotheses that in any case all converge and point to one need: that of constructing tools that grant youngsters their spirit of independence, but also accompany families along a path of cultural acquisition and growth with regard to new media.