



KiDiCoTi: Kids' Digital Lives in Covid-19 Times: A Comparative Mixed Methods Study on Digital Practices, Safety and Wellbeing

Key findings from Ireland

DCU's National Anti-Bullying Research and Resource Centre in partnership with the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission undertook a study on the experiences of Irish children and families during the Covid-19 lockdown. Fifteen European countries, including Ireland, participated in the study.¹ The goal of this research is to understand how children and parents engaged with digital technology while staying at home and how these experiences may have impacted children's online safety and overall family wellbeing. In Ireland, over one thousand participants (504 parents and 504 children age 10-18) completed an online survey that asked about exposure to online risks such as cyberbullying and harmful content online²; digital technology use-related habits; use of digital technology for school purposes; parental worries regarding technology use; but also the positive aspects of digital media use for the family, such as the acquisition of digital skills.

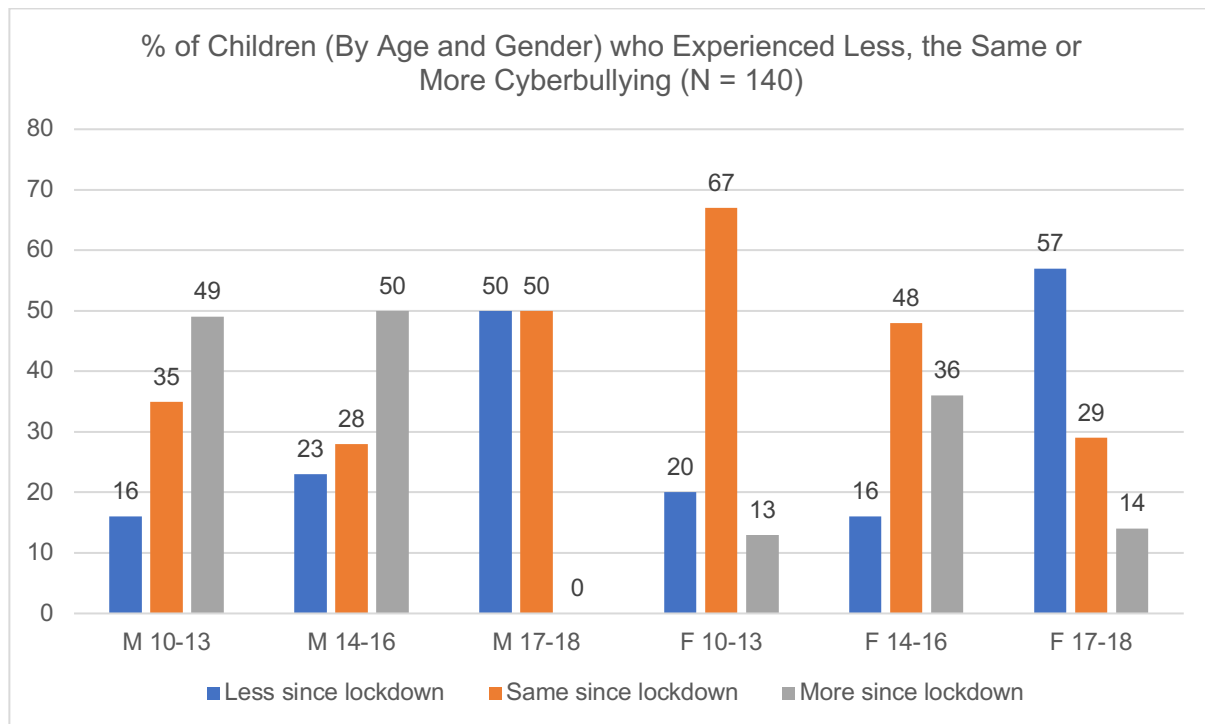
Key findings

28% of 10-18-year old children in the sample reported to have been victims of cyberbullying during lockdown, while 50% reported to have seen others being cyberbullied (bystander role). The younger in age they were the more likely they were to have been victims of cyberbullying. Overall, 49% of males experienced significantly more frequent cyberbullying since lockdown. Detailed breakdown by age and gender is shown in Figure 1.

¹ Austria, Belgium, Croatia, Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Norway, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Spain, Switzerland

² This was an online panel with participants across Ireland. NB: quotas for population characteristics were not used and so the sample cannot be characterised as nationally representative. Nonetheless, this is a national sample: It is regionally balanced ([NUTS 3 level for Ireland](#)); with children across the target age group being evenly distributed across the sample (target age for children: 11-18). NB: Children age 10 are included in this report too as some children born in target year had not yet turned 11 at the time of data collection; and gender balance for both parents and children: Male parents: 246; Female parents 258; Male children 274, Female children 228; Other: 2;

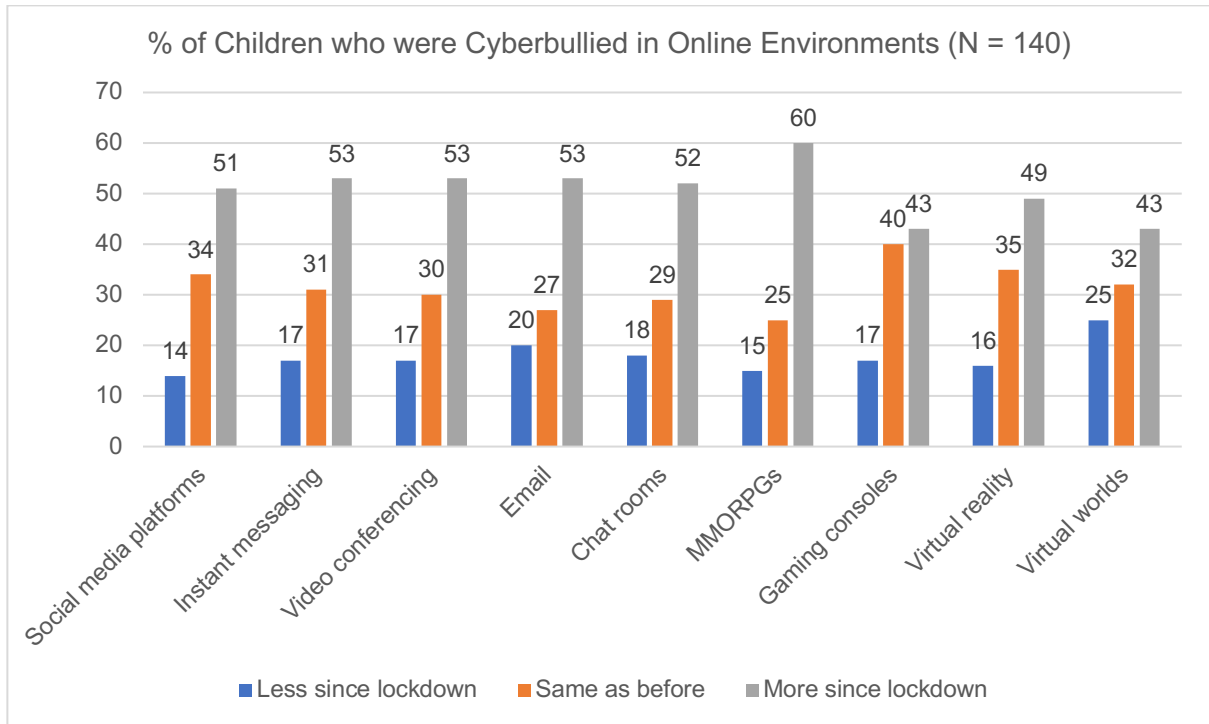
Figure 1



N=140. Question: We will now ask you a few more questions about a specific risk called cyberbullying. Cyberbullying is when someone repeatedly harasses, mistreats, or makes fun of another person (on purpose to hurt them) online or while using mobile phones or other electronic devices. How frequently have the following happened to you during the lockdown?

We asked children if they experienced more cyberbullying victimisation on specific online platforms such as video conferencing (e.g. Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Skype); on social media such as Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat or Tik Tok, among others; online gaming or email etc. Males experienced significantly more cyberbullying via email (62%), chat rooms (57%), video conferencing such as Teams or Zoom (60%), and in virtual reality (56%) since lockdown. 66% of all children between the ages of 14-16 years experienced significantly more cyberbullying in instant/private messaging services such as WhatsApp, Viber or Telegram. Detailed breakdown is in Figure 2.

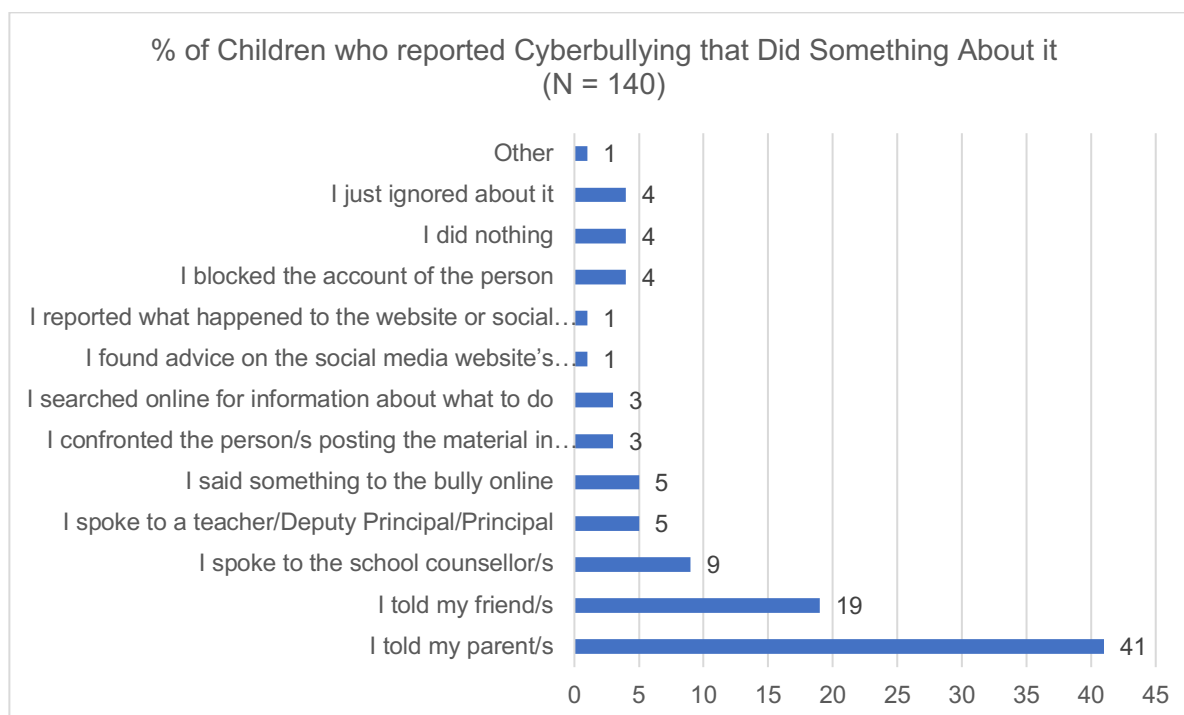
Figure 2



N=140 During the lockdown, how frequently have you been cyberbullied in these online environments (please provide one answer on every line)

Just under half of the children who said they were victims of cyberbullying (41%) told a parent or caregiver. Under a fifth of the victims (19%) said they told a friend; and less than a tenth told a school counsellor (9%) or a teacher or principal (5%). Just under a tenth of the children said they did nothing about it or ignored the problem (8%). Figure 3 provides a detailed overview of children’s coping and reporting strategies; whereas Table 1 breaks down children’s reporting to friends and parents by age group.

Figure 3



N=140 NB: Children were allowed to provide multiple responses to this question (they did not need to opt for one answer choice only). Question: What did you do about the experience of cyberbullying during the lockdown? Click all that apply to you.

Table 1 Whether children reported to parents and friends, breakdown by age group:

Age Range	Told Parents	Told Friends
10-13	41%	19%
14-16	37%	21.5%
17-18	56%	12.5%

Were children more mean and hurtful to others online since lockdown began than before? Out of 25% of the sample who reported to have ever been mean or hurtful to others online, just over a third (34%) said it happened more frequently or much more frequently since the lockdown than before. When broken down across age and gender, this increase is only visible for both boys and girls in the 14-16 age group. For other age groups, the most common answer was that this experience happened about as often as before the lockdown.

Other harmful content

Self-harm: Out of the 36% of children in the sample who reported having seen people talk about or show ways of physically harming or hurting themselves online, over a third (33%) had seen this more frequently or much more frequently since the beginning of the lockdown than before.

Pro-ana, pro-mia and thinspiration: Of the 44% percent who have ever seen such content, 35% have seen that more frequently or a lot more frequently during the lockdown

than before. The most frequent answer across age groups was that they saw such content as frequently as before.

Hate speech: Almost half of the children (47%) have seen hateful messages towards certain groups of individuals (of different colour, ethnicity or nationality). 43% of those who have seen these messages report that they have seen these more frequently or a lot more frequently during the lockdown. Looking across age groups, the most frequent answer was that they saw such content about as frequently as before, except for 14-16 year old boys, where there was a slight increase in exposure to such content.

Gory of violent images of people hurting other people or animals A similar percentage of children 44%, report to have ever seen such gory content and just under a third of these (32%) reports to have seen this more frequently or a lot more frequently during the lockdown, while “as frequently as before” was the most common answer across age groups.

Technology use

We asked families if they acquired more digital technology items during the lockdown (computers, laptops, tablets, fitness trackers etc.) More than half of households (53%) acquired at least one device since the lockdown. Combined, all households reported to have had 4,407 devices before lockdown. All households reported to have acquired an additional 792 devices since lockdown. This is an *18% increase in devices acquired since lockdown* among households. All households had approximately an average of 11 devices in them before lockdown. All households acquired on average of 2 additional devices since lockdown.³ Parents who were out of work and looking for a job or self-employed acquired significantly fewer devices than others. Employed parents acquired significantly more devices than parents of other statuses. Parents who strongly agreed with the statement that they were increasingly worried about the online safety of their child during the lockdown, acquired significantly fewer devices since lockdown.

71% of children who use smartphones (56% of the entire sample) said they used smartphones during the lockdown more often than before. 66% of children who use gaming consoles (49% of the entire sample) said they used gaming consoles more often than before; 72% of children who use social media (53% of the entire sample) said they used social media more often than before the lockdown; and 65% of children who use direct/instant messaging like WhatsApp or Telegram (48% of the entire sample), said they used direct/instant messaging more often than before the lockdown.

An increase is visible across age groups, and there are no significant differences for age and gender for such increased technology use. However, 40% more children from lower income households started playing digital games during lockdown compared to higher income children.⁴

Digital skills

The majority of children know how to join conference calls: 71% of children say that it is true or very true of them that they know how to join a video conference via Skype, Zoom

³ *Higher income households* had significantly more devices (i.e. more than 11) in their households before lockdown ($p = .006$).

⁴ ($N = 43$, $p = .006$). NB: Nonetheless, frequencies are low, we are talking about 17 children from lower income, another 17 from average and 9 from higher out of the total sample.

or Microsoft Teams. Almost half of children (49%) say they know where to find health information that they can trust online. 63% say they know how to change privacy settings (e.g. on a social networking site or on a device). Slightly over a half (52%) say they know more about the Internet than their parent or guardian. 73% say they know which information they should or should not share online.

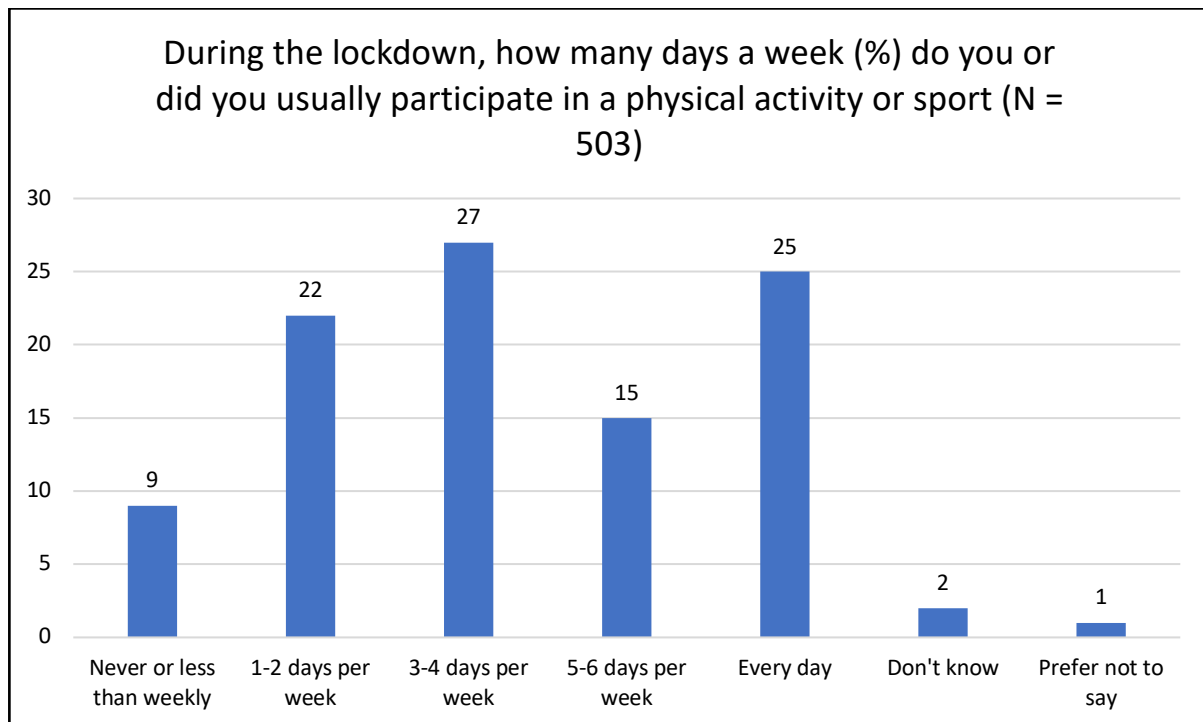
Schoolwork and Activities including Exercise in Lockdown

50% of all children reported having significantly less schoolwork (school hours and homework) since the lockdown as compared to before the lockdown. 55% of children aged 10-13 say they received significantly less schoolwork/ hours compared to other age-groups during lockdown. Over 60% of 5th and 6th class primary school children reported receiving significantly less schoolwork/ hours during lockdown. 30% of 3rd year pupils and 49% of 6th year pupils reported receiving significantly less schoolwork/ hours during lockdown. Nonetheless, 41% of transition year pupils (4th year) reported receiving significantly more schoolwork/ hours during lockdown. There was no indication that the amount of schoolwork/ hours were connected with increased cyberbullying.

School-related online activities: 77% of all children in the sample engaged in some online activities, such as an online class or video conference with their teachers while classes at their school were changed due to the coronavirus. For the rest of the children who did not engage in online activities, 80% of them said it was because it was not offered to them. Most children who participated in online activities reported doing so a few times a week (35%), followed by a few times a day (24%). Eight percent of children said they participated less often than once a week. No significant differences regarding engagement with digital technology for school purposes have been found among children from lower, middle and higher income families.

Physical activity during lockdown

Many parents and caregivers might be wondering if the lockdown brought significant disruptions to children's physical activity, especially due to reliance on digital media use. Almost all children (87%) did physical activity or sport to some degree during lockdown a similar number of girls (88% of them) and boys (90% of them). More than half of children (51%) used technology during physical exercise during lockdown. Children from low income households exercised significantly less with technology than those from average or higher income households (N = 258, p = .009).



N=503: Answer to the question: During the lockdown, how many days a week did you engage in physical activity

Parental digital parenting habits, attitudes and worries

Parental worries: A significant portion of parents reported an increased level of worry over their children's Internet and digital media use during lockdown. 57% of parents said they were worried or very worried that the coronavirus situation would have a negative impact on their child's education (falling behind in schoolwork, failing in exams etc.). 58% of parents reported being more or much more worried during the lockdown than before, about excessive Internet and digital technology use, such as their child spending too much time playing games, watching videos or on social media. 42% of parents were more or a lot more worried about cyberbullying since the lockdown than before. 52% were more or much more worried about health-related issues (e.g. eyesight, obesity, them getting sick); as many as 62% were worried or much more worried about their child's mental health (isolation, depression, burn out); and 50% worried much more or more than before about their child's social interactions (too much or too little of these or with unwanted contacts online). 54% of parents have been increasingly worried about the online safety of their child during the lockdown.

41% of the parents agree or strongly agree that digital technology use increased stress and anxiety levels in their family. 39% of the parents agree or strongly agree that it was difficult for them to juggle their work and family life during the lockdown. In case of increased parental worry, our analyses to date have not found any notable differences among parents of lower, average and higher socio-economic status.

Benefits of digital technology: Nonetheless, many agree on the positive aspects of technology use: 86% agree or strongly agree that digital technology use has helped maintain contacts with family, friends and people they care about. 61% say that digital technology helped their family be more creative during lockdown; and 70% of parents say

they spent more time playing or doing shared activities with their children during lockdown. As many as 59% of parents agree that their child has become overall better at using digital technology for school activities during lockdown.

Parental digital skills: There is a very weak correlation between parental age and confidence in these digital skills: The older the parent, the less likely they are to say that they know which information they should or shouldn't share online (-.106*); and the less likely they are to say that they know where to find health information online that they can trust (-.005*).⁵ Table 2 provides more detail:

Parental Digital Skills

Item	Reported as True or Very true	
	N	%
I have enough digital skills to support my child's online schooling	355	70
I am able to motivate my child when she/he loses interest or gets frustrated with their schoolwork	111	57
I have enough knowledge about school subjects to support my child with learning activities	295	58.5
I know which information I should and shouldn't share online	435	86
My family is experiencing fatigue from overuse of digital technology	209	41
I know where to find health information that I can trust	422	84

Parents who agreed with the above statements as "true" or "very true of them. Q15. Below, you'll find some statements about the online and distance schooling during the lockdown. On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 means "not true at all" and 5 means "very true", please assess how true these statements are of you.

Changes in digital parenting practices

We do not see a noticeable increase in parental restrictions to children's digital technology use or otherwise engagement with their technology use. A detailed breakdown of parental answers for before the lockdown and during the lockdown are provided in Table 3 below:

⁵ Correlation score interpretations are very weak: * = Sig. at 0.01 level.

Table 3

	Less than before (%)	Same as before (%)	More than before (%)
I forbid certain digital activities altogether (e.g. playing multiplayer games or buying stuff online) N = 360	7% (N=25)	68% (N=244)	25% (N=91)
I limit the time for digital technology use (screen time in general or for some activities) N = 373	5% (N=17)	52% (N=260)	19% (N=96)
I limit the spaces for digital technology use (e.g. "no smartphone in your bedroom") N = 366	8% (N=41)	61% (N=223)	28% (N=102)
I talk with my child about what he/she does with digital technologies N = 400	3% (N=11)	60.5% (N=242)	37% (N=147)
I use digital technology together with my child, doing shared activities (playing, learning together) N = 368	4% (N=15)	54% (N=200)	42% (N=153)
I encourage my child to explore and to learn new things by using digital technologies on his/her own N = 391	4% (N=14)	57% (N=222)	40% (N=155)
I use parental controls or other technical means of blocking, filtering, keeping track of the websites or apps that my child uses N = 376	7% (N=26)	65% (N=245)	28% (N=105)

Percentage of parents who answered each item from the following question (Q8): Below, you'll find some statements about different ways in which you can handle your child's use of digital technology (e.g. tablets, computers, smartphones). Think about the lockdown period. Compared to the period before the lockdown, how much more or less did you do the following things, if ever?