How Children Learn to Know the Internet. A Qualitative Study on Acquiring Internet Competencies

To familiarise children with the internet early on is one of the most important issues of education policy and media pedagogics today. Undisputed is the fact that children have to generate orientation knowledge, develop selection criteria and learn how to evaluate information, in order to use the internet sensibly. Without a doubt, children need shelter to be protected from endangering contents on the internet, whether through an children's media act or a special filter technology or parent's guided internet visits.

However, not much is known about how children use and understand the internet, in which way they acquire this new technology and which strategies they form while getting used to handling the internet. The study is focused on the child as an active recipient, its understanding of the internet, its interest in contents at web sites and its experiences picked up by using internet services.

Finally, not only the age-dependent internet usage but also the social conditions of children's early internet access will be investigated. Considering the statement of the increasing knowledge gap – i.e. the circle of social inequality, user styles of new media and further exclusion from knowledge – it is important to find a concept that gives children the chance to get media-literate on an equal basis, independent from internet access at home and various media habits in their families.

Targets of the Project

The project aims to phrase the concept of children's internet competencies in concrete terms - especially for children four to twelve years old. From observations of child-specific handling of the internet some starting points for media pedagogical advice will be outlined. To encourage children's sensible use of the internet an everyday-life oriented framework is needed. For that reason data has to be traced out on the following levels:
- the individual children's dealing with the internet will be documented by isolated case studies;
- the increasing internet experience of children in time will be observed by repeating the case studies periodically;
- the children's internet use related to age, sex, motivation and interests will be examined by comparing the cases;
- the influence of the family environment, pedagogical institutions and peer groups on how children cope with the internet will be shown by collecting data in families, kindergartens and schools.

The results of the project will be published as printed material for parents' advice and educators' further vocational training. A supplementary video will illustrate the main patterns of children's internet behaviour.

Questions of the Project

To keep up with the children's own view of the internet it is asked
- What are the experiences of children on the internet like?
- What do internet contents and virtual communication mean to children?
- Are there some hints which give reason for the hypothesis that the internet increases the opportunities of self education for children and stimulates the process of self socialisation?
- What abilities and skills should be promoted by parents and teachers to enable children to use the internet to their benefit?
- Which kind of pedagogical, technical and creative support do children need to explore the various internet services independently?
- How are problems of child protection on the internet in the everyday family life taken into account?

Empirical Priorities of the Study

The research program is focused on following qualitative aspects:
- children's, parents' and teachers' expectations on and attitudes towards the internet;
- social contexts of children's internet usage in their daily life and the regulation of access by grown-ups;
- particular conditions of children's internet usage: reasons, motivation and personal surroundings;
- children's preferences on internet services (web, e-mail, chat, newsgroups), specific interests in contents, and how the children create meaning for themselves;
- actual use of the internet: children's patterns built up by activities like navigation and searching strategies, problem-solving approaches, time-budget considerations;
- influence of children's dealing with the internet on social relationships in leisure time as well as in school;
- age-specific and experience-dependent behaviour of internet usage (growing knowledge).

Methods

Child-centred approach. The empirical data is gained by isolated case studies on children's internet usage. About 20 children aged four to twelve are

observed during their internet visits, using video and computer-screen recordings. Both films will be spliced together, in order to get synchronised and analysable material. Children, their parents and teachers are interviewed to supplement the material. The observation process is designed as three waves, each comprising five days, to find out how children's handling the internet is changed by increasing experience. The collected material will be analysed in an interpretative manner.

The project is financed by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research of Germany. The authors are responsible for the contents.

Research Team

Regina Decker, Christine Feil, Christoph Gieger

For further information about the project see:

http://www.dji.de/www-kinderseiten/default.htm (in German only).

- "Websites for Children": data base with a collection of predominantly german websites; description, age recommendation, evaluation
- "Internetprojects with Children": data base including school and other projects; for information exchange between educationalists
- intermediate results from the project: "How Children Learn to Know the Internet"
- literature referring to children on the internet: bibliographic specifications and short annotations
- links to contents of children's protection on the internet

Contact:

Deutsches Jugendinstitut e.V.
Abteilung Kinder und Kinderbetreuung
Internetprojekt
Nockherstraße 2
D-81541 München

Tel.: 0049-89-62306-172, -316, -131
Fax: 0049-89-62306-162
E-Mail: feil@dji.de, decker@dji.de, gieger@dji.de
http://www.dji.de/www-kinderseiten/default.htm

DJI

Deutsches Jugendinstitut

Children on the Internet: Mediapedagogical Information for Parents and Educationalists

Information on the Project

How Children Learn to Know the Internet. A Qualitative Study on Aquiring Internet Competencies