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SocialWeb – SocialWork

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Safer Internet 2009-2013

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a multiannual Community Programme on protecting children using the Internet and other communication
technologies.

¹ OJ L348, 24.12.2008, p. 118.

INDEX

1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY 3

2 PROJECT ACTIVITIES 4

3 PROJECT ACHIEVEMENTS..... 5

4 EVALUATION RESULTS 6

5 DISSEMINATION 10

6 IMPACT AND SUSTAINABILITY 13

7 CONCLUSION 15

8 FURTHER INFORMATION ON ONLINE SAFETY AND VULNERABLE CHILDREN AND YOUTHS 16

9 LIST OF FIGURES..... 17

1 Executive Summary

The purpose of the *SocialWeb – SocialWork* project was to improve children's online safety by availing the positive energy and influence of social work on vulnerable children and youths. Nowadays the Internet is no longer a mere tool for information search but rather **the** platform for social life and it is only logically consistent to involve the area of social work in strategies for a safer Internet for children and youths.

The primary target group of the project were professionals working with children and youth at risk in various fields of activities. For young people who face a higher vulnerability due to social or educational disadvantages, having disabilities or other special needs, educational professionals in the broad field of social youth work often fill the role of a confidant.

Therefore the project strategy of *SocialWeb – SocialWork* was built on the professionals' detailed knowledge and acquaintance with situations of daily life and the needs of their young target group, and sensitively addressed their possible reluctance to digital media usage in social work. During the project's 24 months runtime, a training campaign was piloted in the participating partner countries and evaluated in regular cycles to measure the effects of such qualification for the improvement of Internet safety of vulnerable children and youths. The project resulted in a training programme consisting of both face-to-face and online learning units and an additional train-the-trainer strategy, thereof all elements have proven their transferability and scalability to other European countries and further groups of professionals working with children and youths at risk.

SocialWeb – SocialWork was a knowledge enhancement project in the Safer Internet Programme funded by the European Commission. The project consortium consisted of:

[Stiftung Digitale Chancen](#), Germany (project coordinator)

[Narodni centrum bezpecnejsiho internetu](#), Czech Republic

[Association Rural Internet Access Points \(RIAP Association\)](#), Lithuania

[Nobody's Children Foundation](#), Poland

[Fundación Esplai](#), Spain

The project was furthermore sustained by the expertise of an Advisory Board which included the following experts (in alphabetical order): John Carr, Dr. Per Christiansen (Hans-Bredow-Institut), Dr. Renata Geležiniene, (Lithuania Republic Special pedagogue association), Loreta Krizinauskiene (Association LIA /Langas I ateiti), Andreas Link (jugendschutz.net), Prof. Sonia Livingstone (London School of Economics), Tink Palmer (The Marie Collins Foundation), Ana Luiza Rotta Soares (PROTEGELES).

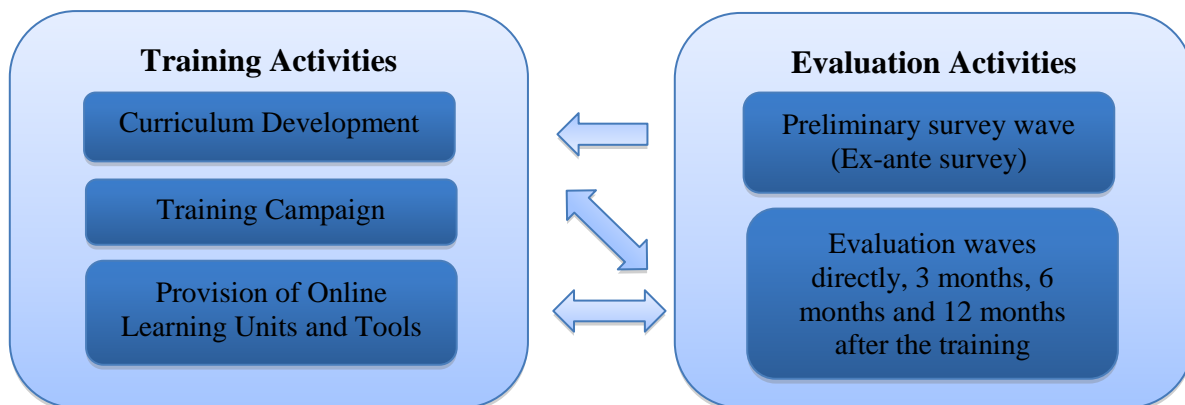
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digitale-chancen**

**safer
internet.cz**



2 Project activities

The project was based on two complementary strands of activities: the provision of a training campaign for professionals working with children and youths at risk on online safety and in



parallel the evaluation of the training effects on their work.

A preliminary ex-ante survey was carried out with 189 respondents from the five partner countries to better understand the learning needs and working circumstances of the target group of professionals and to get a good overview of the content that is needed in training them. Based on the results a training curriculum with a modular structure was developed and piloted with professionals working with vulnerable children and youths. The purpose of the training was to improve the online safety of their young clientele taking into consideration the given circumstances and backgrounds of social youth work in the countries involved.

In addition, interested professionals were qualified by specific train-the-trainer sessions to act as trainers for their colleagues and pass on their newly acquired knowledge to multiply the training content and to further raise awareness for the issue of online safety for children and youths.

The training campaign was accompanied by a formative evaluation with quantitative survey waves and additional qualitative focus group interviews to identify effective awareness raising strategies for the online safety of this vulnerable young target group. In up to four, but at least three, evaluation waves subsequent to the training, the following questions were assessed:

- Which role have professionals working with vulnerable children and youths played so far in the online protection of their young clientele and in awareness raising for Internet safety?
- As how useful is the training perceived by the professionals?
- Does the training increase their awareness for online risks and threats?
- Do the trained professionals adapt their educational approaches and activities according to their potentially changed risk perception?
- Which effects regarding online safety of vulnerable children and youths are achievable by training professionals for those tasks?

The findings from the evaluation waves were incorporated into the regular updating and development of the curriculum and the supplementary online learning units. The evaluation of the training effects on social work in the field allowed both to analyse which strategies proof of value for Europe wide scaling and transfer to other countries and other social work conditions and to reason on the scalability of the project's approach in a larger European context.

3 Project achievements

The project *SocialWeb – SocialWork* resulted in



4 Evaluation Results

Socially and educationally disadvantaged children and youths are less likely to get guidance in their family and it can be difficult to address them in school education, if they go to school at all. To reach them, new areas of work with children have come into focus. And, as proven by the evaluation results of the project, social youth work can play a role in improving the Internet safety of these young people.

The detailed answers from trainees about their target group's vulnerability show a very high sensitivity regarding the needs of socially and educationally disadvantaged youths. This does not come as a surprise as understanding children's behaviour and providing them with the support they need for their growing up is the main task of social work. Nonetheless the pilot project has shown that there is a certain need to qualify social workers in the five participating countries. It can be assumed that the situation is not much different across Europe; so far online safety is not included in the curricula of social work education. On the other hand it seems that the ground is well prepared. Social workers in all countries have shown a high awareness for the need to deal with the topic and a high motivation to get themselves ready to guide their children and youths through the digital world. The one day training session was perceived as appropriate – fitting into the tight schedule of most social workers but also providing the learning resources they need. Together with the accompanying online learning units the training served as a well-developed instrument of qualification in social work.

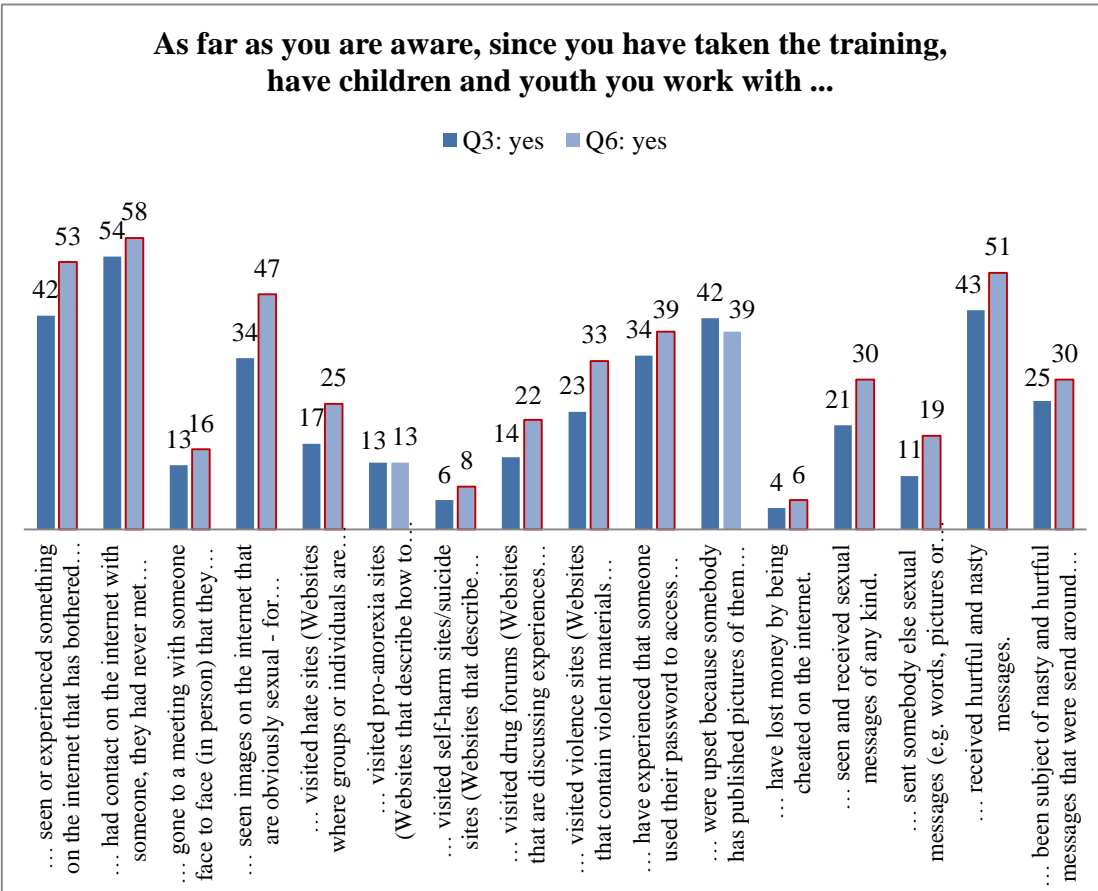


Figure 1: All trainees who have answered questionnaire Q3 and Q6, distribution in per cent (Q3, Q6, n=189)

Although the training started with a certain degree of awareness for online risks and threats on the participants' side, the evaluation results show that the awareness of the trainees was increased for nearly all risks, and this effect sustainably persisted over time. Six months after the training the perception of risks was increased by 0.1 to 13 per cent. In parallel the number of those who answered "I don't know" decreased around 10 per cent which means that the respondents were more confident in judging a situation as fraught with risk. Both indications validate the previous assumptions about the effectiveness of the training.

Q0: Which specific aspect/idea do you want to realise when you are back at work?						
	technical approaches	educational approaches	mixture of different measures	others	no answer	All
All	24 (4 %)	440 (69 %)	30 (5 %)	25 (4 %)	122 (19 %)	641 (100 %)

Table 1: Aspects/ideas the trainees want to integrate in their professional life (Q0: n=641)

When it comes to the question if the trained professionals adapt their educational approaches and activities according to their changed risk perception the circumstances of their daily work need to be taken in account. For most of the social workers, educational approaches to increase the online safety of their target group play a higher role than technical means.

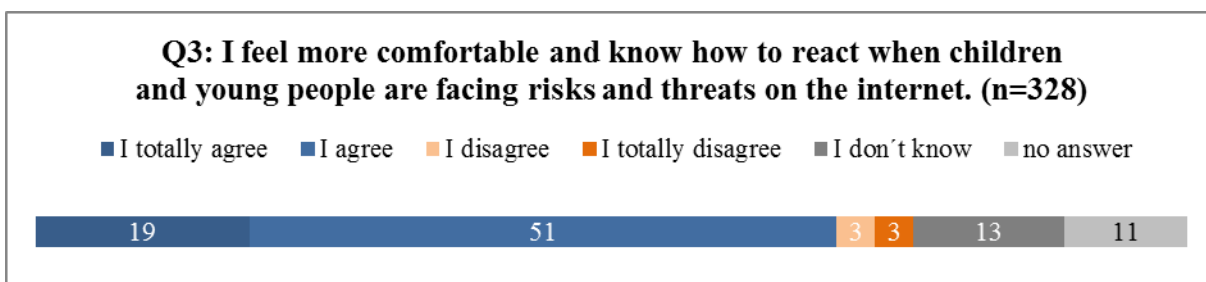


Figure 2: Evaluation of the participants: Dealing with internet risks, distribution in per cent (Q3, n=328)

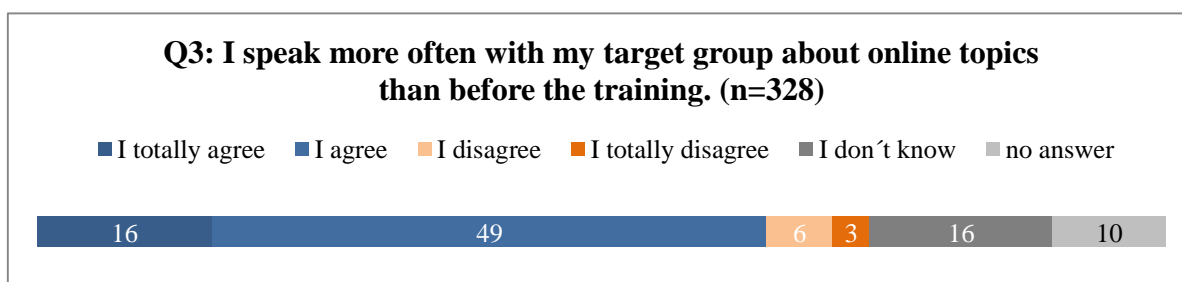


Figure 3: Evaluation of the participants: Speak about online topic, distribution in per cent (Q3, n=328)

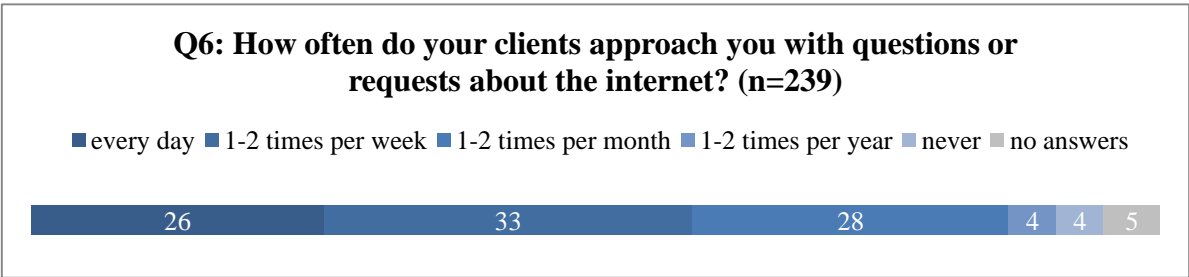


Figure 4: Request about the internet, distribution in per cent (Q6, n=239)

After the training they feel much more confident to tackle the issue of online safety. They seek the dialog about online topics with their target group, and vice versa their clients accept them as trustful and knowing persons and more often approach them with questions or requests about the internet. The findings of the project document an increasing acceptance in communication about online topics on both sides: professionals working with vulnerable children and youths and their target group.

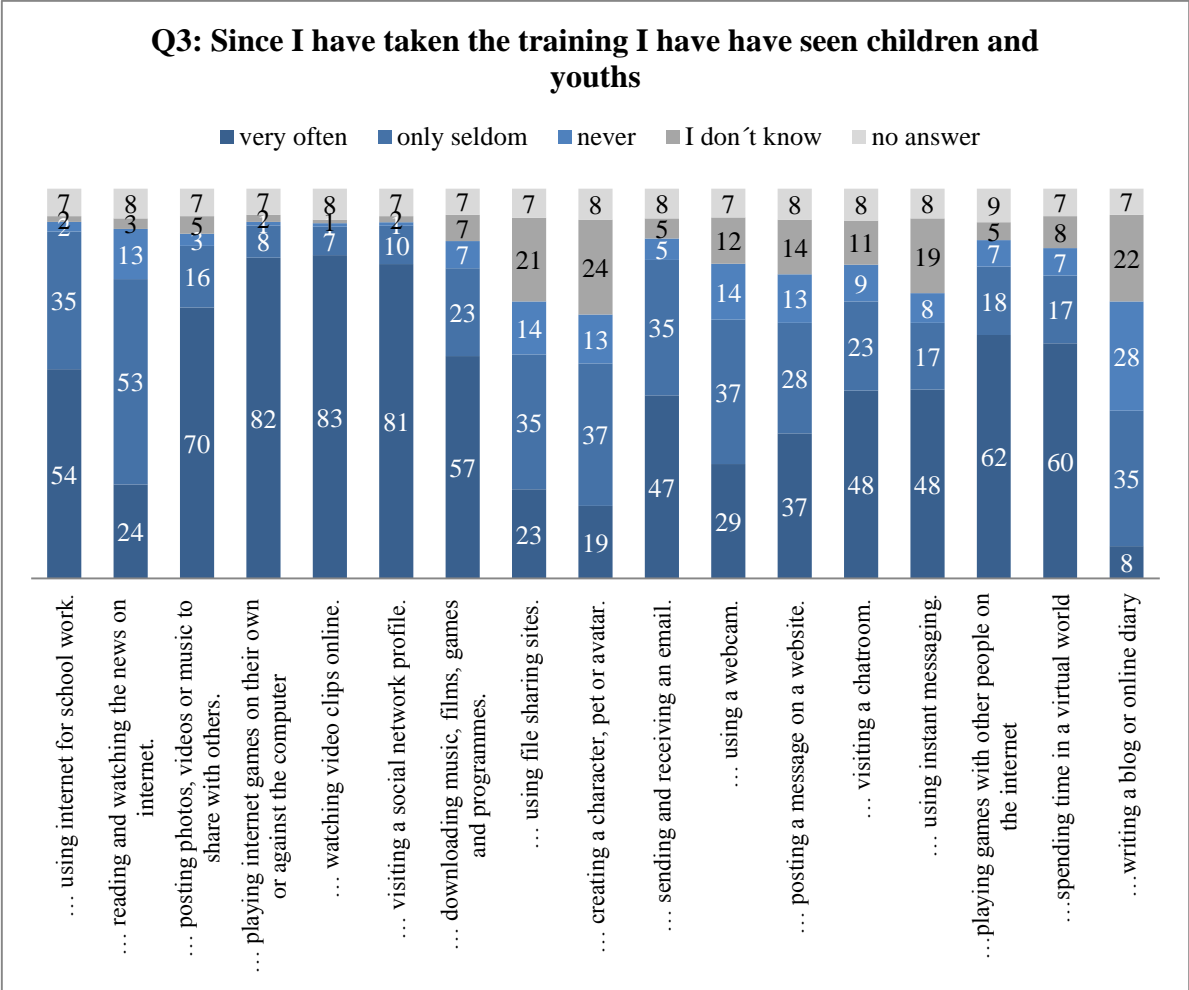


Figure 5: Observations on risks and threats children and youths faced, distribution in per cent (Q3, n=328)

With regard to the perception of children and youths in general but also the special target group of the project it can be assumed that the somewhat negative impression of those social workers that are digital immigrants was slightly blurred by their newly acquired knowledge about children's and youths' online habits. Nonetheless one should not ignore the phenomenon firstly described by Bourdieu. In his illustrious book "Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste" he elaborates on the theory that one's observations are always influenced by their own social background. This so called habitus might be an explanation why the social workers are prone to observe more often entertaining than creative internet activities with their target group. Just because they know the shortcomings of socially and educationally disadvantaged children and youths so well they might not be able to see their capabilities in certain unexpected areas.

Further training should therefore take this phenomenon into account and in addition pay attention to the special needs of certain groups of vulnerable children. There are online risks and threats that call for special attention to gender aspects in the target group and it will be necessary to observe further developments both of social media applications and the internet usage attitudes of boys and girls with regard to this aspect. In addition the small sample of social workers working with children with disabilities in Germany has given at least some hints that it would be useful to pay more attention to their needs with regard to online safety. It is well known that handicapped people can benefit from the use of the internet especially with regard to independence and self-determination. To also ensure this effect for young disabled users they will need special guidance for which social workers in this area are not yet well equipped. Further research on the needs of the special target group as well as the social workers in charge of them is essential.

Eventually a differentiated answer must be given in regard to the effects on the online safety of vulnerable children and youths which can be achieved by training professionals working with vulnerable children and youths. While it was possible to gain valid results in regard to the positive impact of raised awareness on the social workers side within the context of the project *SocialWeb – SocialWork*, there is a desideratum for further research focussed directly on the target group of vulnerable children. Learning to know how they benefit from increased digital literacy and awareness of the adults responsible for educating them would allow to design a broader strategy and training approach not only for professionals in social work but also for parents and other adults in charge of minors.

5 Dissemination

To ensure that the activities and findings of the project find their way into the structures of social work taking care of children and youth at risk, it was necessary to reach the relevant players in this field such as social youth workers, representatives of parental advisory organisations, representatives of children's welfare organisations, representatives / managers / staff of institutions providing public internet access, Safer Internet National Awareness Centres in the Insafe network, academia, media and lobbyists and politicians.

These relevant players were addressed at different times of the project's runtime and through different communication channels:



Articles in Academic Journals:

- Pigulevičienė, J., Žemaitienė, I. (2013): Education on Safer internet issues – Safer Society and Children, in: XVI kompiuterininkų konferencijos mokslo darbai; pp. 125-133
- Croll, J., Euler, J., Müller-Bretl, C. (2014): Soziales Netz – Soziale Arbeit, in: unsere jugend, 66. Jg., pp. 171-183
- Croll, J., Euler, J., Müller-Bretl, C. (2014): Aufwachsen mit dem Internet - Chance und Herausforderung für die Jugendsozialarbeit, in: Soziale Arbeit,
- Croll, J., Euler, J., Müller-Bretl, C. (2014): "Handy-Akku leer: Katastrophe!" Von der Notwendigkeit, die medialen Katastrophen im Alltag von Kinder und Jugendlichen zu verstehen, in: medien + erziehung, 58. Jahrgang, Nr.4

Future Summit *SocialWeb – SocialWork*

About 100 international stakeholders from the area of children and youth work have attended the final conference of the European project *SocialWeb – SocialWork* on April 8th 2014 in Berlin to discuss **the influence of social work on the online safety of children and youths**. The project consortium presented the project's findings and discussed the results with the high-ranking members of the international Advisory Board of *SocialWeb – SocialWork*. In the afternoon, all participants had the opportunity to exchange experiences and ideas in the framework of a future summit on the impact of social work on the online safety of children and youths.

What kind of influence does the internet have on the identity building and personality development of young people nowadays? Digital media are an essential part in youths' daily life, as data reveals. In 2013, the average number of Internet users in Europe was 77% of the



population aged 16 to 74 years, the age group of 16 to 24-year-olds is with 96% almost entirely online (Eurostat 2013). And especially for the 9 to 16-year-old children and adolescents, for example, the EU Kids Online survey found that "Internet use is fully integrated into the daily lives of the children," because 93% of this age group are at least once a week online and 60% every or almost every day (Livingstone/Haddon et al. 2011, 5).

Unfortunately, vulnerable children and youths, e.g. minors belonging to high-risk groups such as socially disadvantaged families, are literally falling through the net. Research like the EU Kids Online Studies show the need to consider this target group and their specific needs when measures for child and youth protection in the media are developed (Livingstone/Haddon et al., 2011).

This is where *SocialWeb - SocialWork* steps in: after a two year phase of piloting and evaluating, professionals working with children and youths and other interested parties were invited to the projects' final conference to discuss, based on of the project's findings, how the influence of social work can be used to ensure the safety of children and youths at risk on the Internet.

The evaluation results show that the approach to train professionals working with children and youths in media literacy and online safety is successful. The training participants in the five European partner countries deepened their knowledge of media usage behaviour and understanding of the online fascination of their young clientele and developed it further. Their awareness for risks which children and youths are exposed to on the internet has clearly been increased through the training campaign. Six months after the training the awareness of the professionals working with children and youths was heightened by around 20% for all mentioned online risks. Plus, they are taken into confidence by their young clientele when the

need is felt to discuss online problems. "Talking to each other and listen what children and youths have to say - that is what is important," says Gerhard Seiler, managing director of Stiftung Digitale Chancen, project coordinator of *SocialWeb - SocialWork*.



The interactive working session in the afternoon, designed according to the *Appreciative Inquiry Approach*, allowed all participants to get directly into contact with each other and exchange experiences and opinions beyond national and professional borders. This approach encourages positive thinking and focuses on identifying what is working well, analysing why it is working well and then discussing how to achieve more of it. In four working phases – appreciating the

best of what is, envisioning what might be, engaging in dialogue about what should be and innovating what will be – the conference participants took a look into the future and tried to identify the existing strengths, potentials and the positive aspects of social work on that issue.

The presentation of the group work highlighted the significance of the African saying "It takes a whole village to raise a child" and its transferability on the subject of the conference. "Nowadays, it must be a global village that takes part in a child's education," concluded Jutta Croll, host and board member of the Stiftung Digitale Chancen. "We need companies to already consider safety for children and youths while developing their internet services, as well as the support of the government for setting a frame." "Parents and other guardians need support for media education within the family, while social youth workers are especially needed when the safety of children and youths at risk is concerned", adds Virginia Pareja from the Spanish partner organization Fundación Esplai.

6 Impact and Sustainability

Piloting projects such as *SocialWeb – SocialWork* hold the responsibility to draw conclusions for its general transferability and scalability. With regard to the scope and content of *SocialWeb – SocialWork*, it was important to find out if the project's approach and outcomes are transferable to professionals in the broad field of social youth work in other European countries as well as to additional groups of professionals working in general with children and youths. Furthermore, it was necessary to demonstrate how the developed training offer is scalable to set up a nationwide training campaign for more sustainability.

With regard to the **transferability of the project's approach and outcomes**, one can say that the interaction of all components of the developed training strategy – a face-to-face training course accompanied afterwards by online learning units and train-the-trainer sessions – shows that this is the best possible way that the lessons are learned, repeated and finally integrated in the daily work of the professionals to sustain the project achievements beyond its runtime. In addition, the training strategy enhances the professionals' motivation and encourages them to improve their own, but also the digital skills of their target group.

Although the situation of social youth work and the groups of vulnerable children and youths vary in the different European countries, it still remains the responsibility of professionals working in the broad field of social youth work to respond to the different types of vulnerability and to integrate this relatively new topic of digital media usage behaviour of their young clientele and their corresponding online safety into their daily work. The fact that the content of this qualification measure is subject to replacements and adjustments regarding the permanent innovations of the social web and its appliances depicts the urgent necessity of a continuous qualification – not only in the piloting partner countries, but also in every country of the European Union.

SocialWeb – SocialWork has also shown the necessity to open up its approach to additional groups of professionals since the involvement and collaboration of all relevant persons who are concerned with the growing up of children and young people allows for a comprehensive accompaniment of the young target group concerning their online media usage. As a matter of fact, this also applies for young people who are not defined as educationally and socially disadvantaged. Here, parents and teachers as the two official guardians for children and youths could be the relevant beneficiaries. For children and youths who are assigned certain vulnerability and where parents and teachers are not able to fulfil their responsibilities, further professionals could be addressed by offering trainings as previously considered in the project *SocialWeb – SocialWork*.

In terms of the transfer of the training to other countries and additional groups of professionals, the training curriculum, methods and materials were designed to enable an adaption of its content to further local contexts. Nevertheless, a public provision of the train-the-trainer strategy and the training curriculum requires the provision of notes for its adaption. For the adaption for people that don't have at least basic educational knowledge, it is important to provide additional helpful information on didactic methods and sources for further information and platforms especially developed for parents.

With regard to the **scalability of the training course** the expansion of a piloting training offer on a nationwide training campaign comprehends various opportunities but also holds certain challenges.

A close cooperation with and support by leading authorities such as national ministries, universities, professional associations, government agencies, local governments and civil society organisation allows at best for a firmly anchorage in the national educational structure for people working with children and youths, but should at least lead to a common open training offered nationwide with a continuous follow-up qualification throughout the working life of these professionals (life-long learning).

The format of the training – offline, online, blended learning – plays a significant role and has to be adapted to the national context and needs. A face-to-face training allows to react directly to the needs of the participants and to adapt the learning content to their requirements. It also enables them to benefit from a learning environment at its best in a small learning group which ensures the learning progress. Additional online learning strengthens the effects of a face-to-face-training and serves as a long term opportunity to improve, repeat and/or expand the knowledge gained during the one-day training course.

Due to the precarious financial situation of the social sector, especially in the area of children and youth work, financial support for qualification programmes funded by state and/or public budgets would facilitate the reception by the persons working with children and youths and their professional umbrella organisations and networks.

The existing potential to overcome the mentioned challenges by joint efforts is as huge as the high demand of professionals working with children and youths for such a (continuous) qualification and the existing efforts made by institutions and organisations for providing information and counselling services on topics related to the online safety of their young target group . Here, the set-up of a well-defined awareness raising and communication strategy throughout Europe on training professionals working with (vulnerable) children and youths concerning their online safety would attract the attention of not only the target group but also of the broader society to find allies and establish binding responsibilities within the political decision makers.

7 Conclusion

Professionals working with vulnerable children and youths are able to play a role in improving online safety of their young clientele as the project's outcomes validly confirm. Due to the social youth worker's task of supporting young people in everything they need for their growing up and the high sensitivity of the professionals in regard to the needs of socially and educationally disadvantaged youths, it is only consistent to include the topic of the digital media usage behaviour and the corresponding online safety into their daily work.

But, since digital literacy has not yet been sufficiently covered in the field of social work – nearly no embedding in the educational curricula, and nearly no institutionalised training courses during the working life, there is a certain need to continuously qualify professionals working with children and youths across Europe on the current issues that touch the daily life of these young people.

Keeping up with the fast development and innovation of the internet and its appliances especially in the area of social media will be one of the most challenging tasks in education in the years to come. The results of the project *SocialWeb – SocialWork* deliver a clear message and a profound rationale for the joint efforts of all stakeholders.

- Professionals in all countries have shown a high awareness for the need to deal with the topic and a high motivation to get themselves ready to guide their children and youths through the digital world.
- The training strategy (face-to-face training, accompanying online learning units, train-the-trainer sessions) has proven to be the appropriate measure to qualify professionals working with vulnerable children and youths on online safety – fitting into the tight schedule of most social workers but also providing the learning resources they need.
- The training strategy led to an increased awareness on online risks and threats, a better self-confidence on the issue of online safety and allowed for the adaptation of the previous social works' educational approaches on the online topic. Furthermore, an increasing acceptance in communication about online topics on both sides – professionals working with vulnerable children and youths and their target group – can be documented.
- Attention to the special needs of certain groups of vulnerable children – gender-specific online behaviour, special guidance for young disabled users – has to be paid.

Although the situation of social youth work and the groups of vulnerable children and youths vary in the different European countries, the common basis for participants of the training is the online safety for the young target group. Therefore nothing precludes a transfer of the training strategy to professionals in the broad field of social youth work in other European countries and to additional groups of professionals working in general with children and youths.

Moreover, the expansion of a piloting training campaign to set up a nationwide training offer requires certain conditions to establish the importance of qualifying professionals working with vulnerable children and youths on the topic of online safety in the national and also European society. Since the training campaign piloted in the project *SocialWeb – SocialWork*

has a fair cost-value ratio and a high effectiveness, it should be given the chance for a broader roll-out across Europe.

8 Further information on online safety and vulnerable children and youths

If you want to know more about online safety for vulnerable children and youths, please take a look at the following printed publications and web references:

a) Printed Publications and Articles in Academic Journals

Croll, Jutta / Kunze, Katharina: Online Youth Protection: Joint Efforts Are Needed. In: High-Tech Tots – Childhood in a Digital World, Berson/Berson (eds.): Sage 2010
<http://infoagepub.com/products/High-Tech-Tots>

Croll, Jutta / Weber, Sven: Vorsicht Internet! Eltern haften für ihre Kinder! In: Stapf, Lauber, Fuhs, Rosenstock (eds.): Kinder im Social Web. Qualität in der KinderMedienKultur. Nomos 2012 <http://www.nomos-shop.de/13895>

Pigulevičienė, J., Žemaitienė, I. (2013): Education on Safer internet issues – Safer Society and Children, in: XVI kompiuterininkų konferencijos mokslo darbai; pp. 125-133

Croll, J., Euler, J., Müller-Bretl, C. (2014): Soziales Netz – Soziale Arbeit, in: unsere jugend, 66. Jg., pp. 171-183

Croll, J., Euler, J., Müller-Bretl, C. (2014): Aufwachsen mit dem Internet - Chance und Herausforderung für die Jugendsozialarbeit, in: Soziale Arbeit,

Croll, J., Euler, J., Müller-Bretl, C. (2014): "Handy-Akku leer: Katastrophe!" Von der Notwendigkeit, die medialen Katastrophen im Alltag von Kinder und Jugendlichen zu verstehen, in: MERZ,

b) Web references

<http://www.saferinternet.org/>

<http://www2.lse.ac.uk/media@lse/research/EUKidsOnline/Home.aspx>

<http://www.yprt.eu/yprt/content/sections/>

<http://www.sipbench.eu/>

<http://www.digitale-chancen.de/content/stories/index.cfm/aus.2/secid.11/secid2.70>

<http://johnc1912.wordpress.com/author/johnc1912/>

<http://ec.europa.eu/digital-agenda/en/creating-better-internet-kids>

<http://www.inhope.org/>

<http://www.saferinternet.eu>

<http://www.saferinternetday.org>

<http://paneuyouth.eu/>

9 List of Figures

Figure 1: All trainees who have answered questionnaire Q3 and Q6, distribution in per cent (Q3, Q6, n=189) 6

Figure 2: Evaluation of the participants: Dealing with internet risks, distribution in per cent (Q3, n=328) 7

Figure 3: Evaluation of the participants: Speak about online topic, distribution in per cent (Q3, n=328) 7

Figure 4: Request about the internet, distribution in per cent (Q6, n=239)..... 8

Figure 5: Observations on risks and threats children and youths faced, distribution in per cent (Q3, n=328) 8

Table 1: Aspects/ideas the trainees want to integrate in their professional life (Q0: n=641) .7