

Preventive measures – how youngsters avoid online risks

Sofie Vandoninck, Leen d’Haenens & David Smahel

Summary

To protect children from online risks, it is important to recognise that children’s perceptions of online problematic situations may greatly differ from those of adults. What adults perceive as problematic does not necessarily result in a negative or harmful experience for children.

This report shows that children’s perceptions of online risks strongly depend on their awareness of how online activities may turn into problematic or harmful situations. Also important is their knowledge of effective preventive measures, since it appears that when children feel capable of dealing with a risk they are less fearful or worried by it.

Children expressed a range of concerns about online problems that sometime bother or upset them. The salient risks in children’s eyes are online bullying and harassment, unwelcome contact from strangers, misuse of personal information, issues related to sexual content or communication, and commercial content.

Looking at the media platforms where these incidents occur, about half of unpleasant online experiences happen on social networking sites such as Facebook. While children acknowledge the potential risks of social networking sites, they do not necessarily do something to avoid the risk. However, when they do feel capable of dealing with the risk, they are less fearful or worried about it.

These new findings result from the qualitative analysis of 57 focus groups and 113 personal interviews with children aged 9 to 16. In total, 349 children from nine different European countries (Belgium, Czech Republic, Greece, Italy, Malta, Portugal, Romania, Spain, and UK) were invited to explain what they perceive as problematic or harmful online, and what they do to prevent harm from occurring.

Children’s perspectives on online problematic situations

Children’s and adolescents’ developmental processes and digital worlds are interconnected. Their online experiences play a crucial role in many developmental aspects of their lives, such as in exploring their identity and sexuality, building relationships with peers or romantic relationships, but also in moral and ethics development.

While parents, teachers and other adult caregivers may feel that exposure to certain online content or contacts is risky, youngsters may perceive this very differently. For example, posting sexy pictures and receiving flirty comments can be flattering and exciting. However, sharing of sexy pictures can turn also into traumatic experience, for example, when youths receive very bad comments or when these pictures are shared with too many people.

The line between online positive and negative experiences is very thin. The outcome depends on the situation and on children’s awareness of problems they may encounter online. The same situation can be perceived differently by different children. For example, while some are very cautious about their personal information, others believe that nothing bad will happen to them, regardless of what they disclose online.

Because of the different perceptions of adults and youngsters, and the lack of a neat distinction between positive and negative experiences online, we decided to avoid the term ‘risk’, and prefer to talk about ‘problematic situations’. These cover any unpleasant, annoying or bothersome experiences which affect children in digital environments.

In light of Safer Internet Day 2014’s theme “*Let’s Create a Better Internet Together*”, we believe it is important for parents, teachers and other adult caregivers to take time to listen to young people, and to learn about how the latter perceive online problematic situations and, more importantly, what they do to avoid unpleasant situations online.

- Young people seem to be very bothered by online bullying and misuse of personal information and privacy. Unwelcome contact from strangers also provokes quite a few worries.
- Youngsters regularly express how they feel about issues related to sexual content or communication (sexting). Much depends on the context and whether it is perceived as disturbing.
- Young people frequently refer to being bothered or annoyed by unwelcome content, referring to shocking or aggressive content, false or misleading information or anything else they didn't ask for nor look for.
- Somewhat less often, youngsters talk about technical problems (e.g. viruses) or commercial content that create unpleasant situations. They feel mostly irritated or annoyed by these issues.
- Sometimes children worry about the risk of excessive usage of the internet and other health-related issues, such as nightmares from sexual or nasty content, problems with eyes, headaches and backpain.
- **We conclude that the most salient problematic situations for children and young people are online bullying, misuse of personal information, unwelcome contact with strangers and sexual issues. In what follows, we will focus on these types of risks.**

Risky platforms?

When talking about problematic experiences, about half of what children said concerned unpleasant experiences in social networking sites. Although many problematic things online happened there, it would be an oversimplification to state that SNS are the most risky platforms online.

- Previous analyses have shown the positive link between online activities and online risks. Because SNS are the most popular platforms, unsurprisingly most stories about problematic situations also took place on social network sites.
- At the time of the interviews, Facebook was the most popular SNS among our interviewees. Younger children (9-11), who are officially below Facebook's minimum age limit of 13 years, sometimes use other SNSs, often (sub)national

initiatives. But younger children also reported pretending to be older on Facebook.

It makes sense to conclude that children acknowledge the potential risks of social networking sites, but this does not necessarily mean they will do something to avoid the risk. Even if they are aware, some children simply do not care much about potential risks.

But this sense of awareness is crucial in learning to avoid problematic situations online. As our findings suggest, when children do feel capable of dealing with the risk they are less fearful or worried by it.

From awareness to preventive measures

Awareness of online risks motivates children to concentrate on how to avoid problematic situations online, or prevent them from (re)occurring. **This brings us to the concept of preventive measures, which is understood as what children actually do or consider doing in order to avoid unpleasant or problematic situations online.**

As a result of an iterative process of comparing literature-based categories of preventive strategies with the children's quotes, five main categories of preventive measures could be identified:

- **Problem-solving strategies:** actions and strategies to tackle the potential stressor, aimed at finding an effective solution.
- **Planning, reflecting, and strategising:** critical thoughts and reflections about how to prevent (hypothetical) problems, deciding on the criteria and circumstances according to which a situation is problematic or not.
- **Information seeking:** increasing one's knowledge or skills about online security and risky situations online. This includes gathering information about a person or certain applications.
- **Support seeking:** approaching others to obtain advice or aid that should help prevent an incident or problematic situation from happening.
- **Fatalistic approach:** accepting the situation as a part of life, trivialising or generalising the

situation. This includes tactics of cognitive reframing and justification, and often results from a failed attempt to avoid the situation.

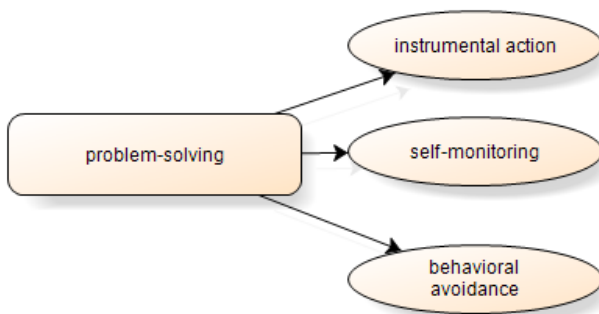
Besides these five main categories, in a number of interviews participants explicitly mentioned they did not even try to take any preventive measure at all, often due to a strong disbelief in the effectiveness or usefulness of any kind of strategy.

Finally, in a substantial number of interviews it was not the participant but another person who is the initiator of the preventive measures. Such comments are treated separately, in an effort to distinguish between children's own initiatives on the one hand, and actions imposed by others, most often their parents or teachers, on the other.

Tailored strategies to solve potential problematic situations online

Most preventive measures can be classified as problem-solving strategies. More in-depth analysis of this predominant category reveals three subtypes of preventive measures aimed at solving the problem.

Figure 1: Types of problem-solving preventive measures



- **Instrumental action:** concrete actions or behaviour to avoid a problematic situation from happening. This often involves so-called technical measures that require some level of digital skills, for example changing settings, installing filters or software.
- **Self-monitoring:** controlling or limiting one's online activities and disclosure of personal information, for example only posting neutral, non-intimate pictures or limiting online communication to people one personally knows.

- **Behavioral avoidance:** (temporarily) staying away from or disabling platforms or applications, avoiding some online activities or actions. For example not accepting friend requests, not answering or ignoring online contacts.

We conclude that, depending on the type of online problematic situation they are confronted with, youngsters consider these three problem-solving measures as appropriate remedial actions.

Instrumental actions

- **To avoid being bullied online, children prefer instrumental actions** such as deleting, unfriending or blocking certain people. Sometimes, bystanders of bullying use the report button to prevent the bully from making more victims.
- *Boy (10-year-old, Greece): "When some stranger sends me a friend request, I reject it, because I don't know him or her. Strangers may pretend they are 10 years old, like I am, and intend to get together to play. But it could be they are a lot older, like 20, 30 or 40 years old."*
- *Boy (9-year-old, Belgium): "We reported a girl. She was a bully, so on the Ketnet website one could report things; for example one could report messages as 'acts of bullying'. So we did this with all her messages".*

Self-monitoring

- **When confronted with the possibility of personal data misuse and unwelcome contact by strangers, children often turn to strategies that focus on self-monitoring or on (temporarily) limiting their online activities,** such as accepting friend requests only from people they know personally or have seen at least once.
- Young people often limit their online communication to people who meet certain criteria. For example, they only share pictures with people whom they personally know, or people from their school, town or neighbourhood.
- *Girl (14-year-old, Belgium): "I look at for example the place where the person lives...if I know that the person lives in the same town, I would add*

him as a friend. But when I see that the person lives in a different city, I won't add him...because I don't really know the person. You can also look at mutual friends. When my classmates or friends are mutual Facebook-friends with this person, then I add the person".

- *Girl (15-year-old, Czech Republic): "I only show my online pictures to friends whom I've known for a long time, or classmates from school, not to everyone".*

Behavioral avoidance

- In situations of unpleasant sexual issues, children do not perceive limiting their online activities as useful. **Unpleasant sexual content or communication is being avoided by turning away from the situation or making sure one does not get involved.**
- Measures such as scrolling further, clicking away, or simply not taking sexy pictures nor undressing oneself in front of the webcam are frequently mentioned. Surprisingly, teenagers, males and females alike, suggest it is up to the girls to take responsibility for avoiding incidents where sexy pictures are shared.
- *Boy (16-year-old, Greece): "My news feed was full of posts about a sexting incident. I could see posts saying 'look at her naked'. I was wondering what happened and started scrolling down, and found the picture further down. The girl might have had 500 friends and there were 2000 comments on the photograph. People were*

saying 'we'll kill the girl who took the photograph. Isn't she ashamed!'"

- *Girls (15-year-old, Belgium): Girl 1: "My sister's friend showed me naked pictures from a classmate, and I was like 'oooooh', I was totally shocked! I didn't know Jennifer would do such things..." Girl 2: "Yeah, I was really shocked..." Girl 3: "And then someone asked 'why does Jennifer make naked pictures from herself', and then a friend said 'Yeah, Jennifer has no self-respect at all'. And we thought they were best friends..."*

Conclusions

These results show that awareness about online risks is crucial to motivate youngsters towards preventive strategies. Although we distinguish three types of preventive measures aimed at solving online problems, we often see that young people do not restrict themselves to just one strategy to avoid unpleasant or problematic experiences online.

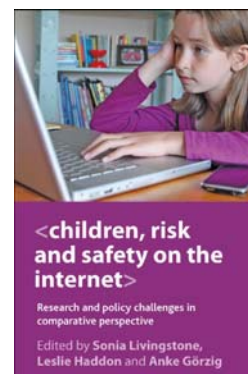
These insights in young people's preferred preventive measures and combinations are helpful for parents and teachers who play in important role in guiding and supporting young people in their explorations of the online world.

This short report presents early findings from the full report on the focus groups and qualitative interviews conducted by EU Kids Online in nine countries. The full report will be published in May 2014.

Further reports

- Barbosa, A., O'Neill, B., Ponte, C., Simões, J. & Jereissati, J. (2013) *Risks and safety on the internet: Comparing Brazilian and European findings* (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/54801/>)
- Barbovski, M., Green, L. & Vandoninck, S. (2013) Innovative approaches for investigating how young children understand risk in new media: Dealing with methodological and ethical challenges. (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/53060/>)
- Holloway, D., Green, L. and Livingstone, S. (2013) *Zero to eight: Young children and their internet use* (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/52630/>)
- Helsper, E., Kalmus, V., Hasebrink, U., Sagvari, B. & de Haan, J. (2013) *Country classification. Opportunities, risks, harm and parental mediation* (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/52023/>)
- Ólafsson, K., Livingstone, S. & Haddon, L. (2013) *How to research children and online technologies. Frequently asked questions and best practice* (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/50437/>)
- Ólafsson, K., Livingstone, S. & Haddon, L. (2013) *Children's use of online technologies in Europe: A review of the European evidence database* (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/50437/>)
- Livingstone, S., Kirwil, L., Ponte, C. and Staksrud, E., with the EU Kids Online Network (2013) *In their own words: What bothers children online?* (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/50228/>)
- D'Haenens, L., Vandoninck, S., and Donoso, V. (2013) *How to cope and build online resilience?* (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/48115/>)
- Smahel, D., Helsper, E.J., Green, L., Kalmus, V., Blinka, L., and Ólafsson, K. (2012) *Excessive internet use among European children.* (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/47344/>)
- Haddon, L., Livingstone, S., and the EU Kids Online network (2012.) *EU Kids Online: National perspectives.* LSE, London: EU Kids Online. (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/46878/>)
- Livingstone, S., Ólafsson, K., O'Neill, B. and Donoso, V. (2012) *Towards a better internet for children* (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/44213/>)
- Dürager, A. and Livingstone, S. (2012) *How can parents support children's internet safety?* (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/id/eprint/42872/>)
- Livingstone, S., Haddon, L., Görzig, A. and Ólafsson, K. (2011) *EU Kids Online final report* (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/39351/>)
- O'Neill, B., Livingstone, S. and McLaughlin, S. (2011) *Final recommendations for policy, methodology and research* (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/39410/>)

- Livingstone, S., Haddon, L., Görzig, A. and Ólafsson, K. (2011) *Risks and safety on the internet: The perspective of European children: Full findings* (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/33731/>)
- Görzig, A. (2011) *Who bullies and who is bullied online? A study of 9-16 year old internet users in 25 European countries* (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/39601/>)
- Livingstone, S., Haddon, L., Görzig, A. and Ólafsson, K. (2011) *Disadvantaged children and online risk* (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/39385/>)
- Livingstone, S., Ólafsson, K. and Staksrud, E. (2011) *Social networking, age and privacy* (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/35849/>)
- Sonck, N., Livingstone, S., Kuiper, E. and de Haan, J. (2011) *Digital literacy and safety skills* (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/33733/>)
- Livingstone, S. and Ólafsson, K. (2011) *Risky online communication* (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/33732/>)



The *EU Kids Online* network has been funded by the EC Safer Internet Programme in three successive phases of work from 2006-14 to enhance knowledge of children's and parents' experiences and practices regarding risky and safer use of the internet and new online technologies. For this report, David Smahel acknowledges the support of the project CZ.1.07/2.3.00/20.0184, which is co-financed by the European Social Fund and the state budget of Czech Republic.

As a major part of its activities, *EU Kids Online* conducted a face-to-face, in home survey during 2010 of 25,000 9-16 year old internet users and their parents in 25 countries, using a stratified random sample and self-completion methods for sensitive questions. Now including researchers and stakeholders from 33 countries in Europe and beyond, the network continues to analyse and update the evidence base to inform policy. See www.eukidsonline.net