

The Meaning of Online Problematic Situations for Children: Results of a Qualitative Cross-Cultural Investigation in Nine European Countries

Aims

This report presents the findings of qualitative research from the EU Kids Online III study. The research included children who used the internet weekly from nine European countries: Belgium, the Czech Republic, Greece, Italy, Malta, Portugal, Romania, Spain and the United Kingdom. This research focused on what children perceive as being potentially negative or problematic while using the internet, what risks children are aware of when using the internet, what consequences online negative experiences might have, how children react to negative experiences, what children do to avoid or prevent these problematic experiences, and why children perceive certain situations as negative.

Key Findings

- The most common online problematic situation includes the sending of content that is violent, vulgar, or sexual. Other problematic situations include perpetrating, experiencing, and/or witnessing hateful, vulgar, or nasty messages. Although less covered in the risk literature, some involve being killed, cursed, excluded, and/or verbally assaulted in online games. Lastly, some include meeting online peers offline, sending “friend” requests or communicating with strangers not their own age.

Sexual issues:

- Although many children say they are bothered by vulgar content displayed in dating site advertisements, some post attractive or sexual content, usually through pictures, to attract peers.
- Occurring less frequently, some children engage in the sharing of private, naked pictures of someone without the owner’s permission. This activity is mostly perpetrated by boys.
- Sexual content is often perceived as bothersome by children and often found by mistake, but sometimes children, particularly older children, intentionally search for this content. Older children sometimes report positive feelings about this content as well. Girls experience more sexual communication and post “sexy” or provocative pictures to receive “likes”.

Awareness of online problematic situations:

- Children’s framing of online problematic situations differs from adults’ perspectives especially in the case of online bullying, whereby children distinguish bullying from other forms of online conflicts (i.e., “drama”).
- Awareness of risks that children are less likely to experience, such as “stranger danger,” is influenced more by the sensationalist tone that figures heavily in media representations.
- There are significant age differences in how children make sense of online problematic situations: younger children’s awareness reflects the perceptions of the media and parents, whereas older children draw more on personal experiences or those of their peers.
- Some risks – notably both “stranger danger” and bullying – are perceived as strongly gendered.

Dealing with problematic situations online:

- Many children self-monitor their online activities through planning, strategising, and reflecting on ways to avoid risky online problematic situations.
- Proactive strategies are used more frequently than seeking-support strategies when dealing with online bullying.
- Girls are more likely to seek social support when faced with online problematic situations compared to boys.

- The usage of preventive strategies depends on the most popular online activities for a particular age group. The older age group (14–16) use more preventive behaviour, which intensifies as their social networking site (SNS) usage increases.
- Avoidance tactics, that is, avoiding or clicking away from certain online platforms, applications or websites, is a popular strategy among the youngest age group (9–11). In general, behavioural avoidance turns out to be an effective way of preventing problematic situations related to content risks.

Methodology

Interviews and focus groups were used to collect children's data. The main fieldwork, using the revised research procedures guide and the topic guide, was carried out from February to September 2013 in all nine countries, with children aged 9–16 (N = 378). Schools or youth centres were used to recruit children for 56 focus groups and 114 interviews.

Policy Context

- Given the variety of online problematic situations that children experience, it is necessary for them to receive a broader education about the online world. Such education might help children better evaluate and deal with an assortment of online situations.
- In official advice adults should be encouraged to refrain from simply forbidding children's access to the internet as the digital world is likely to continue to be embedded in children's lives, making it difficult to avoid online problematic situations. Furthermore, certain online situations might represent a developmental need, potentially bringing something positive to children's lives. Instead of prohibiting access to or scaring children about online situations, parents in particular should be advised to discuss online experiences with their children, explain why something is risky, be sensitive about (particularly to older) children's desire for a certain amount of privacy, and teach them about the broad array of online problematic situations they might encounter and how to avoid them.
- Parents should be encouraged to foster understandings whereby children feel more comfortable about confiding in them. This is important as some online problematic situations, such as encountering sexual content, make children uncomfortable talking to their parents about unpleasant experiences.
- Schools should provide broad eSafety advice (e.g., about commercial risks, about how online conflicts between peers can escalate) and offer forms of support. Through eSafety, schools should highlight the good points about the internet and avoid creating a moral panic by overstressing the online world as a dangerous and misleading place.

Background

This research is part of the EU Kids Online project funded by the European Commission's Better Internet for Kids programme (see www.eukidsonline.net).

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