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Girls' and boys' experiences of online risk and safety

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As digital and online technologies are variously acquired and appropriated by families the world over, questions are being asked about the social shaping and social consequences of these rapid changes in everyday life. Considerable attention has centered on young people, who, while regarded as the pioneers of the new digital age, the creative and adaptable "digital natives" who leave older generations ("digital immigrants") behind, are also seen as particularly vulnerable in the face of techno-social change, supposedly assaulted by the onslaught of commercialized, sexualized, and manipulative images and invitations for which they are unprepared. And it is in this context that gender represents an important dimension of young people's experiences of the internet.

Dominant cultural representations have long positioned men and women differently in relation to technology and computer skills, influencing the construction of gender identities and privileging men's (and boys') approach to information and communication technologies of all kinds (Henwood *et al.* 2000). Uotinen's (2002) study of the biographies of information technology students found that gender differences in childhood computer use, including in computer game playing, shape future career choices, resulting in gender segregation in the information and communications technology (ICT) sector. Although theories of diffusion and development hold that economic growth and technological progress, by "lifting all boats," could alleviate social inequalities, these processes are also shaped by cultural norms, values, and beliefs (Inglehart and Norris 2003). Thus gender differences may persist even when today's younger generation of "digital natives" grows up (Helsper 2010).

Although already heavily researched, no clear picture has yet emerged of the ways in which gender might matter in relation to children's use of the internet. One challenge is that young people in heavily mediated societies do so much on the internet that the role of gender—as for age, ethnicity, culture, and class—is inevitably complex and multifaceted. And the place of the internet in society continues to change. Early accounts focused on the digital divide in access, finding that boys

Table 17.1 Children's internet access, use, and skills, by gender

	Girls	*Boys*	*All*
Has internet access at home (%)	86	87	87
Has internet access in own bedroom (%)	47	50	49
Has internet access via mobile or handheld device (%)	33	35	34
Uses the internet every day or almost every day (%)	58	61	60
Internet use on an average day (minutes)	85	91	88
Online activities in the last month (average, out of 17)	6.9	7.4	7.2
Digital literacy and safety skills(average, out of 8)[a]	4.0	4.3	4.2
"I know more about the internet than my parents" (% very true)	34	38	36

Base: 25,142 children aged 9–16 who use the internet in Europe.
[a] 11–16 years only.

typically gained earlier and better access to the internet at home than girls; and in schools, teachers supported boys' use of educational technologies more than they did girls' use. Although some inequalities persist (Livingstone and Helsper 2007), especially in countries where the gender gap is relatively large (Helsper 2012), researchers have moved away from static, binary approaches that contrast "haves" and "have-nots" (van Dijk 2006) to recognize more subtle ways in which gender inflects the contexts, practices, and meanings of internet use, including the development of digital literacies (Hargittai 2010), thereby possibly reproducing existing inequalities.

Here we draw on the findings of the EU Kids Online project, which surveyed 1,000 children aged 9–16 in 25 European countries about many aspects of their internet use (Livingstone *et al.* 2011; see www.eukidsonline.net). Table 17.1 reveals modest yet consistent gender differences that favor boys over girls. These measures are self-reinforcing—correlational and path analysis show that better access supports longer use, which, in turn, is linked to broader online activities and greater digital skills (Livingstone and Helsper 2010). However, not all gender differences necessarily reveal inequalities—immersion in today's highly social media culture sustains a more shared experience for children than they have ever enjoyed before. It is also open for debate whether differences in use (girls chat online more, boys play more games) represent an inequality, or a gender preference, or opportunities for gendered identities and forms of participation. Nonetheless, the findings in Table 17.1 suggest that the combination of parental provision and children's preferences, embedded as they are in a gender-unequal society, serve to reproduce differences and also inequalities.

Gendered dimensions of online risk encounters

In this chapter we focus on the relation between gender and online risk, contextualizing these within the literature on gender, media, and family socialization, while not forgetting that online risks and opportunities are often intertwined in the realities of daily life. What risks do girls and boys experience online? Do these mirror the agenda of public and policy concerns? Do boys' better access, greater skills, and broader use of the internet lead them to encounter a greater degree of risk? Or is society right to worry more about boys and pornography, but girls and

"stranger danger"? We asked about exposure to pornography, cyberbullying, sexual messaging ("sexting"), potentially harmful user-generated content, and meeting online contacts offline ("stranger danger"). We also examined how parents respond to risks faced by their children, and how children cope with online risk, shedding light on questions of vulnerability and resilience, now part of the "digital citizenship" policy agenda.

The question of coping is important as part of a wider shift from technologically determinist discourses (of what the internet "does" to children) in favor of also recognizing children's agency. The internet is not merely an environment that affords (unequal) opportunities and risks; it is also one in which people initiate, learn, adapt, and gain resilience. Encountering risk could in itself also represent an opportunity— to become more resilient, more digitally literate, and less vulnerable to online risks (Schoon 2006). Such twists and turns in the debate are familiar to researchers, who, in the debate about the "digital generation" (Buckingham and Willett 2006), have long recognized the dynamic interplay between the agency of children and young people and the forces of socialization.

Overall, four in ten children (40 percent of girls and 41 percent of boys) reported one or more of the risks we asked about. However, risk is not harm, and the conditions that explain encounters with risk could differ from those that account for experiences of harm. As Table 17.2 shows, only one in eight children had been

Table 17.2 Children's experience of online risk and harm, by gender

	Girls	Boys	All
"I have been bothered by something online" in the past year (%)	13	11	12
Has seen sexual images in the past year—% at all	21	25	23
(% online)	(12)	(16)	(14)
Has seen sexual images online and been upset by this—% all children(% upset of those who saw sexual images)	5	4	4
	(39)	(26)	(32)
Has received nasty or hurtful comments in the past year—% at all	20	17	19
(% online)	(7)	(5)	(6)
Has received nasty or hurtful comments online and been upset—% all children	6	4	5
(% upset of those who received bullying comments)	(87)	(82)	(85)
Has received sexual messages online—% all children	13	15	14
(% upset by this of all children, % upset of those who received messages)[a]	(4, 33)	(3, 17)	(4, 25)
Has gone to meet an online contact face to face—% all children	8	9	9
(% upset by this of all children, % upset of those who met someone)	(1, 9)	(1, 13)	(1, 11)
Has seen pro-anorexia websites[a]	14	6	10
Has seen self-harm website[a]	7	8	7
Has seen hate sites[a]	12	12	12
Someone used their password/got their personal information	8	6	7

Base: 25,142 children aged 9–16 who use the internet in Europe.
Note: This wording was easier for children to understand, and easier to translate into 25 languages than the words "pornography," "cyberbullying," "sexting," or meeting "strangers."
[a]11–16 years only.

bothered or upset by something online in the past year (the self-report measure we used for harm)—slightly more girls than boys. As expected from other research on risks (Peter and Valkenburg 2009), the EU Kids Online survey found that boys were somewhat more likely to have seen sexual images online than girls (16 percent vs. 12 percent) while girls were a little more likely to receive bullying messages (20 percent vs. 17 percent). Further, boys received slightly more sexual messages (15 percent vs. 13 percent) and girls were considerably more likely to see pro-anorexia sites (14 percent vs. 6 percent). There were no gender differences for meeting online contacts offline, contrary to popular anxieties about girls.

The picture is rather different for self-reported harm. While online bullying—the most upsetting risk of all—was described as harmful by boys and girls equally, among those who saw sexual images, girls were more likely to be bothered or upset by this (39 percent vs. 26 percent of boys). Similarly, "sexting" upset 33 percent of girls who received sexual messages, twice as many as boys (only 17 percent were upset by such messages). Which girls report such risks? Brown et al. (2005) suggest that those who reach puberty earlier than their peers use media sources to explore their developing sexuality, but then find themselves unsupported by their (more slowly developing) peers and are exposed to typically sexist content alone.

Insofar as the internet provides a space for exploration of and experimentation with identities and social relations, children and young people engage in a range of online activities that are not easily classified as either opportunities or risks. The EU Kids Online project has termed these "risky online activities," recognizing the ambiguous nature of much youthful activity as well as that of the online environment (Kirwil and Laouris 2012). It is not merely difficult to determine whether, say, exposure to pornography is a risk to or an opportunity for sexual development. There are also many things young people do online which could lead to benefits or harms, depending on both the individual and context (e.g. the design or affordances of the online environment). It is precisely in this in-between space that so many online activities are positioned, permitting young people the opportunity to explore the risks surrounding them (Willett and Burn 2005); for Marwick and boyd (2011), this is essential to the "drama" of girls' peer culture. Some opportunities can still lead to risks—for example, the communicative nature of girls' internet use may increase the chance of unwanted sexual solicitation (Baumgartner et al. 2010; Mitchell et al. 2008).

In relation to a range of risky online activities, the survey revealed that boys had the edge (Table 17.3). Possibly they were generally more sensation-seeking; possibly they found face-to-face social relations more embarrassing, hence finding it a little easier to be themselves online, and so they sought online contacts beyond their familiar social circle. This might explain why they were more likely to keep their social networking profile public and to share online what they didn't share offline (Livingstone and Ólafsson 2011). While this may be framed as an opportunity, those who kept their profiles public were also more likely to reveal personal information. Indeed, risky social networking practices are associated with an increase in exposure to sexual images, receipt of sexual messages, and contact with those known online only (Staksrud et al. 2013).

Despite the sometimes celebratory talk that surrounds sexual expression on the internet, girls found this more problematic than boys. Wolak and Finkelhor (2011)

Table 17.3 Children's risky online activities, by gender

	Girls	Boys	All
Uses the internet excessively (% yes to at least 1/5 indicators)[a]	28	31	30
Has a social networking profile set to 'public' (% of social networking site users only)	23	30	26
Shares private things online which doesn't share face to face[a]	31	34	32
Has made contacts online who have no connection to their lives[a]	20	31	25
Says it is "easier to be myself on the internet" than face to face[a]	48	51	50

Base: 25,142 children aged 9–16 who use the internet in Europe.
[a] 11–16 years only.

argue that sending sexual images is simultaneously normalized and disapproved of for girls, but not boys. In a qualitative exploration of mobile phone-related "sexting" practices among UK teenagers, Ringrose *et al.* (2012) argue that this is not a matter of girls' comparative prudishness (or innocence) but because the exchange of sexual content and messages is used within the peer culture as part of the sexual pressure, sexual stereotyping, and even sexual harassment exerted by boys on girls in their school or locale. Protecting their sexual reputation while avoiding being seen as rigid and unattractive is a "project" in which girls must invest energy and effort to construct just the right kind of "sexy, but not too sexy," image (Gill 2008). Such double standards can also disadvantage boys—while they are rewarded for displays of masculinity, they are also attacked (e.g. as "gay") for not joining in. Hearn (1999) argues that the construction of men's sexuality through power, aggression, objectification, and supposed "uncontrollability" creates problems of "normal boyhood." What needs further investigation is less the question of where online sexual content is located (or whether it can or should be filtered), but, rather, the social context within which girls are exposed to such content or messages and the (unwelcome) expectations that this may reinforce in the peer group.

Gender similarities and differences in safety

Children and parents play a vital role in managing the risk of harm associated with internet use. While researchers first focused on the parental role—taking a lead from the longer tradition of research on parental mediation of children's exposure to television—recent research includes examination of children's agency, capabilities, and potential for resilience. As shown in Table 17.4, most commonly, children upset by something online talk to someone about this, as recommended by awareness-raising initiatives (Vandoninck *et al.* 2012). Girls were much more likely to talk to someone about being upset than boys, most often turning to their friends if they received unwanted sexual or bullying messages online. Gender differences are less within the family, with boys and girls similarly likely to tell a parent or, less commonly, a sibling about an online problem. Although other adults were rarely confided in, boys said they told a teacher more often than girls when bothered by sexual messages or offline meetings with online contacts.

Table 17.4 Coping strategies among those bothered by online risks, by gender

Coping strategies		Risks	Girls	Boys	All
Fatalistic/passive coping strategies	Hope the problem would go away (%)	Sexual images	22	30	26
		Sexual messages	14	36	22
		Cyberbullying	28	18	24
	Stop using the internet for a while (%)	Sexual images	29	22	25
		Sexual messages	21	13	18
		Cyberbullying	20	19	20
Communicative strategy	Talk to somebody (%)	Sexual images	56	50	53
		Sexual messages	66	48	60
		Cyberbullying	85	67	77
Proactive strategies	Try to fix the problem (%)	Sexual images	19	25	22
		Sexual messages	29	23	27
		Cyberbullying	41	30	36
	Delete the message (%)	Sexual images	26	25	26
		Sexual messages	41	33	38
		Cyberbullying	43	39	41
	Block the person who sent the message (%)	Sexual images	22	24	23
		Sexual messages	45	33	40
		Cyberbullying	48	43	46

Source: Adapted from Vandoninck *et al.* (2012).

Both boys and girls used "fatalistic" coping strategies. When upset by sexual content online, boys tended to do nothing, hoping that the problem would go away, while girls more often went offline altogether—a strategy unlikely to help build resilience (Vandoninck *et al.* 2012). Few gender differences exist in children's use of proactive strategies: both boys and girls deleted unwelcome messages, although girls more often blocked those who sent them. Girls also more often tried to fix a problem with cyberbullying, while boys did this more to avoid unwelcome sexual images.

Parental mediation of children's internet use may enhance the benefits and reduce the risks that children experience online. Broadly, parental mediation strategies can be divided into *social support* (help, guidance, co-use, and co-interpreting) and *rules and restrictions* (social as well as technical; Kalmus 2012). The Flash Eurobarometer 2008 survey showed that mothers more frequently than fathers talked to their children or stayed nearby when the child used the internet (Flash EB Series #248 2008). As Valcke *et al.* (2010) observed, it seems that mothers manage their children's internet usage more and give more guidance and support.

In the EU Kids Online survey, matched comparison questions about parental mediation were asked of the parent most involved in the child's internet use. This turned out to be mothers or female carers in four out of five families, reflecting European norms according to which women tend to bear most of the domestic caregiving responsibilities (Kalmus and Roosalu 2012). However, there is some evidence that parents treat sons and daughters differently in mediating their internet use. Although the analysis of single indicators of parental mediation did not reveal many differences between boys and girls (Livingstone *et al.* 2011), composite measures (the indexes of parental mediation) reveal stronger differences. Table 17.5 shows that,

Table 17.5 Strategies of parental mediation for sons and daughters, according to child and parent (means)

Index of mediation	According to	Girls	Boys	*p*
Active mediation of internet use (5)	Child	2.61	2.51	0.000
	Parent	2.89	2.84	0.005
Active mediation of internet safety (6)	Child	3.34	3.21	0.000
	Parent	3.66	3.53	0.000
Restrictive mediation (6)	Child	3.13	3.01	0.000
	Parent	3.5	3.41	0.001
Monitoring (4)	Child	1.02	0.95	0.000
	Parent	1.55	1.47	0.000
Technical mediation (4)	Child[a]	1.25	1.30	0.003
	Parent	1.43	1.45	NS

Base: 25,142 children aged 9–16 who use the internet in Europe.
[a]11–16 years only.

according to both children and parents, girls received more of all types of parental mediation except technical mediation.

Neither boys nor girls felt deprived of parental interest in their online activities— just 15 percent would have liked their parent(s) to take more interest in what they did online, although nearly half of boys and girls also thought that their parents' management limited their activities (Livingstone *et al.* 2011). However, girls attributed slightly greater authority to their parents in internet-related matters (although social desirability may play a part in this): 46 percent of girls (41 percent of boys) said their parents knew a lot about their internet use, 63 percent of girls (61 percent of boys) thought their parents' management made their internet experience better, and only 33 percent of girls (39 percent of boys) ignored what their parents said when using the internet.

Does parental mediation reduce children's experiences of online risks and harm? Dürager and Livingstone (2012) found that children's exposure to online risks is reduced the more parents apply restrictions, although these also reduce children's online opportunities. Active mediation of the child's internet use also reduces risks, as does the use of technical restrictions, although to a lesser extent. Parental restrictions work better in reducing the likelihood of risk than they do in preventing harm from such risks. Interestingly, parental monitoring is associated with a higher incidence of online harm experienced by children of both sexes, suggesting that this type of mediation may occur *retroactively*, after children have had a negative online experience. As shown in Table 17.6, these findings differ little by gender. The exceptions are that, particularly among girls, the chance of encountering risks online is higher the more parents actively mediate their internet safety and the more they monitor their online activities. Also, girls' experiences of online harm are associated with higher levels of parental active mediation of internet safety and use of technical restrictions. It seems either that girls react against parental management by seeking out risks, or that parents are more inclined to intervene after their daughter encounters online risks by introducing safety strategies to prevent further negative experiences.

Table 17.6 Boys' and girls' experiences of online risks and harm (according to child) correlated with strategies of parental mediation (according to parent)

Index of mediation	Risks[a]		Harm[b]	
	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys
Active mediation of internet use (5)	–0.08***	–0.11***	–0.01	–0.01
Active mediation of internet safety (6)	0.04***	–0.02*	0.06***	0.01
Restrictive mediation (6)	–0.32***	–0.33***	–0.10***	–0.09***
Monitoring (4)	0.03**	–0.00	0.04***	0.06***
Technical mediation (4)[a]	–0.03**	–0.06***	0.03**	0.00

[a]Child has experienced any of seven risks asked about in the EU Kids Onlinesurvey.
[b]"In the past 12 months, have you seen or experienced something on the internet that has bothered you in some way?"
Point biserial correlations: * = $p<0.05$; ** = $p<0.01$; *** = $p<0.001$.
Base: 25,142 children aged 9–16 who use the internet in Europe.
[a]11–16 years only.

Conclusions: developing policy recommendations

Children's experiences of the internet are not simply or stereotypically gendered. To those who suppose that girls and boys live very different lives online, our findings are more striking for revealing gender similarities than differences. This conclusion extends to children's experiences of online risk of harm. However, there are some subtle gender differences. In the policy debates that surround children's internet use, the intensity of public anxiety, moral panics, and media hyperbole is such that con-textualized, contingent, or counter-intuitive arguments are easily lost. Thus we end with some evidence-based policy recommendations (see O'Neill *et al.* 2011) to counter the too-common policy discourses that reproduce moral panics (e.g. online pornography is inevitably harmful; lots of children are meeting strangers online) and popular myths (e.g. porn is more common online than offline; media-savvy kids know how to cope with online risks). Too often also, "children" are addressed in policy initiatives as a homogeneous rather than heterogeneous category in which gender, along with age, class, ethnicity, and other factors, all make a difference.

Schools are the main means by which a society can address digital safety and citizenship issues for all children within a structured learning environment. This requires teacher training and curriculum materials that are age appropriate, non-patronizing, technologically up-to-date, and gender and culture sensitive. In recent years, considerable efforts have been made to address cyberbullying, but schools still struggle to address sexual issues with students, including those that arise online. There is no easy line to draw between online and offline social relations, nor between cyberbullying and sexual harassment, nor indeed between empowering or entertaining content and that which is experienced as threatening or upsetting. All this makes the task of teachers especially difficult, and yet simply banning social networking or mobile phones from school or leaving safety management to parents is inadequate.

Awareness-raising—funded by governments, children's charities, or industry—has worked to provide materials, guidance, and advice to parents and children. Young

people reject material that includes stereotypes, moralizing, and victim-blaming, preferring witty, topical, realistic, and thought-provoking scenarios presented through video or interactive media. Also, safety tips and advice should be gender sensitive, for example encouraging boys to talk more openly about online problems and girls to be more self-confident and independent in their relationships, both offline and online.

These materials may best be used in discussions, possibly in groups separated by gender, to permit exploration of the different pressures and concerns that girls and boys experience. Online risks do not exist in a vacuum, and adults advising young people must be confident in addressing wider issues as they arise—including sexism and sexual violence in society, and in popular culture. Both teachers and parents, we suggest, must stop regarding online risk as only originating from strangers, because risks that arise within the peer group (and the family) are more common and also upsetting.

Last, it would be naïve of policymakers to rely on either teachers or parents to ensure children's well-being in relation to so complex and fast-changing a technology as the internet. The role to be played by both government and industry remains highly contested, with cultural and political factors shaping public support for regulatory responses by both public and private sector bodies. Instances of good practice are growing—for example the provision of helplines across Europe, or the development of online safety tools on social networking sites; but instances of poor practice are also widespread, and few checks exist to evaluate what works or how well for girls and boys, or whether vulnerable children may slip through the safety net provided. Moreover, the efforts put in to safety provision by the industry are dwarfed by its efforts to develop new products and services that, it seems, are always several steps ahead of even today's fairly digitally literate children and young people. Becoming confident and competent digital citizens in a thoroughly mediated network society will remain, therefore, a significant challenge—in some ways different for girls and boys, but in other ways similar for both. It is not a challenge that they should be left to meet unsupported.

Acknowledgments

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