

Risky communication online

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Summary

Which European 11-16 year olds who use the internet say, “I find it easier to be myself on the internet than when I am with people face-to-face”?

- 37% say this is ‘a bit true’ for them and 12% say it is ‘very true’. Age and gender make little difference.
- Those who say it is ‘very true’ are more likely to have problems forming good peer relations. This suggests that online relations may compensate for difficult off line relations.
- They are also more likely to look for new friends online, to ‘add’ people or send personal information to people that they haven’t met face to face, or to pretend to be a different kind of person. This suggests that ‘life online’ may lead to risky communication practices.

Half of European 11-16 year olds find it easier to be themselves online than offline

Children spend time on the internet because of the many useful and entertaining activities that it affords. For some, the internet offers opportunities to express themselves and develop friendship or intimacy:

- 50% of 11-16 year olds who use the internet find it a bit or very much easier to be themselves on the internet than when with other people face-to-face.
- Nearly half (45%) talk about different things on the internet than when speaking to people face-to-face.
- One third (32%) talk about private things online that they do not discuss face-to-face.

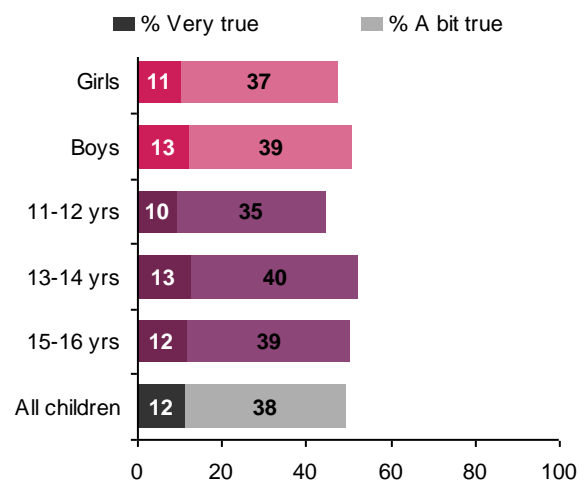
These findings from the *EU Kids Online* survey suggest that for up to half of young people, “it’s more than a game, it’s your life!” – the theme of Safer Internet Day 2011.¹

A second life?

EU Kids Online argues that opportunities and risks often go hand in hand – what is fun for some children can be risky for others. It is part of adolescence to experiment with identity, so those who say “a bit true” to feeling more themselves online may be enjoying the benefits of online communication – for example, it can be less embarrassing to discuss some things online.²

But what about the 12% of European 11-16 year olds who say it is ‘very true’ that they find it easier to be themselves online than offline (Figure 1)? This raises some concerns. Is it because they have personal or social difficulties in relating to people face-to-face, so the internet compensates in some way? Or is it because they spend a lot of time online and this leads them to feel more at home in an online environment?

Figure 1: “I find it easier to be myself on the internet than when I am with people face-to-face”



Base: All children aged 11-16 who use the internet.

To measure children’s relations with their peers, we asked five self-report questions from the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire³ (see Table 1). Most but not all children have good relations with their peers.

¹ See <http://www.saferinternet.org/web/guest/safer-internet-day>

² Livingstone, S. (2009) *Children and the Internet*. Cambridge: Polity.
³ These constitute the ‘peer problems’ subscale See <http://www.sdqinfo.org/>

Table 1: Children's relations with their peers

	% Not true	% A bit true	% Very true
I am usually on my own, I generally play alone or keep to myself	65	27	7
I have at least one good friend*	8	12	80
Other people my age generally like me*	6	30	63
Other children or young people pick on me	82	14	3
I get on better with adults than with people my own age*	60	31	9

Base: All children aged 11-16 who use the internet.

Note: * reverse coded items

Statistical analysis

A logistic regression was conducted to see why 12% say it is very true that they find it easier to be themselves online compared with those who did not.

Table 2: Logistic regression model for the likelihood of children agreeing strongly with the statement 'I find it easier to be myself on the internet'

Variables	B	S.E.	Sig.	Exp(B)
Age	-.040	.015	.010	.961
Girls (vs. boys)	-.130	.048	.007	.879
Peer problems	.928	.337	.006	2.530
Time spent on the internet (minutes)	.003	.000	.000	1.003
Number of online activities	.051	.008	.000	1.052

-2 Log likelihood = 11,945; $\chi^2_{(53)} = 1,052$; $p < 0.001$

Note: The table shows the parameter estimates for the listed variables, controlling also for country differences. All variables are centred on their mean.

A matter of vulnerability

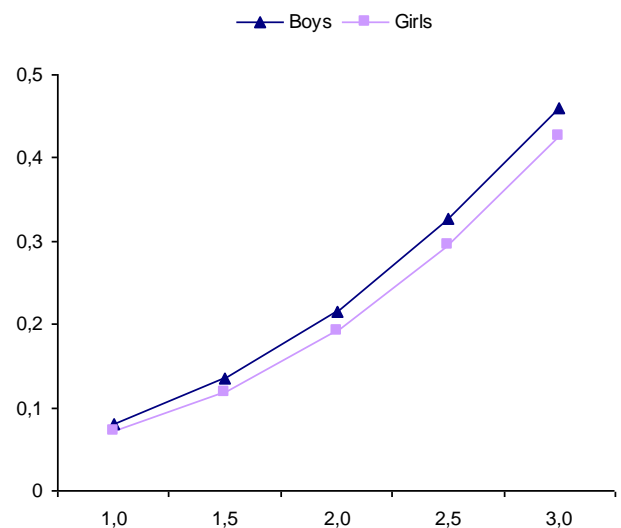
The analysis shows that peer problems are strongly linked to an increased likelihood of saying it's 'very true' that 'I find it easier to be myself on the internet'.

Children who say it is very true that they find it easier to be themselves online than offline are those who have

more difficulties with peers, as predicted by the Social Compensation Hypothesis.⁴

Figure 2 shows how the predicted probability of a child agreeing strongly with the statement 'I find it easier to be myself on the internet' changes as the child has more difficulties with peers and divided by gender. As shown on the graph, a child with a low score on the SDQ peer problems scale has a much lower probability than a child with a high score on that scale of agreeing strongly with the statement 'I find it easier to be myself on the internet'. This applies to both boys and girls.

Figure 2: Change in predicted probability of children agreeing strongly with the statement 'I find it easier to be myself on the internet' by gender and peer problems



However, spending more time online and doing more activities online is also somewhat associated with finding it easier to be oneself online. Figure 3 shows how the predicted probability of a child agreeing strongly with the statement 'I find it easier to be myself on the internet' changes as the child's use of the internet per day increases from 10 minutes to 140 minutes. Similarly, Figure 4 shows how this changes as the child engages in a larger variety of activities online.

⁴ Valkenburg, P. M., & Peter, J. (2009) Social consequences of the internet for adolescents. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 18(1), 1-5.

Figure 3: Change in predicted probability of children agreeing strongly with the statement 'I find it easier to be myself on the internet' by minutes/day spent online

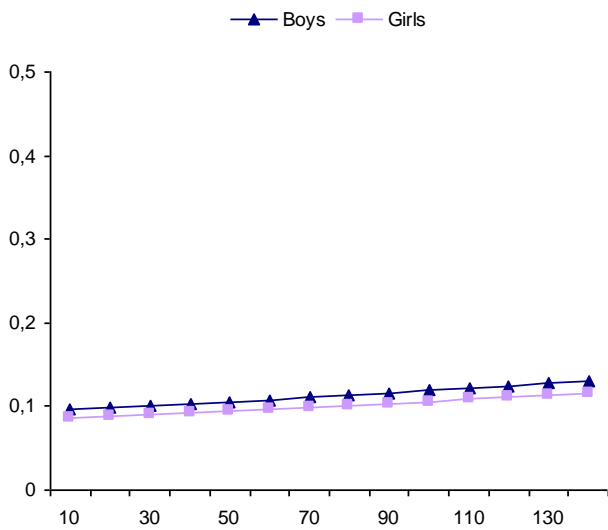
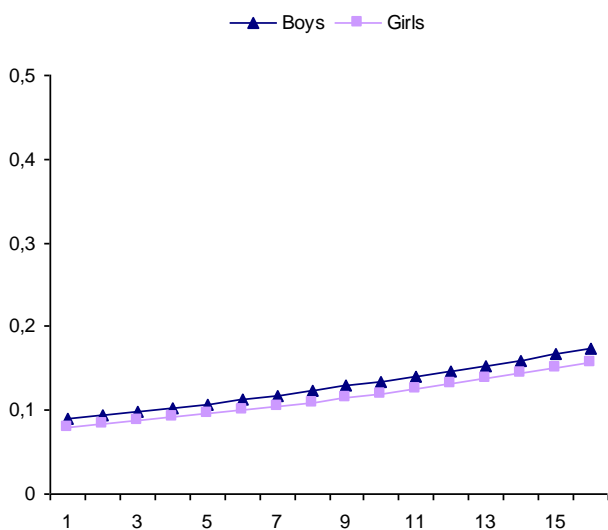


Figure 4: Change in predicted probability of children agreeing strongly with the statement 'I find it easier to be myself on the internet' by number of activities online



Interestingly, having more contacts online makes little difference and nor does age or gender matter much.

Risky consequences?

Since these seem to be the more 'vulnerable' children who really feel themselves online, we asked next, is this associated with risky online behaviour? Figure 5 shows that finding it easier to be oneself online than offline is associated with a range of forms of possibly risky communication. To be sure, they may not lead to any kind of harm. But they may.

Figure 5: Children's actions in relation to online contacts

% who have, in the past 12 months . . .	"I find it easier to be myself on the internet than with people face to face"	
	Very true	Not true/a bit true
Looked for new friends on the internet	34	22
Added people to my friends' list or address book that I have never met face-to-face	27	17
Sent personal information to someone that I have never met face-to-face	14	6
Pretended to be a different kind of person on the internet from what I really am	12	5
Sent a photo or video of myself to someone that I have never met face-to-face	11	5
In the past month, the child has been in contact with people first met on the internet but who have no other connection to their life	30	25

Note: for all rows, the differences between children who say very true and those who say not true or a bit true are all significant at $\alpha < 0.001$.

Base: All children aged 11-16 who use the internet.

Conclusion

For children who have difficulties with their peers offline, it is especially important to discuss the risks of online communication or disclosure of personal information.

But for most children, their relations with peers offline are positive, they feel more themselves offline and they undertake few risky online activities.

EU Kids Online II is funded by the EC Safer Internet Programme (contract SIP-KEP-321803) from 2009-11 to enhance knowledge of children's and parents' experiences and practices regarding risky and safer use of the internet and new online technologies.

To inform the promotion among stakeholders of a safer online environment for children, EU Kids Online conducted a face-to-face, in home survey 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.

For more findings, see Livingstone, S., Haddon, L., Görzig, A., and Ólafsson, K. (2011). *Risks and safety on the internet: The perspective of European children. Full findings*. LSE, London: EU Kids Online. Other reports and technical survey details are at www.eukidsonline.net.