

## Risky communication online

Sonia Livingstone and Kjartan Ólafsson

### 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, both girls and boys, of all ages from 11-16.
- 12% say it is ‘very true’ for them, and they are:
  - more likely to have problems with their peers, suggesting that they are seeking online relationships to compensate for offline ones;
  - 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.

While most children enjoy communicating online, for those with peer problems offline, internet use may increase risky communication online.

### 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 their friendships:

- 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, online communication offers important opportunities for identity and intimacy. This may mean that, for them, online communication is “more than a game, it’s your life!” – the theme of Safer Internet Day 2011.<sup>1</sup>

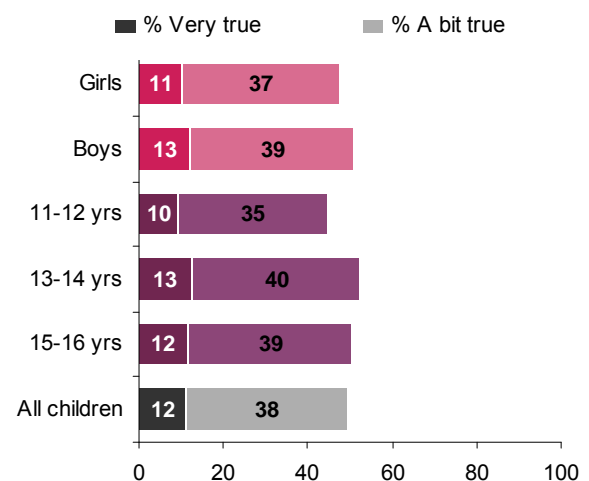
<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.saferinternet.org/web/guest/safer-internet-day>

### 1 in 8 say it is ‘very true’ that it is easier to be themselves online

*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 than with people face-to-face.<sup>2</sup>

But what of 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 Questionnaire<sup>3</sup> (Table 1).

<sup>2</sup> Livingstone, S. (2009) *Children and the Internet*. Cambridge: Polity.  
<sup>3</sup> 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'.

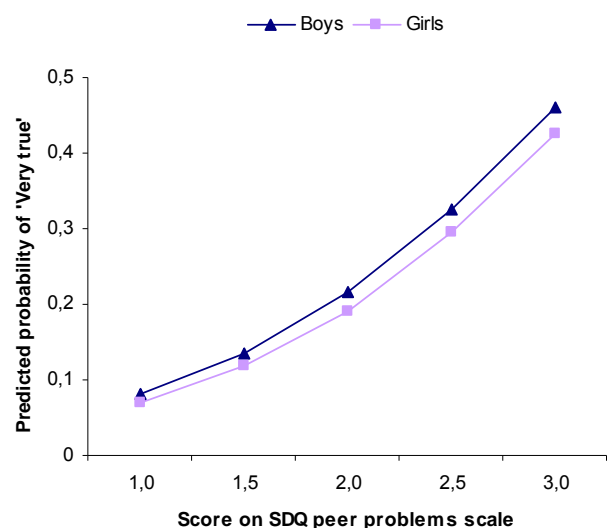
- Children who say it is very true that they find it easier to be themselves online than offline tend

to have more difficulties with peers, as the Social Compensation Hypothesis predicts.<sup>4</sup>

Figure 2 shows how the predicted probability of a child saying 'very true' to 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 saying 'very true'. 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**

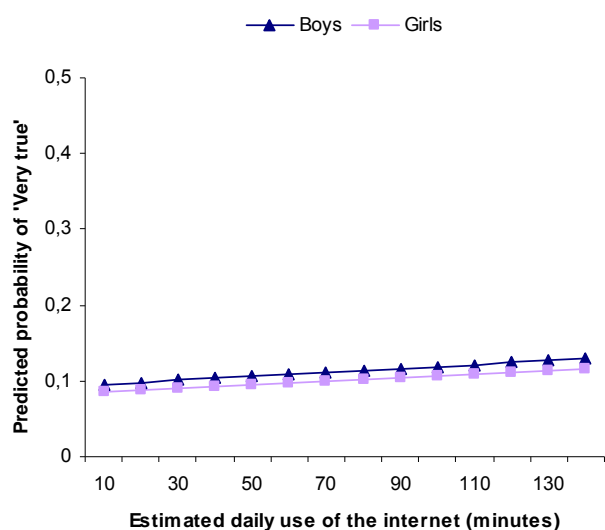


Also, spending more time or doing more activities online makes a small but significant difference:

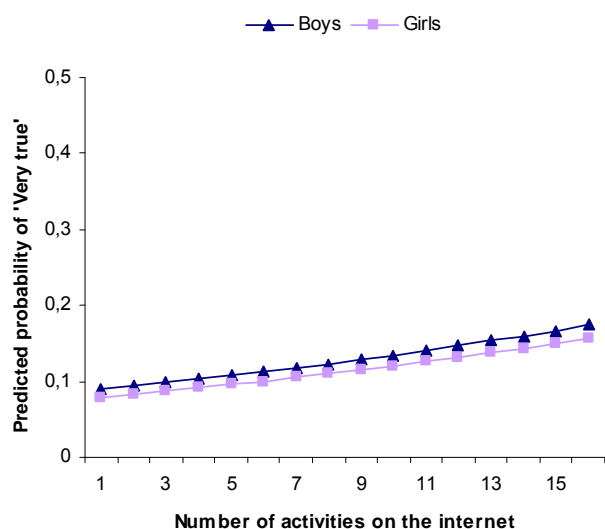
- Figure 3 shows how the predicted probability of a child saying it is 'very true' that 'I find it easier to be myself on the internet' changes as the child's use of the internet per day increases from 10 minutes to 140 minutes.
- Figure 4 shows how this changes as the child engages in a greater range of activities online (out of the 17 activities we asked if they had done in the past month).
- Having more contacts online makes little difference and nor does age or gender matter much.

<sup>4</sup> 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 time 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 activities online**



## 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 those who say it is 'very true' that it is easier to be oneself online than offline are more likely to undertake several types of risky communication. This may or may not result in harm to the child, as a future *EU Kids Online* report will investigate.

**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.

## Implications

For children who find it very much easier to be themselves online than offline, it is very important to discuss with them how and why they communicate online. Also, it seems that children with offline peer problems may seek intimacy online, resulting in more risky online communication. Still, 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](http://www.eukidsonline.net).