Coping and resilience: children's responses to online risks

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Theoretical background

There is an impressive body of behavioural science research, beginning in the 1950s, which focuses primarily on '[w]hat makes a difference in the lives of children threatened by adversity or burdened by risk' (Masten and Powell, 2003, p 4). Exposure to risks is part of everyday life and potentially contributes to increased ability to cope with threats; however, children's resilience to risks varies, and some cope with adversity better than others (Smith and Carlson, 1997). Resilience, defined as 'positive patterns of adaptation in the context of risk or adversity', is considered one of the most complex and provocative aspects of human development (Masten and Gewirtz, 2006, p 24). Masten and Gewirtz (2006, p 24) define the concept of 'coping' as 'efforts to adapt to stress or other disturbances created by a stressor or adversity'. Interestingly, risk and protective factors can work together to enhance overall resilience (Coleman and Hagell, 2007, p 15). Very few studies focus specifically on resilience to risks in the online world, and also little work has been done on investigating whether the risks encountered offline also extend to the online world.

Contextualising online risks: from risk to harm

As children grow older and as their level of digital literacy increases, they are more exposed to all types of online risks (Livingstone et al, 2011). Psychological characteristics are related to the effect of online risks: children with more self-efficacy and more psychological difficulties, who are sensation-seeking, experience more exposure (see Table 16.1). Exposure to risk, however, is not necessarily related to more harm. Despite their higher levels of exposure, older children, children from more affluent homes and children with high self-efficacy are frequently

Table 16.1: Exposure to and being bothered by online risks, and intensity of being upset (among those feeling bothered) (%)

	Sexual images			Sexual messages			Online bullying		Meeting online contact	
	Exposure	Bothered	Fairly/ very upset	Exposure	Bothered	Fairly/ very upset	Bothered (victim)	Fairly/ very upset	Exposure	Bothered very upset
Gender										
	Boy	15 ^c	28 ^c	43	16 ^c	19 ^c	40 ^a	47 ^c	8 ^a	14 ^b
	Girl	11	42	45	13	36	49	61	7	9
Age										
	9-10	5 ^c	59 ^c	50 ^b	—	—	3 ^c	48	2 ^c	33 ^c
	11-12	8	46	54	7 ^c	46 ^c	55 ^a	54	3	21
	13-14	15	35	44	13	28	44	58	8	10
	15-16	23	25	36	22	22	41	57	15	9
Socio-economic status										
	Low	11 ^c	42 ^c	55 ^c	14 ^c	36 ^c	42 ^b	62 ^c	5 ^c	15 ^b
	Medium	12	32	39	13	25	54	57	8	13
	High	17	32	40	17	22	38	46	8	8
Self-efficacy										
	Low	7 ^c	52 ^c	34	11 ^c	31 ^b	55	63	3 ^c	33 ^c
	Medium	11	35	44	13	29	46	55	6	11
	High	18	31	46	17	24	43	54	10	10
Psychological difficulties										
	Few	8 ^c	24 ^c	24 ^c	10 ^c	21 ^c	49	46 ^c	5 ^c	2 ^c
	Moderate	13	27	40	14	21	41	50	7	11
	A lot	16	45	50	19	35	47	60	9	17
Sensation-seeking										
	No	8 ^c	40 ^c	46	9 ^c	34 ^c	49	60 ^b	4 ^c	12
	Low	16	32	42	17	24	48	55	10	9
	High	26	29	43	27	22	39	49	16	13

(continued)

less bothered by sexual risks (seeing sexual images or receiving sexual messages) or offline meetings with online contacts. High sensation-seeking and a wide range of online activities also seem to increase children's resilience towards online sexual risks. Experiencing psychological difficulties may threaten the development of children's resilience to online risks: emotionally troubled children are subject to higher exposure to online risks and are more likely to feel bothered by the experience. Although boys more often see or receive sexual images and messages, girls are more sensitive about sexual risks.

Psychological characteristics have a particularly strong impact on a child's level of perceived harm, irrespective of the type of risk. Self-confident children are more likely to recover from the experience immediately, while children with psychological difficulties may experience more intense, longer-lasting harm (that is, they are more upset). There are some personal characteristics that are related to resilience to risk: sensation-seekers are more resilient to online bullying and a wider range of online activities seems to have a mainly positive impact on resilience to disturbing sexual images. Younger children are more intensely upset by sexual risks (both images and messages). Girls tend to find it more difficult to cope with contact risks (online bullying, sexting and meeting online contacts). Children from lower socioeconomic status families are more upset by online bullying. Overall, children with psychological difficulties manifest in the offline world are likely to be more vulnerable online, and children who are generally more resilient are likely to develop resilience to online situations.

Online bullying is the online risk that most upsets young people: more than half of the children who had been victims of cyberbullying said they were very or fairly upset by it. In relation to sexual risks, more children were upset after seeing sexual images than after receiving sexual messages. However, if a child is upset by seeing a sexual image, the feeling is intensified by the receipt of sextings. Meeting online contacts offline is less likely to produce negative feelings: among those children who felt bothered by the experience, the majority were only slightly upset. These findings illustrate why it is important to differentiate between exposure to risk and actual harm. While relatively many people come across sexual images and/or receive sexual messages, these incidents cause less harm than being exposed to acts of online bullying. Adults tend to overestimate the risks related to meeting online contacts, since in most cases these meetings are pleasant experiences involving age group peers. Moreover, what adults might consider risky young people may perceive as opportunities.

Coping strategies: who adopts what strategy when encountering ~~what risk?~~

[Insert reference to Table 16.2 near here?](#)

Fatalistic response

Children can respond in passive, rather fatalistic ways, hoping simply that the problem will go away, or ~~stop~~ using the internet for a while. The former group may be upset for a short time, and any harm is not substantial or long term, or they may feel indifferent, accepting that sometimes they will encounter unpleasant things. One in four of those bothered by an experience hope the problem will go away, and this reaction is related less to specific sociodemographic or psychological characteristics. Deciding to stop using the internet can be interpreted as ignoring the problem without eliminating the actual cause, and involves missing online opportunities or ~~building~~ resilience. This strategy is more common among younger children, lower socioeconomic status children, children with little self-efficacy or with psychological difficulties, young people who engage in only a few online activities and those who are more intensely upset.

Younger children are more likely to adopt a fatalistic reaction to unwelcome *sexual images*. Boys and children from higher socioeconomic status families more often hope simply that the problem will go away. Girls, lower socioeconomic status children, those with psychological issues and the less active internet users more often decide to go offline for a while, a more radical decision that indicates that they feel more upset. Indeed, those feeling upset to ~~more intense degrees~~ stop using the internet more often. Boys receiving unwelcome *sexual messages* online are more likely to do nothing and wait until the problem goes away; girls are more likely to react by going offline for a time. Children with low self-confidence, and older children, are more likely to stop using the internet. Children upset by sexting are more likely to turn off their computers for a while. Among victims of *online bullying*, psychologically troubled children and those more upset and upset for longer by the experience are more likely to respond fatalistically. Girls more often simply hope that the problem will disappear without intervention.

These findings indicate that more vulnerable groups are more likely to use a strategy that may further reduce their capacities for resilience and online opportunities. However, about seven in ten children who went offline for a while following an upsetting experience indicated this strategy was 'helpful', although in this case it is important to

Table 16.2: Use of coping strategies among those feeling bothered (%)

	Fatalistic/passive coping strategies						Communicative strategy			Proactive strategies			
	Hope the problem would go away			Stop using the internet for a while			Talk to somebody			Try to fix the problem		Delete the message	
	Sexim	Bullying	Sexim	Sexim	Bullying	Sexim	Sexim	Bullying	Sexim	Sexim	Bullying	Sexim	Bullying
Boys	30 ^b	18 ^c	36 ^c	22 ^b	19	13 ^a	50 ^a	67 ^c	48 ^c	25 ^a	30 ^c	23	25
Girls	22	28	14	29	20	21	56	85	66	19	41	29	26
Age													
9-10	—	—	—	50 ^c	41 ^c	—	61 ^b	78 ^a	—	—	—	20 ^b	37
11-12	33 ^a	23	21 ^a	21	24	13 ^b	62	76	72 ^c	23	27 ^c	35 ^a	21
13-14	26	21	28	21	16	14	53	82	48	22	43	21	32
15-16	21	26	18	21	14	24	45	74	62	21	36	27	25
Socioeconomic status													
Low	17 ^c	25	26	37 ^c	25 ^b	22	60 ^b	74 ^b	61 ^b	26	47 ^c	36 ^b	39 ^c
Medium	28	25	18	24	21	14	46	82	52	23	34	21	24
High	32	21	22	17	16	19	57	73	70	19	33	25	18
Self-efficacy													
Low	35	20 ^c	22	26	47 ^c	33 ^c	46	71	48	18 ^a	42 ^c	10 ^a	32
Medium	23	31	25	25	17	21	53	77	59	19	29	26	25
High	26	16	18	26	18	11	56	78	63	26	44	32	25

(continued)

Fatalistic/passive coping strategies						Communicative strategy			Proactive strategies								
Hope the problem would go away			Stop using the internet for a while			Talk to somebody			Try to fix the problem			Delete the message			Block the person who sent the message		
Sexim	Bullying	Sexim	Bullying	Sexim	Bullying	Sexim	Bullying	Sexim	Sexim	Bullying	Sexim	Sexim	Bullying	Sexim	Sexim	Bullying	Sexim
PD meanings of abbrev:																	
Few	26 ^b	15 ^c	12 ^a	14 ^b	56	80 ^a	59	11 ^c	35	35 ^b	23 ^a	41	40	12 ^b	50	44	
Moderate	33	17	23	21	55	81	58	19	34	18	20	38	37	22	48	38	
A lot	22	30	22	23	52	74	61	26	38	29	29	43	37	26	44	41	
Sensation-seeking																	
No	31 ^b	23 ^c	19	10 ^c	57 ^a	83 ^c	65 ^b	18 ^c	37	26	27	43	37	20	49 ^a	39	
Low	18	39	16	27	48	87	66	16	36	23	23	40	47	25	38	44	
High	22	20	20	25	50	66	49	29	36	31	25	40	35	25	45	42	
Online activities																	
Low	23	26	36	40 ^c	56	78 ^b	52	13 ^a	34	12 ^b	23 ^c	38	10 ^c	12 ^c	33 ^a	10 ^c	
Medium	25	24	21	18	55	80	61	21	37	23	20	43	37	22	46	43	
High	27	23	22	16	50	71	58	26	36	35	36	39	44	29	48	42	
f/v upset	31 ^a	30 ^c	21	26 ^c	63 ^c	88 ^c	69 ^c	30 ^c	46 ^c	31 ^a	29 ^a	46 ^c	40	27 ^b	49 ^b	39	
n/b upset	23	18	23	13	47	65	54	15	26	23	23	34	37	19	40	43	
Got over	23 ^b	18 ^c	23	10 ^c	48 ^b	67 ^c	55 ^c	14 ^c	24 ^c	27	32 ^b	37 ^b	39	26	46	46 ^a	
Longer	32	27	23	22	60	85	72	35	44	30	21	46	38	21	50	35	
Total	26	24	22	20	53	77	60	22	36	27	26	41	38	23	46	40	

Notes: χ^2 -test; ^a $p < 0.05$; ^b $p < 0.01$; ^c $p < 0.001$.
EP: emotional problems **does not appear in table 11**; f/v upset: very/fairly upset; n/b upset: not/a bit upset; got over: got over it straight away; longer: feeling upset for at least a couple of days.
Sexim: sexual images, Bullying: online bullying. The number of children bothered by meeting online contacts was too low to conduct valid χ^2 -analysis on coping strategies.

1 understand that ‘helpful’ refers to lack of further exposure to online
2 risks during that time.

4 *Communicative response*

6 Children can adopt a communicative approach, seeking social support
7 and talking to someone. For all online risks, children prefer to talk to
8 their peers (63–68 per cent) or to parents (48–54 per cent). Only a few
9 children turned for advice to teachers (4–10 per cent) or professional
10 childcare workers (2–4 per cent).

11 Regardless of the type of online risk, girls, children not interested
12 in sensation-seeking and those experiencing more intense feelings of
13 being upset tend to be more communicative. About half of children
14 talk to someone about an upsetting sexual image and one in six discuss
15 the receipt of an unwelcome sexual message. Younger children are
16 more likely to talk to someone when they feel bothered by sexual
17 risks. Children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds tend to talk
18 to someone when they are bothered by sexual images, while children
19 from more affluent families will talk to someone about sexting-related
20 problems. Among victims of online bullying, 77 per cent report talking
21 to somebody about this. Interestingly, children who engage in fewer
22 digital activities are more likely to talk to someone about being bullied
23 online.

24 These findings might be an indication that awareness-raising
25 campaigns that emphasise communicative coping strategies are having
26 an impact. Communicative strategies are broadly adopted by members
27 of sociodemographic groups identified as vulnerable (girls, younger
28 children, lower socioeconomic status children). However, children
29 with psychological difficulties or low self-efficacy – identified as most
30 vulnerable – are no more likely to talk about their negative experiences
31 than children with no psychological issues.

33 *Proactive response*

35 Children who are proactive are regarded as displaying the best adaptation
36 (most resilience) to adversity, because their actions are intended to
37 reduce or eliminate harm in the future. ~~Greater intensities of feeling~~
38 ~~upset promote a greater tendency for some children to try proactively~~
39 ~~to fix the problem.~~ Although this reaction is not limited to the more
40 resilient groups, the willingness to tackle problems independently is
41 stronger among children with high self-efficacy. This suggests that self-
42 confidence is a key component of greater resilience. Internet-specific

1 coping strategies, that is, deleting messages or blocking senders, require
2 minimal digital skills. Hence, as expected, the number of a child's online
3 activities is positively related to these coping strategies. Our findings
4 also confirm that if the feeling of being upset is strong and persistent,
5 this motivates the child 'to fix' the problem.

6 Children are more likely to respond proactively to being bothered
7 (upset) by sexual images if they use the internet for a wide range of
8 activities. Trying to fix the problem is a more likely response among
9 more resilient groups, such as boys, self-confident children and
10 sensation-seekers, as well as those experiencing more intense harm.
11 Online proactive coping strategies are also common among lower
12 socioeconomic status children. Thus, a proactive response to upsetting
13 sexual images is not limited to the more resilient groups. Also, the
14 child's level of online activities is again related positively to a proactive
15 response to unwelcome sexual messages. Self-confident children are
16 more likely to try to fix problems, but more vulnerable groups, such as
17 younger children and children from lower-class families, also favour this
18 approach. There is no straightforward relationship with other personal
19 characteristics. Children are most proactive when the victims of bullying
20 online, and the number of online activities is positively related to the
21 strategy of blocking the senders of upsetting messages.

22 There is a self-reported success rate of around 80 per cent for deleting
23 messages and blocking senders, which are perceived as very effective
24 strategies to cope with sexting. For victims of online bullying, blocking
25 the sender is more effective (78 per cent) than simply deleting the
26 message (58 per cent). In the case of experiences of unpleasant sexual
27 images, it is more helpful to delete the content (82 per cent) than to
28 block the source or sender (71 per cent). Overall, the strategy adopted
29 depends on the risk at stake.

31 **Coping strategies: predictive factors**

32
33 To provide a more complete picture of the relative predictive value of
34 sociodemographics, psychological difficulties (emotional, conduct and
35 peer problems) and the range of online activities for children's coping
36 strategies, we conducted linear regression analyses for three of the
37 four online risks (seeing sexual images, online bullying and receiving
38 sexual messages)¹ (see Table 16.3). In Table 16.3, empty cells refer to
39 non-significant beta values. Emotional, conduct and peer problems
40 were added separately to the regression model. The relative impact of
41 these different types of psychological problems varies across different
42 coping strategies and different online risks. For example, in the case of

Table 16.3: Relative predictive values of factors for coping strategies with online risks (standardised betas)

	Sexual images						Online bullying						Sexual messages (sexting)					
	Hope the problem would go away	Stop using the Internet	Talk to somebody	Try to fix the problem	Delete message(s)	Block the sender of message(s)	Hope the problem would go away	Stop using the Internet	Talk to somebody	Try to fix the problem	Delete message(s)	Block the sender of message(s)	Hope the problem would go away	Stop using the Internet	Talk to somebody	Try to fix the problem	Delete message(s)	Block the sender of message(s)
Gender	-0.106 ^a	0.147 ^c	0.088 ^b	-0.068 ^a					0.142 ^c	0.086 ^a		0.070 ^a	-0.277 ^c	0.092 ^a	0.156 ^c	0.131 ^b	0.148 ^c	0.115 ^d
Age	-0.106 ^b	-0.103 ^b	-0.128 ^c			0.071 ^a		-0.176 ^c				-0.070 ^a		0.132 ^b		-0.139 ^b		
Socioeconomic status					0.148 ^c					0.084 ^b	0.196 ^c				-0.294 ^c			
Education (parents)	0.121 ^c									0.132 ^c	0.169 ^b		-0.127 ^b	-0.229 ^c	0.119 ^b	-0.153 ^c		
Self-efficacy			0.074 ^a	0.088 ^b				-0.111 ^c			-0.074 ^b			-0.231 ^c		-0.128 ^b	-0.235 ^c	
Emotional problems				0.079 ^b		0.091 ^a	0.219 ^c			-0.110 ^c				0.146 ^b	0.241 ^c	0.192 ^c		
Conduct problems														0.259 ^c			0.153 ^c	
Peer problems		0.153 ^c		0.124 ^b	0.108 ^b			0.138 ^c	-0.080 ^b	0.128 ^c					-0.182 ^c			
Sensation-seeking	-0.123 ^b	0.082 ^a		0.093 ^b	-0.120 ^c				-0.143 ^c									
Online skills		-0.183 ^c		0.119 ^b		-0.090 ^b					0.099 ^b	0.212 ^c	-0.110 ^b			0.217 ^c	0.133 ^b	
Online activities	0.137 ^c				0.190 ^c	0.253 ^c											0.106 ^c	
Intensity of harm	-0.124 ^c	-0.200 ^c	-0.133 ^c	-0.179 ^c	-0.086 ^b	-0.120 ^b	-0.103 ^c	-0.138 ^c	-0.241 ^c	-0.180 ^c	-0.130 ^c	-0.082 ^b		-0.124 ^b	-0.115 ^b	-0.098 ^b		
Adjusted R ²	0.060	0.146	0.044	0.088	0.072	0.061	0.064	0.097	0.127	0.083	0.044	0.044	0.096	0.172	0.111	0.140	0.091	0.024

Notes: ^ap<0.05; ^bp<0.01; ^cp<0.001.
The number of children bothered by meeting online contacts was too low to conduct valid regression analyses on coping strategies.
Gender: boy = 1, girl = 2/SES (socio-economic status): high = 1, low = 6/Education parents: low = 1, high = 7.
Being upset: fairly/very upset = 1, a bit/not at all upset = 2.

online bullying, it is peer problems that show the main influence on children's coping reactions; in the case of sexting, children's strategies are explained by a broader range of psychological difficulties. These nuances are better captured by looking at emotional, conduct and peer problems separately rather than psychological problems combined.

Sexual images

Children who feel very upset when confronted by sexual images are more likely to respond in some way – passively, communicatively or proactively. Girls, younger children, children who have problems with peers, sensation-seekers and children with few online activities more often take the route of going offline for a time following an upsetting experience with sexual images. Adoption of a proactive problem-solving strategy increases children's resilience and is more common among self-confident children and children who are very active online. Also, sensation-seekers and those who experience peer problems are more likely to look for some solution to their problem. The use of specific online coping strategies, such as deleting or blocking messages, increases with the range of children's online activities. Girls, younger children and very self-confident young people prefer a communicative approach.

Online bullying

More intense feelings of being upset have a strong impact on the whole range of children's responses to online bullying. Children with higher self-efficacy are more willing to try to fix the problem and not to stop using the internet. The children most vulnerable to online bullying are children with peer problems, low self-efficacy and younger children: all are more likely just to stay offline for a period. Experiencing peer problems is linked to being a boy, to coming from a more affluent home and to responding proactively to problems. The children with these attributes seem to experience serious harm, which apparently motivates them to look for a (long-term) solution to bullying. Self-confident children who do not have conduct problems are also proactive at dealing with bullying. Deleting messages and blocking senders of upsetting messages happens more often among children who are highly active online. Those who prefer a communicative response following an experience of bullying online tend to be girls, low sensation-seekers and children with no peer problems.

Sexual messages (sexting)

Experience with sexual messages produces the response in boys of hoping that the problem will go away, and in girls to stop using the computer and talk to someone or be proactive. Girls, and children with low self-efficacy, more conduct problems and more peer problems, are more likely to decide to go offline for a while after a sexting incident. It is noticeable that older children and children with no emotional problems often adopt a fatalistic approach to sexting. Presumably, the more resilient children go offline for short periods, while those groups less able to cope may stop using the internet for much longer. Although girls, children with conduct problems and children with no emotional problems are more likely to abandon the internet for a time, they are also more motivated to look for solutions. Also, children engaged in a broad range of online activities, higher socioeconomic status children and younger age groups tend to respond proactively. The group most vulnerable to harm from sexting are children with low self-confidence: this group more often stops using the internet and less often searches for solutions. Internet-specific coping strategies (deleting messages and blocking senders) are practised more often by girls, children with no emotional problems, children with peer problems and, as might be expected, children who are more active online (who engage in more activities). These findings indicate that the likelihood of using online coping strategies increases with the intensity of distress from the experience, a certain state of mind and mastery of the necessary skills.

Conclusion

Exposure to risk does not necessarily result in harm, and not every risk is equally upsetting. Some online risks, such as seeing sexual images, provoke mainly minor negative responses. Other risks, such as meeting online contacts offline, are perceived mainly as opportunities and are rarely upsetting for those involved. In order to understand the negative effects of online risks, it is crucial to take account of the child's understandings and characteristics. Children reporting more psychological difficulties, particularly those with low self-efficacy and emotional problems, are more likely to be upset by the risks they encounter. For each type of risk, individual characteristics (gender, age, online activities) play a definite role in the intensity of the harm that children feel following exposure to that risk. Our results are indicative of a type of 'Matthew effect' (in which the rich get richer and the poor get poorer), in that those children who experience more difficulties

1 coping with offline risks seem to find it more difficult to cope with
2 online risks.

3 In tackling the problem of online risks in relation to young people, it
4 is essential that educators and policymakers know what young people
5 actually perceive as most risky and upsetting. From the four risks
6 discussed in this chapter, online bullying has the strongest negative
7 impact. However, it is the online risk that engenders the most proactive
8 and communicative coping responses. Young people who encounter
9 disturbing sexual images are less inclined to look actively for a solution
10 to the problem. Online problem-solving coping strategies, such as
11 deleting unwelcome messages or blocking contacts, are much more
12 common if children are upset by the risks, ~~and young people who feel~~
13 ~~extremely upset tend to adopt more proactive or communicative coping~~
14 ~~strategies.~~ This suggests that children are able to build resilience through
15 the use of different strategies when confronted with something that
16 upsets them. However, it should be borne in mind that some children
17 are significantly less likely than others to be able to respond adequately.
18 Across all risks, the 'more vulnerable' children will often stop using the
19 internet for a time, which then slows their progress up the ladder of
20 digital opportunities (see Chapter 6).

21 Our findings show that more than half of children (including less
22 resilient groups such as girls and primary school children) talk to
23 someone about online problems, which implies that awareness-raising
24 efforts already in place are playing a positive role. However, we need
25 other initiatives to encourage children with psychological difficulties
26 and/or low self-efficacy to talk about the online risks they encounter
27 and the harms they suffer. As more and more children perceive talking
28 to someone to be an acceptable coping strategy, those providing
29 the support could become key agents in the transition from using
30 communicative to applying proactive strategies.

31 32 Notes

33 ¹ The number of children bothered by offline meetings with online contacts
34 is too small for a valid regression analysis.
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