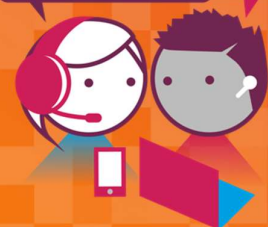


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# Online risks, harm and resilience

Flemish findings from the 2020 EU  
Kids Online survey

eukidsonline.net



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# Introduction

This report presents the Flemish EU Kids Online findings regarding youths' (aged 13-21) online risk experiences, their feelings of harm after these negative online experiences, and their online resilience and coping strategies.

As today's youths increasingly spend time online, it is inevitable that they encounter some risks along the way. Risks are defined as online activities that might produce harmful outcomes for youths' wellbeing and development (Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig, & Ólafsson, 2011). Important to note is that in this report, we present findings concerning online experiences that parents, educators, and experts consider to be risky for children and youths. This view on online risk experiences might differ from youths' views on the matter, as it is possible that online activities that are considered risks by adults, are not seen as negative or harmful by youths (Livingstone, Mascheroni, & Staksrud, 2015).

In this report, we will deal with three types of risks that youths can encounter on the internet (Hasebrink, Livingstone, & Haddon, 2009):

- Content risks: Youths are exposed to potentially harmful online contents, such as hate speech or pornography.
- Contact risks: Youths participate in potentially harmful interactions online, such as sexting.
- Conduct risks: Youths engage in behaviour that has a clear victim and perpetrator, such as cyberbullying or sexual grooming.

Parents, experts and policy makers have raised their concerns about the negative consequences of these online risk experiences on youths. It is, however, important to distinguish between the risks that youths encounter online and their potential harmful

outcomes, as previous research has shown that not all youths feel bothered or upset after a negative experience online (Livingstone et al., 2011).

Indeed, some youths prove to be more resilient to the negative consequences of online risk experiences than others, as they are "able to deal with a negative experience online: i.e., not remaining passive but displaying problem-solving coping strategies in order to protect oneself from future harm" (Vandoninck, d'Haenens, & Roe, 2013). By employing communicative and proactive coping strategies, resilient youths successfully prevent or deal with the negative consequences of online risk experiences.

The current report is divided into three parts. In the first part, we discuss the findings concerning the online risks that Flemish youths encounter online. We will particularly focus on five risks: exposure to sexual content, exposure to other types of potentially harmful content, talking to and meeting with strangers, sexting, and cyberbullying. Furthermore, the results concerning the feelings of harm that youths experience as a result of these negative online experiences are presented.

In the second part of this report, we present the findings regarding youths' online resilience and the coping strategies they employ to prevent or deal with the negative consequences of online risk experiences. We will specifically provide insight into Flemish youths' communicative, pro-active, and passive coping strategies.

In the third part, we aim to discuss some implications for practice, relevant for parents, educators, and experts, based on the key findings in this report.

# Key findings

- Over a third (38%) of Flemish youths (aged 13-21) indicate that they have experienced something online that has bothered or upset them in the past year. A quarter (26%) of these youths says they feel bothered or upset after an online experience at least once a month.
- About a fifth of youths are exposed to online contents containing hate speech, drug use, and violence online at least once a month.
- Half of Flemish youths (52.6%) has had contact online with someone they never met face-to-face. A quarter of youths (27.3%) have met with someone face-to-face that they only first got to know online.
- A third of youths (34.7%) have received sexual messages in the past year. Of these youths, 31.6% felt harmed after having received the message. Girls felt bothered or upset by these messages almost three times as much as boys.
- 10% of Flemish youths admitted having sent or posted sexual texts, images, or photos online.
- A quarter of youths (27.3%) were the victim of cyberbullying at least once a month in the past year. Cyberbullying is the most harmful of the risks discussed in this report, as 78% of those that were the victim felt bothered or upset afterwards.
- Youths from low SES families experience the most risks online. However, they do not always report the most feelings of harm after these negative online experiences.
- Flemish youths mainly use communicative and passive strategies to cope with negative online experiences. They prefer to do so by either talking to friends or parents, or by neglecting the problem and by closing the window or app in which the negative experience took place.

# Methodology

## Sample

The findings presented in this report are based on data from the EU Kids Online IV project that was collected in Flanders, the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium. The data were collected through school surveys between March and May 2018 and between October and November 2018. 14 secondary schools in Flanders were visited by the researchers while the pupils in the participating classes filled in the survey on computers at the school.

1436 Flemish secondary school pupils completed the survey. The sample consisted of 670 boys and 708 girls. The age of the youths in this sample ranged between 13 and 21 years old, the mean age was 16.11 (SD = 1.79). Throughout this report, we compare the findings for several subgroups of youths based on their gender, their age, and their socio-economic status (SES):

- For gender, we distinguish between boys (N = 670) and girls (N = 708).
- Concerning age, we distinguish between youths that are between 13 and 15 years old (N = 641), youths that are between 16 and 17 years old (N = 539), and youths that are 18 years old or older (N = 201).
- Regarding SES, we distinguish between low (scores below 5 on a scale of 10; N = 21), medium (scores of 5 through 7 on a scale of 10; N = 288), or high (score of 8 or higher on a scale of 10; N = 979) SES backgrounds. It is important to be aware of two issues. First, SES was measured using a self-report scale, where

the respondents had to indicate where their family was situated on a scale of 0 (low SES) to 10 (high SES). Second, the low SES group only contains a handful of respondents (N = 21), which is essential to keep in mind while studying the findings in this report.

## Questionnaire

The current findings are based on a questionnaire developed within the EU Kids Online IV project. More information about the project can be found at [www.eukidsonline.net](http://www.eukidsonline.net). In this report, we present findings from questions on:

- Different online risk experiences
- Feelings of harm after online risk experiences
- Coping strategies to prevent or deal with feelings of harm

## Ethical considerations

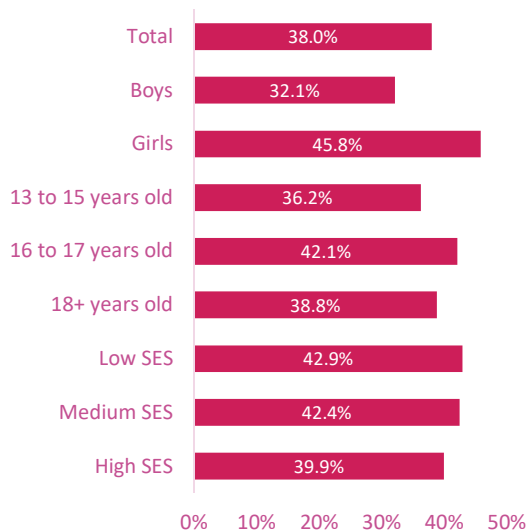
Parents of youths below the age of 16 received a letter informing them about the aim and contents of the study. If the parent did not want their child to participate in the study, they could fill out the opt-out form. Before the start of the survey, informed consent from the respondents was obtained. The youths were guaranteed of the anonymity and confidentiality of their responses and were given the option of answering "I don't know" or "Prefer not to say" on each question. Furthermore, they also were allowed to skip any question they did not want to answer or to stop their participation in the study if they did not wish to continue.

# Online risk and harm

While youths can benefit from their internet use in various ways, it has become inevitable that they also have some negative experiences online. After presenting the findings concerning Flemish youths' general experiences of online risk and harm, we will discuss five particular risks that youths can encounter while spending time online: exposure to sexual and other potentially harmful content, meeting with strangers, sexting, and cyberbullying.

Figure 1 shows that more than a third (38%) of Flemish youths say they experienced something online that bothered or upset them in the past year. More girls (45.8%) than boys (32.1%) encountered a negative experience on the internet. Online risk experiences and subsequent feelings of harm are particularly common among 16- and 17-year-olds. A potential explanation for this finding is that this age group is going through puberty, generally testing the boundaries in their offline and online lives. It is hence highly possible that youths in this age group might encounter more harmful online experiences than their younger or older counterparts. Youths from higher SES backgrounds (39.9%) were left feeling bothered by a negative online experience slightly less than youths from low (42.9%) or average (42.4%) SES backgrounds.

**Figure 1.** Online risk experiences

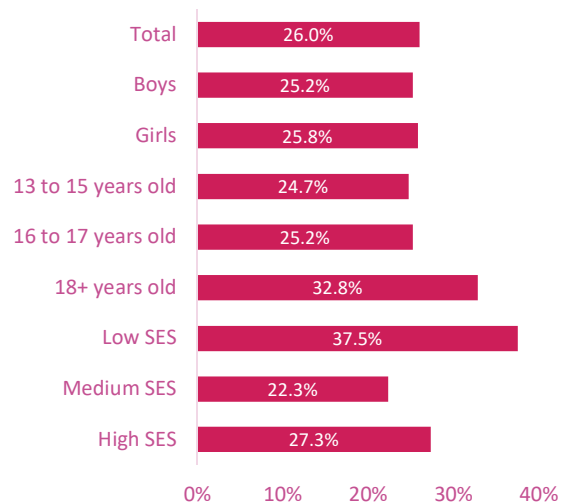


Note: Question: *In the PAST YEAR, has something happened online that has bothered or upset you in any way (e.g., It made you upset, uncomfortable, scared, or gave you the feeling that you had better not seen it)?*

A quarter (26%) of the youths that said that they had felt bothered or upset by an online experience in the past year experienced such an event at least once a month. While Figure 1 showed that mostly

youths between 16 and 17 years old encounter negative experiences online, youths aged 18 or above (32.8%) seem to encounter them most frequently. Similarly, more youths from lower SES backgrounds (37.5%) feel bothered or upset by an online experience at least once a month than youths with higher SES backgrounds.

**Figure 2.** Online risk experiences (at least once a month)

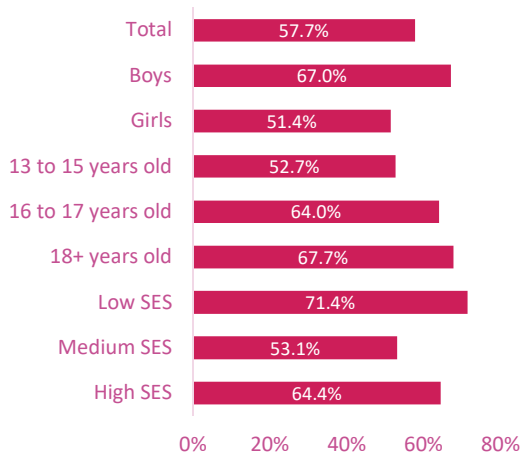


Note: Question: *How often did that happen in the PAST YEAR?* Total percentages for responses "At least once a month", "At least once a week", and "Daily or almost daily" are displayed. Base: Youths that had felt bothered or upset by an online experience in the past year.

## Sexual content

Concerns exist about the potentially harmful effects of exposure to sexual images and pornography on youths' sexual attitudes and development. Figure 3 indicates that more than half (57.7%) of Flemish youths says they have seen sexual contents in the past year. It is important to note, however, that this question did not particularly measure *online* sexual images. This percentage hence also includes exposure to sexual contents in traditional media. Boys (67%) are more exposed to sexual contents than girls (51.4%). Exposure to sexual content increases as youths grow older, with 18 year-olds and older youths reporting the most exposure (67.7%). Youths from low SES backgrounds are exposed to sexual contents the most (71.4%) in comparison with youths from average (53.1%) and high SES backgrounds (64.4%).

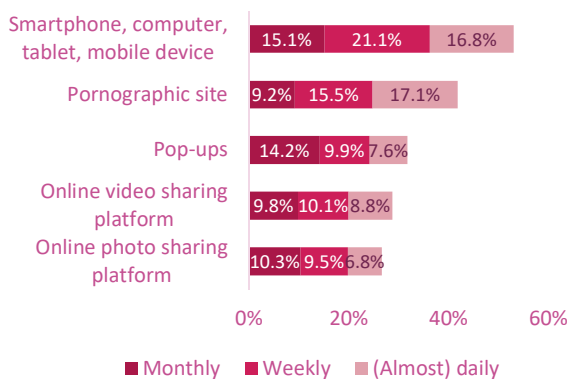
**Figure 3.** Exposure to sexual content



Note: Question: In the PAST YEAR, have you ever seen sexual images?

Figure 4 presents the 5 most popular online sources for sexual content according to Flemish youths. They are mostly exposed to online sexual contents through their mobile devices (53%). Flemish youths are mostly exposed to online sexual contents through pornographic websites (41.8%), followed by pop-up windows (31.7%), video sharing platforms (28.7%), and photo sharing platforms (26.6%).

**Figure 4.** Five most popular online sources for sexual content

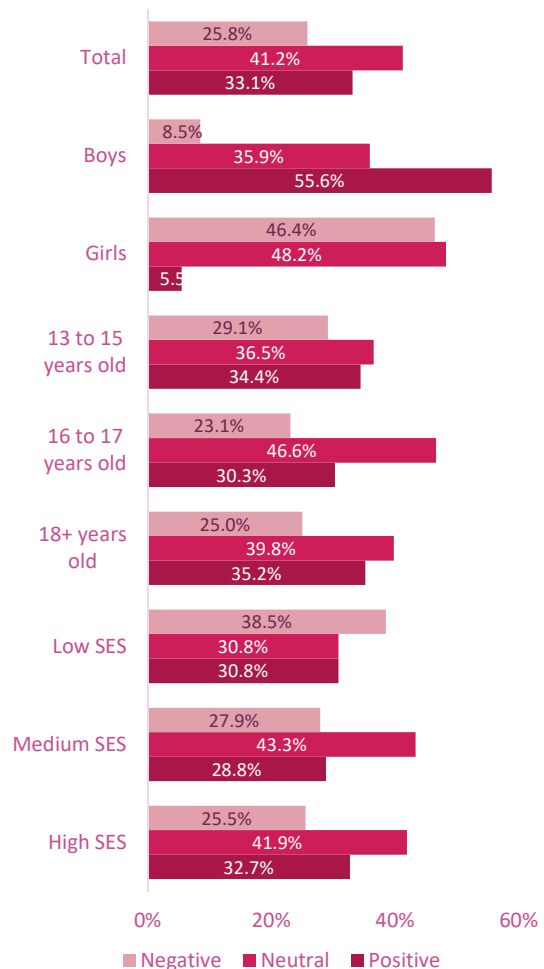


Note: Question: In the PAST YEAR, how often have you seen such images in the following ways? Base: Youths that had seen sexual images in the year.

Not all youths that are exposed to online sexual material feel harmed afterwards. Figure 5 reveals that the majority of Flemish youths (74.3%) reports positive or neutral feelings after being exposed to sexual content. A quarter of them (25.8%) say they feel bothered after seeing these contents. Boys (8.5%) feel considerably less bothered after seeing sexual contents than girls (46.6%). Younger youths report feeling bothered after exposure to sexual contents more than older youths. Similarly, youths from lower SES backgrounds (38.5%) report the most negative feelings after being exposed to

sexual contents compared youths from average and high SES backgrounds.

**Figure 5.** Feelings of harm after exposure to sexual content



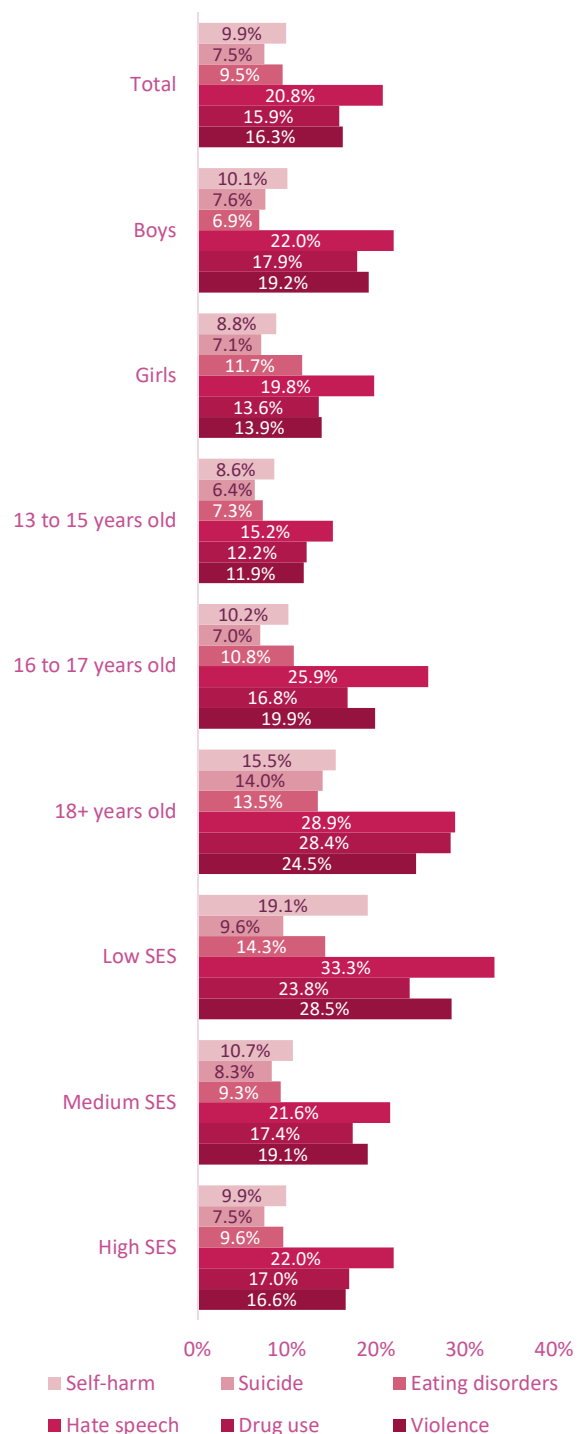
Note: Question: When you think about THE LAST TIME you saw such images, how did you feel about that? Base: Youths that had been exposed to sexual content in the past year.

## Other potentially harmful content

While online, youths can encounter different kinds of potentially harmful contents. Figure 6 shows that exposure to risky online content highly depends on the type of content. Flemish youths are almost twice as much exposed to contents concerning hate speech (20.8%), drug use (15.9%), and violence (16.3%) than to contents containing self-harm (9.9%), suicide (7.5%), or eating disorders (9.5%). Boys are exposed more to all types of risky contents than girls, except for eating-disorder related messages, to which girls (11.7%) are almost twice as much exposed than boys (6.9%). Younger youths are generally less exposed to these risky online contents than older youths, and especially youths over the age of 18 years old report seeing

these types of contents the most. Youths from lower SES backgrounds report being exposed to each type of content more than their peers from average or high SES backgrounds.

**Figure 6.** Exposure to potentially harmful content

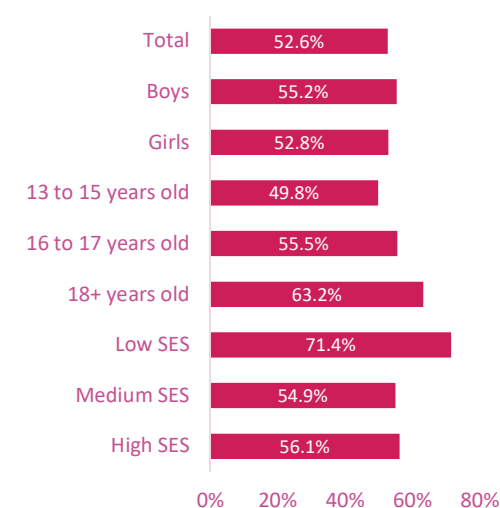


Note: Question: In the PAST YEAR, have you seen online content or online discussion where people talk about or show one of these things? Total percentages for responses "At least every month", "At least every week", and "Daily or almost daily" are displayed.

## Meeting with strangers

The internet allows youths to communicate with their friends and family, but also facilitates interactions with strangers. Figure 7 shows that over half of the Flemish youths (52.6%) have had contact online with someone they have never met face-to-face. This number increases with age, but even in the youngest age group (13 to 15), half of youths (49.8%) talks to strangers online. From the age of 18, almost two-thirds of youths (63.2%) communicate online with people they have never met face-to-face. Youths with a low SES background (71.4%) communicate more with strangers on the internet compared to their peers from average and high SES families.

**Figure 7.** Online contact with strangers

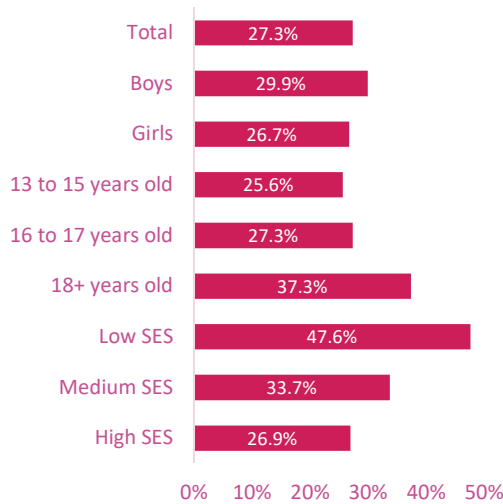


Note: Question: Have you EVER had contact on the internet with someone you have never met face-to-face (with this we mean talking to somebody who is at the same location as you and hence not through the internet, through telephone, or through a webcam)?

Sometimes, youths meet face-to-face with the people they first met on the internet. Figure 8 shows that about a quarter of Flemish youths (27.3%) have met face-to-face with someone they first met online in the past year. Boys (29.9%) meet with strangers they met online slightly more than girls (26.7%). Meeting with strangers remains relatively stable in minors, but increases when they reach the age of 18, of which over a third of youths (37.3%) have met with strangers they knew from the internet in the past year. While a quarter to a third of average and high SES youths meet face-to-face with strangers from the internet, almost half (47.6%) of youths from lower SES families do so.



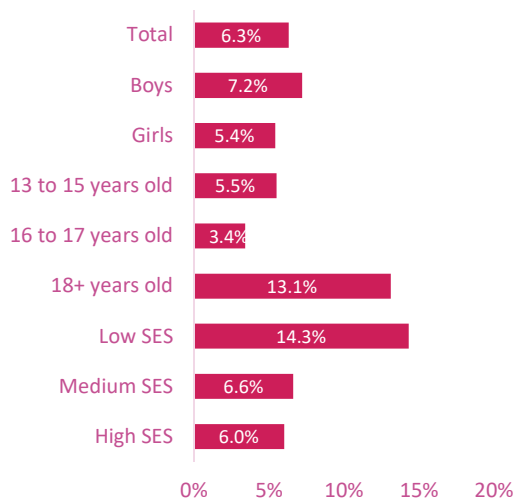
**Figure 8.** Meeting face-to-face with strangers



Note: Question: In the PAST YEAR, have you EVER met someone face-to-face (with this we mean talking to someone who is at the same location as you and hence not through the internet, through telephone, or through webcam) that you first met on the internet?

The majority of Flemish youths do not report feelings of harm after meeting face-to-face with someone they met online. According to Figure 9, only 6.3% of the youths that had met face-to-face with a stranger in the past year say they felt bothered or upset afterwards. Girls (5.4%) report slightly less harm than boys (7.2%). Strikingly, youths aged 18 and over (13.1%) as well as youths from low SES backgrounds (14.3%), who reported meeting with strangers the most (see Figure 8), also report feeling bothered or upset afterwards twice as much as other youths.

**Figure 9.** Feelings of harm after meeting with strangers



Note: Question: When you think about the LAST TIME that you met someone face-to-face (with this we mean talking to someone who is at the same location as you and hence not through the internet, through telephone, or through

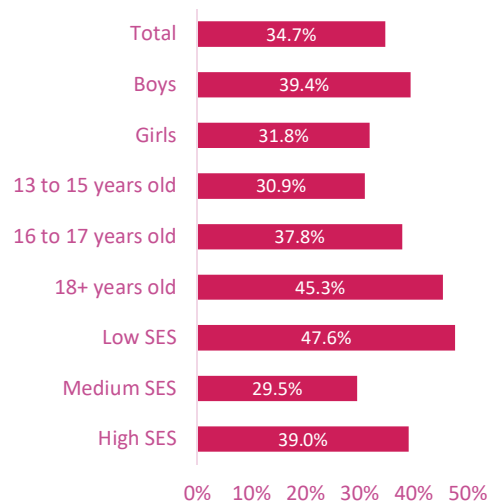
webcam) that you first met on the internet, how did you feel about this? Base: youths that had met with someone face-to-face that they first met online.

## Sexting

Sexting is defined as sexual messages (these can be words, images, or videos of the sender or of someone else) sent through the internet or through the smartphone.

Figure 10 reveals that a third of Flemish youths (34.7%) have received sexual messages in the past year. Boys (39.4%) receive more sexual messages than girls (31.8%). A clear age trend is visible, as receiving sexual messages increases as youths grow older. Youths from medium SES backgrounds (29.5%) receive less sexual messages compared to youths from low (47.6%) and high (39%) SES backgrounds.

**Figure 10.** Receiving sexual messages



Note: Question: In the PAST YEAR, have you EVER RECEIVED sexual messages? These can be texts, pictures, or videos?

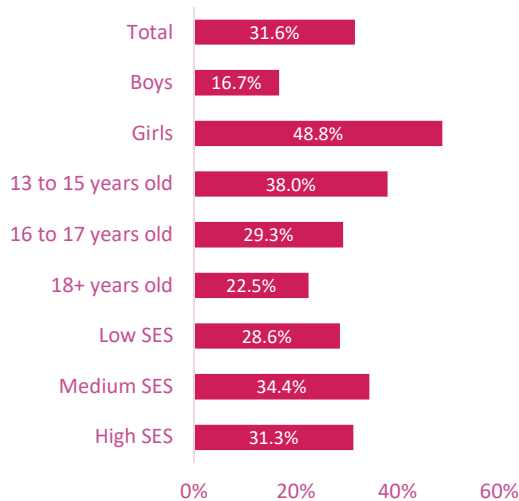
In Figure 11, we see that feelings of harm after receiving sexual messages are more prevalent (31.6%) than feeling bothered after being exposed to sexual content online (25.8%; Figure 5). While barely a fifth of boys (16.7%) say they felt bothered after receiving these messages, almost half of girls (48.8%) reported feeling upset. While younger youths receive the least sexual messages compared to older age groups, they report feeling harmed afterwards the most. Youths aged 18 and older (22.5%) and youths from lower SES families (28.6%), who received the most sexual messages, report the lowest levels of feelings of harm after receiving sexual messages.

These low levels of feelings of harm in the groups that received the most sexual messages might be an indication of the development of online resilience. It is possible that through exposure to these messages, they have learnt to prevent and



cope with the negative feelings afterwards and have hence grown more resilient to feelings of harm after receiving sexual messages.

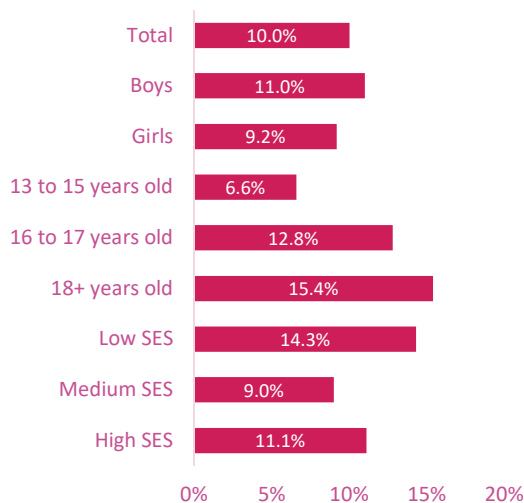
**Figure 11.** Feelings of harm after receiving sexual messages



Note: Question: How did you feel about what you had received the LAST TIME that this happened? Base: Youths who had received sexual messages in the past year.

Flemish youths are not only on the receiving end of sexual messages. Figure 12 shows that 10% have sent or posted sexual messages themselves in the past year. Boys and girls send sexual messages to an approximately equal extent. It doubles after youths reach the age of 16 (12.8%) and increases into young adulthood (15.4%). Youths from lower SES families (14.3%) send the most sexual messages compared to youths with average (9%) and high SES backgrounds (11.1%).

**Figure 12.** Sending or posting sexual messages



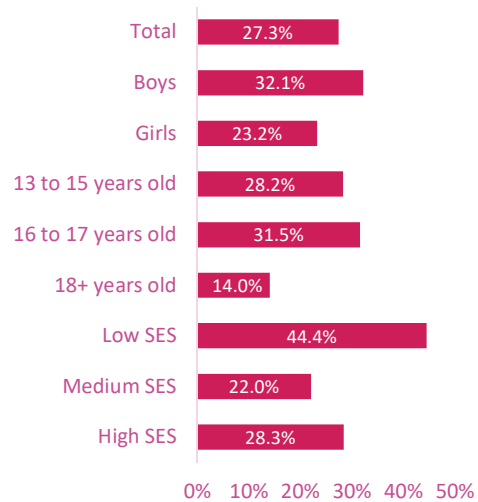
Note: Question: In the PAST YEAR, have you EVER SENT or POSTED sexual messages? These can be texts, pictures or videos of you or of somebody else.

## Cyberbullying

In this study, cyberbullying is defined as intentional and repeated aggression through technology, such as the internet or mobile phones.

Figure 13 reveals that a quarter (27.3%) of Flemish youths have been the victim of cyberbullying at least once a month in the past year. Almost a third of boys (32.1%) and a quarter of girls (23.2%) have been treated badly online or through their mobile devices at least on a monthly basis. About a third of Flemish youths below the age of 18 have been the victim of cyberbullying, but victimization decreases after youths reach the age of 18 (14%). Youths from lower SES families are the victim of cyberbullying almost twice as much (44.4%) as youths with average (22%) and high SES backgrounds (28.3%).

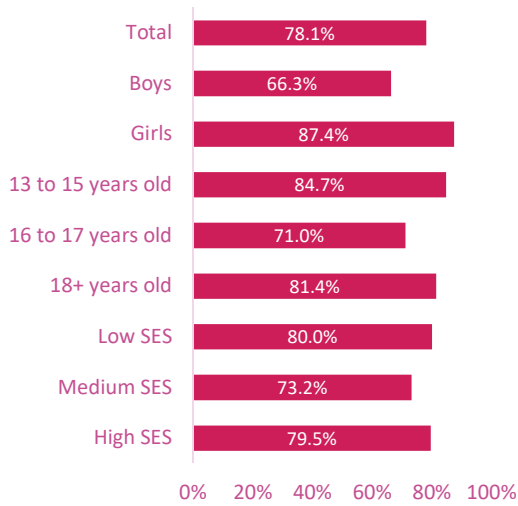
**Figure 13.** Cyberbullying victimization at least once a month



Note: Question: In the PAST YEAR, how often did this happen in one of the following ways? – Through a phone or the internet, computer, tablet, etc. Total percentages for responses “At least every month”, “At least every week” and “Daily or almost daily” are displayed.

Experts and academics have described cyberbullying as one of the most harmful risks that youths can experience. This is also shown in Figure 14. Almost 80% of youths that had been the victim of cyberbullying reported feeling bothered by it. Girls (87.4%) feel more bothered by it than boys (66.3%). Feelings of harm after cyberbullying victimization are highest in youths between 13 and 15 years old (84.7%) and youths aged 18 and over (81.4%). Youths from lower SES families (80%) report the most feelings of harm after being cyberbullied, but this number is only slightly higher than the harm that youths from average (73.2%) and high SES families (79.5%) experience.

**Figure 14.** Feelings of harm after cyberbullying

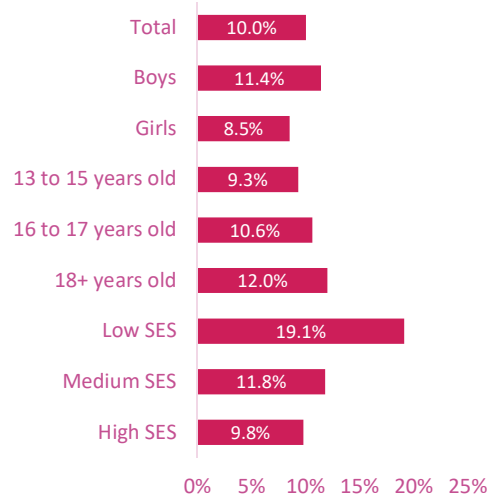


Note: Question: When you think about the LAST TIME that someone treated you in a hurting or mean way ONLINE, how did you feel? Total percentages for responses "I felt a bit upset", "I felt rather upset", and "I felt very upset" are displayed. Base: Youths who were the victim of cyberbullying in the past year.

Figure 15 shows that 10% of youths admit having cyberbullied someone at least on a monthly basis in the past year. Cyberbullying perpetration is more common among boys (11.4%) than girls (8.5%)

and slightly increases as youths grow older. Youths from lower SES families (19.1%) report having cyberbullied someone almost twice as much as youths with higher SES backgrounds.

**Figure 15.** Cyberbullying perpetration at least once a month



Note: Question: In the PAST YEAR, how often did this happen in one of the following ways? – Through a phone or the internet, computer, tablet, etc. Total percentages for responses "At least every month", "At least every week", and "Daily or almost daily" are displayed.

# Coping and resilience

While concerns exist about the harmful outcomes of youths' negative online experiences, it is important to acknowledge that not all youths will experience feelings of harm after these risk experiences.

Previous research has stated that the majority of youths are quite resilient to the negative outcomes of risky internet use (El Asam & Katz, 2018). In the current study, slightly more than a third of Flemish youths (38%) felt bothered by an online experience in the past year.

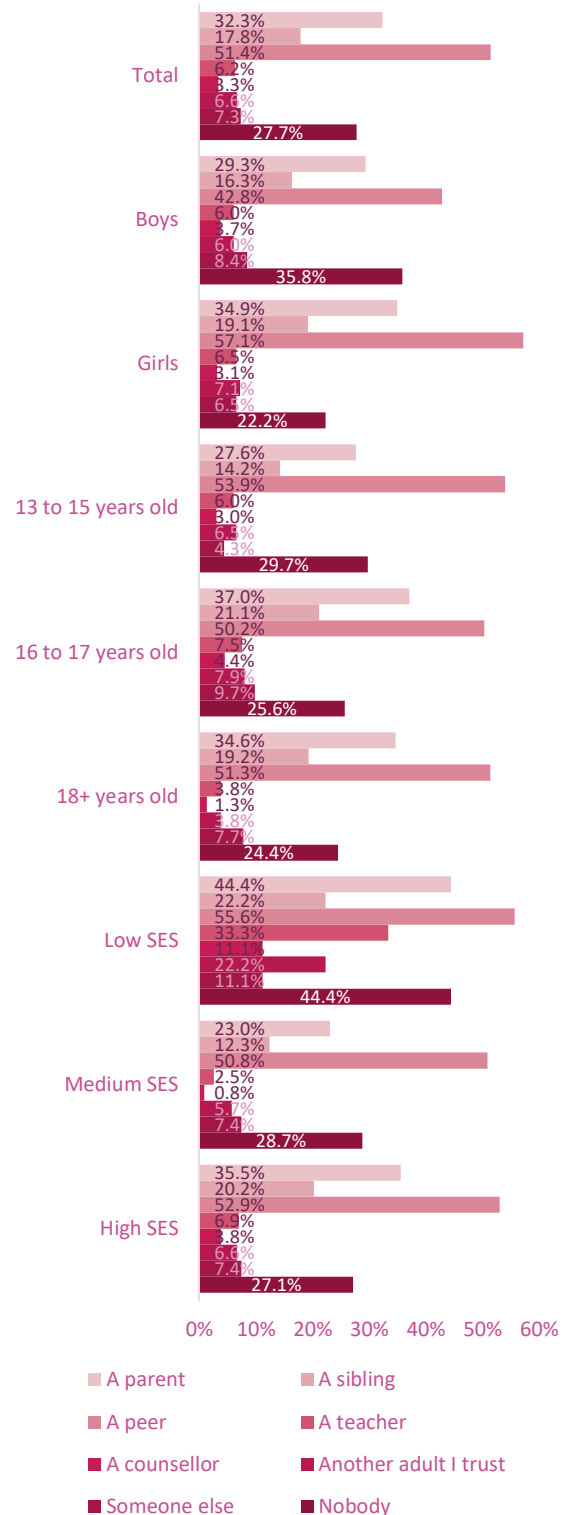
Resilient youths employ communicative or proactive coping strategies and shy away from passive and avoidant strategies to effectively eliminate negative feelings after an online risk experience.

Communicative strategies include finding support from people in the close environment, such as parents and friends, by talking about the negative online experience they encountered. Proactive strategies are aimed at solving the cause of the risk and preventing it from occurring again, such as changing privacy settings or reporting the problem.

Figure 16 contains the findings on youths' use of communicative coping strategies to deal with negative feelings after online risk experiences. Flemish youths predominantly turn to their peers (51.4%) and their parents (32.3%) to find support by talking about their online risk experiences. Siblings (17.8%) are the third source that youths talk to about the online risks they encountered. Teachers, counsellors, other adults or other people are less often consulted when dealing with the negative feelings that youths experience after an online risk.

About a quarter of Flemish youths (27.7%) indicated that they had not talked to anyone after they felt bothered or upset as a result of a negative online experience. More than a third of boys (35.8%) did not talk to anyone about their online risk experiences, compared to only 22.2% of girls. As they grow older, the number of youths that does not talk to anyone about their negative online experiences decreases. Youths from lower SES families (44.4%) were most likely to keep silent about the online risks they experienced compared to youths from average (28.7%) and high SES backgrounds (27.1%).

Figure 16. Communicative coping strategies



Note: Question: *The last time that something happened online that bothered or upset you, have you talked about it with one of these people?* (Multiple answers possible)  
 Base: Youths that had felt bothered by an online experience in the past year.

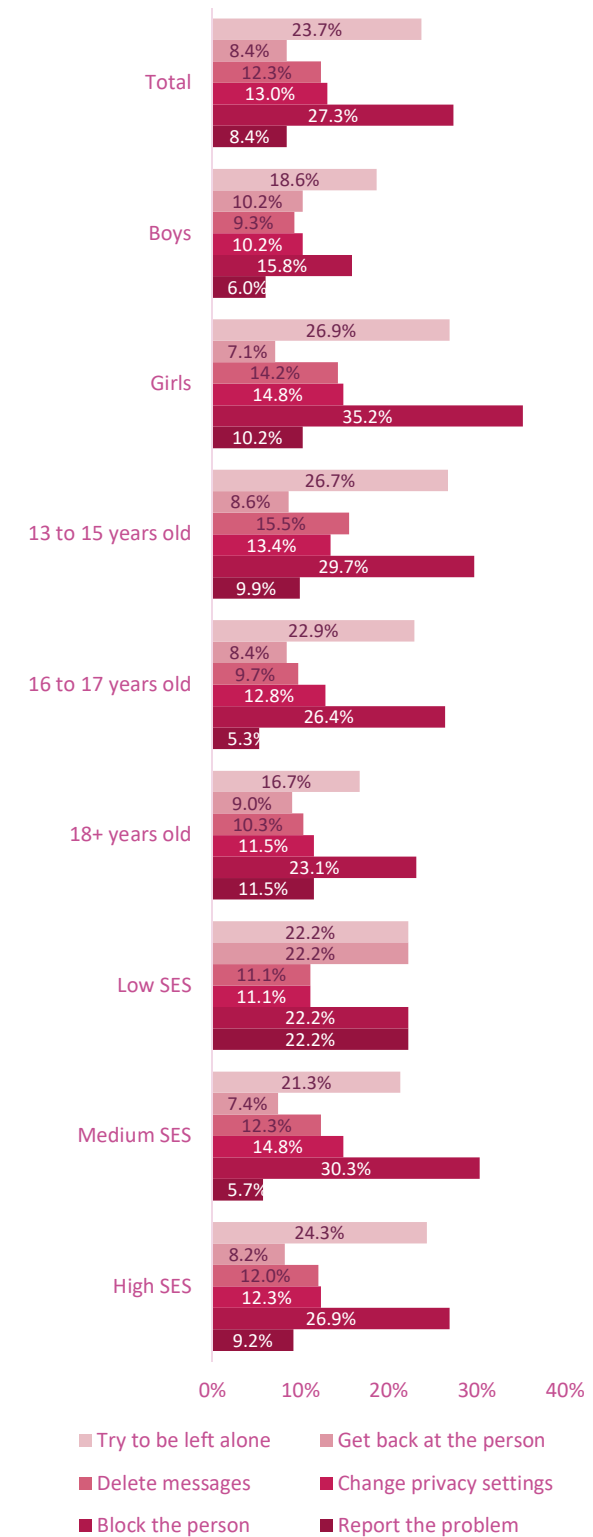
Flemish youths use a variety of proactive coping strategies to prevent and deal with the negative feelings after an online risk experience. Figure 17 reveals that Flemish youths predominantly block the person that is harassing them online (27.3%) and try to be left alone by the person (23.7%). The least popular coping strategies are trying to get back at the person (8.4%) and reporting the problem (8.4%).

Looking at gender, it seems that girls overall employ more proactive coping strategies than boys. While for girls, the most popular strategy is blocking a person (35.2%), boys mainly try to get the person to leave them alone (18.6%). Girls block a person more than twice as much as boys do (15.8%). No large gender differences are observed concerning other proactive coping strategies.

As youths grow older, it seems that they are using certain proactive coping strategies to a slightly lesser extent. For example, blocking a person remains the most popular proactive coping strategies that youths in all age groups employ, but decreases in each group as they get older. A similar pattern can be noticed for trying to be left alone by the person. The use of the remaining proactive coping strategies remains relatively constant throughout youth.

Youths from low SES backgrounds use the different proactive coping strategies that were included more equal compared to youths from average and high SES families. However, it is important to keep in mind that this group only contained 21 respondents in comparison with the larger sample sizes in the medium and high SES groups.

**Figure 17.** Proactive coping strategies



Note: Question: *The last time that you had problems with something or someone online that bothered or upset you in some way, did you do one of these things?* Base: Youths that had felt bothered by an online experience in the past year.

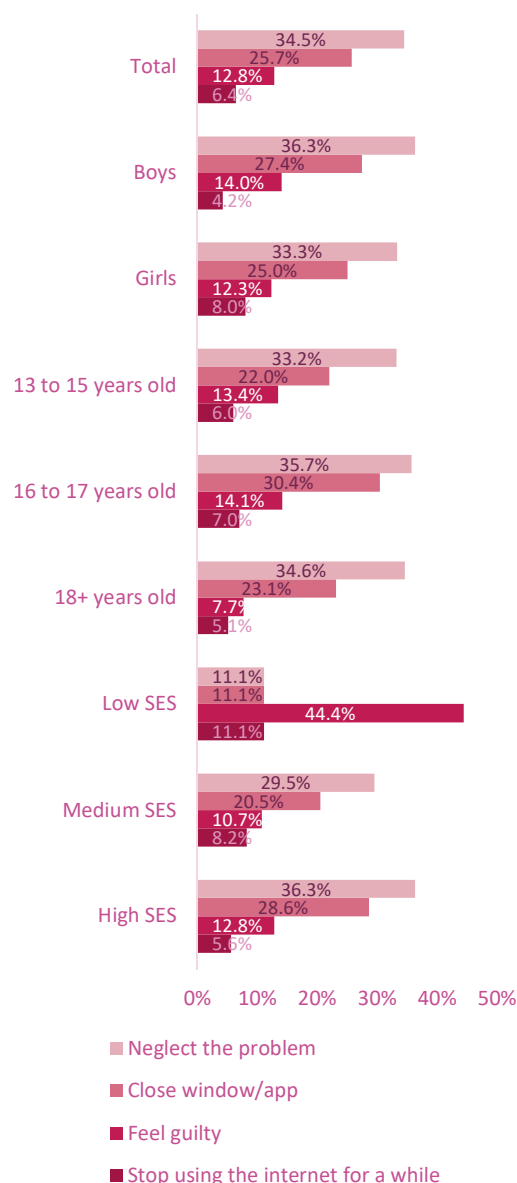
Compared to Figure 17, Figure 18 reveals that Flemish youths mostly use passive coping strategies to deal with negative online experiences. More than a third of Flemish youths (34.5%) said that they neglected the problem and a quarter of them (25.7%) reported that they closed the window or app in which they experienced the online risk. To a lesser extent, Flemish youths report feeling guilty about what happened (12.8%) after an online experience and a minority (6.4%) has stopped using the internet for a while as a result of an online risk experience.

The findings concerning passive coping strategies are relatively equal between boys and girls. For both, neglecting the problem and closing the window or app in which the risk experience took place are the most common passive coping strategies to deal with a negative online experience.

No clear age trend can be distinguished. For Flemish youths of all ages, about a third neglects the problem and about a quarter responds to the risk by closing the window or app in which it took place.

While the findings for youths from average and high SES backgrounds were similar to the Flemish average. Low SES youths, however, report almost four times more feelings of guilt after an online negative experience (44.4%) than youths from average (10.7%) and high SES backgrounds (12.8%). These feelings of guilt are the most prevalent passive coping strategy among youths from low SES families. It is, however, important to keep in mind that the low SES group only consisted of 21 respondents.

**Figure 18.** Passive coping strategies



Note: Question: The last time that you had problems with something or someone online that bothered or upset you in some way, did you do one of these things? Base: Youths that had felt bothered by an online experience in the past year.

# Implications for practice

In the digital age, where youths increasingly spend time online, it has become inevitable that they encounter some risks along the way. Despite concerns from parents and experts, not all youths feel harmed after a negative online experience. The current findings reveal that the majority of youths is quite resilient to negative outcomes from online risks, as only about a third of Flemish youths (38%) generally report feeling bothered or upset after a negative online experience.

The findings in this report lead to three recommendations concerning youths' internet use, their experiences of risk and harm, and their online resilience for parents, educators, and experts in the field.

- Do not excessively monitor children's/youths' internet use with the goal of avoiding risky experiences. In the digital age, it is impossible to prevent negative online experiences. Furthermore, previous research has shown that online risks and opportunities (online activities that are beneficial to youths) go hand in hand (Livingstone & Helsper, 2010). Restricting internet use with the goal of preventing negative experiences also limits the number of online opportunities that are valuable for youths' wellbeing and development.
- Next to limiting online opportunities, attempting to avoid online risks also prevents the development of online resilience. Previous research has shown that exposure to risks is a key factor to learn how to cope with feelings of harm as a result of this risk and to prevent these negative feelings in the future.
- If the child appears to be resilient to feelings of harm after a negative online experience, do not attempt to interfere with their internet use patterns. If the child, however, shows to be less resilient, it is important to provide a safe and welcoming environment that encourages them to start using communicative coping strategies to seek support after an online risk experience.

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