

Cite as:

Smahel, D. Helsper, E. J., Barbovschi, M. & Dedkova, L. (2012) Meeting Online Strangers among European Children. Proceedings of the 15th European Conference on Developmental Psychology. Bologna, Italy, 419-422.

Meeting Online Strangers among European Children

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Summary

This article discusses children contacting new people online and going to face to face meetings with these people. Analyses of the EU Kids Online II project data (2009-2011) showed that older children, girls and more frequent, self-confident communicators are more likely to expand their social circle through contacting new people online. Meeting new people online was also related to sensation seeking, risky offline behaviours, emotional problems and problematic internet-related activities, such as exposure to online sexual content and excessive internet use. Despite this activity is affecting only a small number of children, this could be ground for concern.

Introduction

‘Online predators’ have been high on the list of parental (and public) concerns regarding children’s online safety. The EU Kids online survey gathered data about children communicating with new people online (three in ten of all children), as well as children’s offline meetings with

those people met online (9 per cent of all children). Other surveys reported that about a third of adolescents being contacted online by strangers (Lenhart & Madden, 2007). In addition, connections between communication with strangers and other online risky behaviours have been found (Wolak, Finkelhor, & Mitchell, 2008) as well as links between other types of risky behaviours such as that between Internet addiction and substance abuse (Ko et al., 2006). Within this context, the aim this article is to investigate the factors associated with meeting strangers online and offline, especially other risky activities.

Materials and Methods

EU Kids Online II project surveyed children at home, face to face, and used a self-completion section for sensitive questions. The final sample contained representative subsamples of at least 1,000 9 to 16 year olds from 25 European countries (N = 25,142). The analyses presented here are based on following two questions: “Have you ever had contact on the Internet with someone you have not met face to face before?”, “Have you ever gone on to meet anyone face to face that you first met on the internet in this way?” Details about measures and methods can be found at www.eukidsonline.net (see also Livingstone, Haddon & Görzig, 2012)

Results

Thirty per cent of European children have contact(s) they met online and 23% of children met five or more strangers. Contact with a stranger was often made via Social Networking Sites or Instant Messenger. Nine per cent of European children have met an online contact offline, one per cent were bothered by this experience. This means 11% of those who met an online contact offline were bothered or upset. Younger children aged 9 to 10 were more likely to be bothered; 31% were bothered or upset through meeting a stranger. Among those who were bothered, 27% met someone older and in 22% the stranger had said hurtful things to them (see Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig & Ólafsson, 2011).

Two linear regressions were conducted to understand what predicts meeting strangers online. Gender, age, time online, offline risky behaviour, self-efficacy, emotional problems, and exposure to explicit

sexual material were all predictors (see Table 1). The strongest association was with excessive internet use. Offline meetings with strangers met online was predicted by gender, age, time online, offline risky behaviour, self-efficacy, emotional problems, exposure to explicit sexual material, and excessive internet use (see Table 2).

Conclusion

Meeting strangers online is of considerable public and policy concern. Nice per cent of European children met people offline who they originally met online but only one per cent was bothered or upset by this meeting. Emotional vulnerability, risky offline behaviours and sensation seeking were found to predict meeting people online and, surprisingly, so were higher levels of self-efficacy. It is likely that emotionally vulnerable children have higher social compensation motives (Peter et al, 2005), while children with higher self-efficacy might underestimate the risk of such meetings. Children with high self-efficacy and emotional problems would thus be more at risk of online grooming. Meeting strangers was also associated with excessive internet use and more frequent exposure to online sexual materials, which indicates that general addictive behavior on the internet is a factor associated with social vulnerabilities online as well.

Acknowledgments

This study draws on the work of the EU Kids Online network funded by the EC (DG Information Society) Safer Internet plus Programme (project code SIP-KEP-321803), and was supported by a grant from the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic, MSM0021622406, and the Czech Science Foundation (P407/11/0585).

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Table 1: Factors associated with contacting strangers on the internet Gender

	Beta	B
(Constant)		0.14 **
Gender	0.04	0.04 **
Age of the child	0.10	0.03 **
Population density per square kilometer	-0.04	-0.01 **
How often they are online	0.09	0.08 **
Offline risky behavior (externalisation)	0.06	0.13 **
Self-efficacy	0.09	0.10 **
Sensation seeking	0.08	0.04 **
Emotional problems	0.05	0.07 **
Excessive internet use	0.15	0.42 **
Exposure to explicit sexual materials	0.18	0.09 **
R ²	0.19	
F	171.40	

* p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01

Table 2: Factors associated with offline meetings with strangers from the internet

	Beta	B
(Constant)		0.55 **
Gender	0.04	0.03 **
Age of the child	0.08	0.02 **
Population density per square kilometer	0.00	0.00
How often they are online	0.04	0.02 **
Offline risky behavior (externalisation)	0.14	0.19 **
Self-efficacy	0.04	0.03 **
Sensation seeking	0.09	0.03 **
Emotional problems	0.03	0.02 *
Excessive internet use	0.10	0.19 **
Exposure to explicit sexual materials	0.12	0.04 **
R ²	0.14	
F	114.85	

* p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01