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# Children’s perception of the parental mediation of the risks of the Internet

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## Abstract

**Introduction:** This article addresses the role of the various agents that mediate children’s internet use: parents, teachers and peers such as classmates and friends. **Method.** The study is based on a qualitative approach that involved focus groups and interviews with children aged 9-16, and the analysis of children’s discourses. **Results.** The results focus on children’s perceptions of their relationship with their classmates, friends, teachers and parents in relation to internet use. **Conclusions.** Children show a high degree of awareness about the risks of the internet, and greatly value the support of their friends in solving the problems they find online. However, children do not trust their parents for the mediation of their online activities despite recognising that their parents are those who can help them out the most

## Keywords

Teenagers; childhood; children; internet; social networks; risks.

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Translation by **CA Martínez Arcos**, Ph.D. (Universidad Autónoma de Tamaulipas)

## 1. Introduction

Children's use of new technologies has become a major subject of interest both in the academia (Livingstone and Haddon, 2008; García Jiménez, 2012; Ruiz San Román, Ortiz Sobrino and Porto, 2013) and in the social realm, which has resulted in many interventions from different agents who try to educate the entire population –especially parents and children– about the need to use the internet safely. The risks most commonly identified when talking about children's internet use are the access to inappropriate –violent or pornographic– content, contact with strangers and misuse of the personal data (Hasebrink, Livingstone, Haddon and Ólafsson, 2009).

Adolescence is a period in which people make major adjustments to their internal and external changes they experience, and these changes are also related to the expectations that society puts on adolescents. Many boys and girls experience the transition to adulthood with relative ease. However, it is important to understand the “very obvious” attraction of “some adolescents towards behaviours that cause strong emotions and are potentially dangerous” (Coleman and Hendry, 2003).

Similarly, young people “use” these behaviours to associate themselves with adult behaviour patterns. According to Coleman and Hendry, the adult world has traditionally worried about the use of drugs, alcohol and tobacco among adolescents, and about their involvement in crime and certain sexual behaviours, which are inappropriate elements for people who are going through a process of growth and aim to create an image of maturity as a means to increase attractiveness and sociability. “Like adults, adolescents often adopt behaviours in the belief that it will help them to achieve some desired end, such as pleasure or their peer acceptance. When doing so, is likely they will ignore or set aside the evidence showing that these particular behaviours can pose a potential threat to them” (Coleman and Hendry, 2003).

Understanding risk as the “possibility for human actions or other circumstances to involve consequences that affect different aspects that are valued by people”, Klinke and Renn (2002) distinguish this concept from that of damage. Evidence of risk is not, in itself, evidence of actual damage (Hasebrink *et al.*, 2009) and comparative statistics show an incidence of very different damages suffered on the internet by children according to the various risks and levels of use, as well as diverse reactions to respond to heterogeneous situations. Moreover, research on the risks faced by young people on the internet should pay attention to their capacity to overcome potentially dangerous situations (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008).

In any case, there is a growing consensus on the need to train children to be able to cope with the risks of the internet by themselves and on the idea that excessively restrictive strategies to limit these

risks may adversely affect the enjoyment of the opportunities of the internet (Garmendia, Garitaonandia, Martínez and Casado, 2012).

Faced with this problem, parents and educational agents appear to be the main responsible agents for the training of young people in this area. However, the relative lack of knowledge about the internet –although in decline– among many parents (Dowdell, 2012) and the limitations of schools, both in infrastructure and staff in this regard, prevent us from reaching the desirable levels of a media literacy that is critical enough (Buckingham, 2010) and adjusted to the ever-changing situation of media consumption.

We should also take into account the fact that adults are not the only sources of information for children about the internet. Online activities have a significant impact on the development of children's social, cultural and educational competences, i.e., “on the way they communicate, consume, work, study, collaborate and solve problems” (Sánchez-Navarro and Aranda, 2011). In this context, information of all kinds (cultural, professional, technical) is informally shared among the communities of children who acquire skills often by themselves and disseminate information and turn it into a social capital-network, understood as the knowledge produced and shared by and within the community.

In this process, peers –classmates and friends– and other family members –cousins and siblings– constitute a crucial element to understand children's internet use, which has been hardly researched (Livingstone and Haddon, 2008) and is undoubtedly related to children's own perception of risks.

Based on qualitative research, this article exposes children's own perception of the parental mediation of the use and risks of the internet, and compares it with children's perception of the role of peers in that area. The article first offers a review of the literature on the role of the main mediation agents; then explains the methodological approach of the study; and finally presents the main results and conclusions of the research.

## **2. State of the art review**

Children's internet consumption is mediated primarily by three types of agents: their parents, teachers and peers (classmates, friends, siblings and cousins), whose role and influence vary depending on the relationship that each individual maintains with the internet. Of these three mediating agents, parental mediation has been probably the most analysed (Byrne and Lee, 2011; Gentile, Nathanson, Rasmussen, Reimer and Walsh, 2012; Lee and Chae, 2012; Lwin, Stanaland, Miyazaki, 2008; Marciales and Cabra, 2011; Tabone and Messina, 2010; Valcke, Bonte, De Wever and Rots, 2010).

In this sense, we should bear in mind that traditionally most media consumption occurred at home so that the role of parents has been always considered crucial. In fact, as Gabelas and Marta (2008) point out in their study carried out in Aragon (Spain), 93.7% of parents consider that the work of educating their children on the proper use of screens is theirs. Of them, 40.7% believes that this responsibility lies exclusively with them; 33.3% believes this responsibility should be shared with the school; and 22.8% considers that it should be a tripartite responsibility.

However, different factors are increasingly complicating parental mediation. On the one hand, the “structural changes that have occurred in the family model explain the changes occurred in the family dynamics towards more ‘democratic’ parental mediation” styles (Pasquier, Simoes and Kredens, 2012). In fact, if we examine the results of the EU Kids Online survey we can see a prevalence of active parental mediation styles, which prefer dialogue and co-use over restrictive types of mediation, both at the national and European level (Garmendia, Garitaonandia, Martínez and Casado, 2012). Although it is true that other studies carried out in Spain (Frutos and Vázquez, 2012) found lower incidence of these active mediation styles, this is largely due to the different definitions of the concept of mediation and its classifications (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008).

The development of ICTs has led to individualised consumption which subsequently complicates parental mediation. The nature of the internet makes it harder for parents to use it together with their children, which is easier to do with television. Access to the internet via mobile devices is growing significantly. Several studies point to the increased penetration of mobile phones among young people (FAD, 2012; INE, 2014). In fact, Spain is one of the European countries with greatest penetration of smartphones [1] and mobile internet [2].

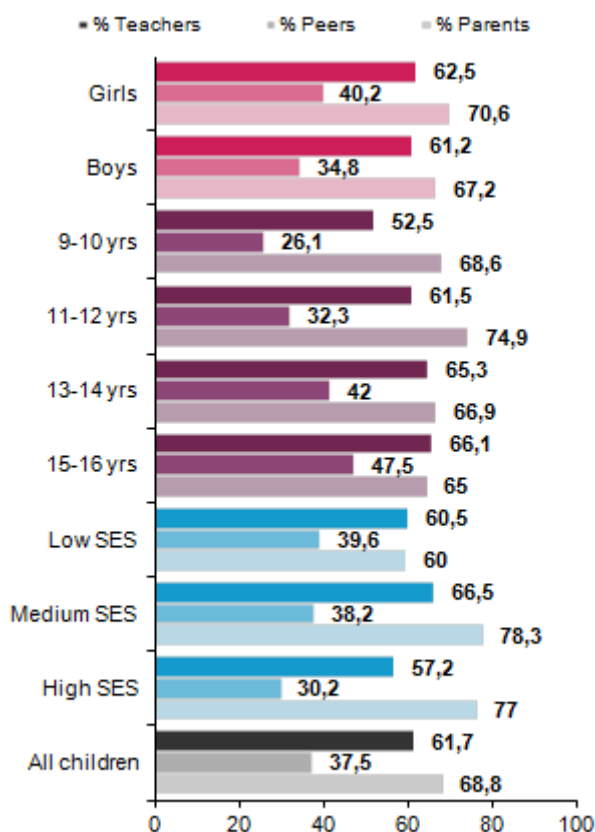
In other European countries, internet access is also increasing in mobile phones and tablets and increasingly in younger age groups –Mascheroni and Ólafsson (2013) use the term “post-desktop media ecology” [3] to refer to this phenomenon–. This move towards mobile devices highlights the need for further scientific research that takes into account the behaviour of school-age children.

While parental mediation occurs at home, teacher mediation occurs within the school environment, in a formal context and is carried out by agents –teachers– that play an institutional role. The importance of the work of schools largely lies in their ability to reach all children.

Although the statistical information in this field can become outdated quickly, we cannot forget that quantitative research on internet and children focuses on the identification of trends, and in this case specific, on the ways adolescents face risks on the internet, which does not vary at the same pace than the penetration of tools and devices.

In this sense, the EU Kids Online survey (Livingstone, Haddon and Görzig, 2011) shows the relevance of teachers as sources of information to avoid risks on the internet. Although nearly 40% of the children surveyed claimed they have not received any advice for safe internet use, after parents, teachers were an important source of information in this regard (see the following Figure).

**Figure 1. Teachers, classmates and parents who have advised children about safe internet use in Spain, according to children**



Source: Livingstone, Haddon and Görzig, 2011.  
 Base: 9-16 year-old Spanish children who use the internet.

However, children do not trust teachers enough to tell them about any serious problem or situation they find online. Table 1 shows how all children who were bothered by any of the risks of the internet (sexual images, bullying, sexual messages or meeting online contacts –strangers) talked about it to a friend, more than to their parents, and much more than to their teachers [4].

In addition, we should take into account that this results are from 2010 and that the penetration of mobile devices has further limited the role of teachers and parents and, at the same time, strengthen the role of peers. In fact, as Pasquier (2008) points out, some studies on youth culture highlight the erosion of the guiding role of parents and the increasingly important role of peers. As Espinosa and Ochaíta confirm, “children and adolescents recognise that their preferred partners to talk about these issues are friends and siblings” (2002). The recent qualitative study of Martínez Pastor, García Jiménez, and Sendín Gutiérrez in Spain (2013) also reinforces this line by referring to the “indirect control” older siblings can exercise on their younger siblings’ internet surfing and habits.

**Table 1. Who the child talked to after being affected by internet risks?**

People the child talked to	Sexual images	Bullying	Sexual messages	Meeting online contacts
Talked to anybody at all	53	77	60	62
A friend	33	52	38	35
Mother or father	25	42	30	28
Brother or sister	9	14	9	11
Another trusted adult	5	9	5	10
A teacher	3	7	3	6
Someone whose job is to help children	1	2	2	2

Source: Authors' own creation with data from Livingstone *et al.*, 2011.

Base: European children aged 9-16 who use the internet and have faced these risk situations.

In comparison to parents and teachers, peer mediation involves children with a shared understanding and experience of media use. As explained by Marta Lazo, “peers acquire special relevance in this age in which mutual respect develops between classmates and friends, along with cooperation in different tasks” (2005). In fact, in the case of television consumption, for example, Orozco pointed out how children “negotiate with peers their provisional meanings of what they watched on television the previous day and television continues to be an important reference for their games or a simple object of their conversation” (1996).

During childhood the mother –more than the father– appears as the main figure of support for children, but as children grow into adolescence peers acquire as much or more importance than parents as a source of support in the presence of any problems (Brown, 2001). As Nikken and de Graaf (2013) point out, peers provide adolescents the opportunity to acquire knowledge and skills that they can hardly acquire from a relationship with their fathers or mothers, especially in the field of intimacy, sexuality and relationship management. This means that on many occasions parents do not intervene in the online activities of their children and, as noted in recent studies (Byrne, Katz, Lee, Linz and Mcilrath, 2014), are hardly aware of risks experienced online by them.

As an example of the “role of peers”, the work of Kalmus, Runnel and Siibak (2009) points out that these are the main source of information about new opportunities on the internet, and that this influence is essential when creating a profile in a given social networking site or participating in a blog. In this case, we can also point out a difference in terms of gender, given that “the support of teachers and peers is slightly more important for girls than for boys in relation to the improvement of their digital skills. This can be explained because girls tend to have less confidence in their digital skills and are more responsive to help in this field” (Kalmus, Von Feilitzen and Siibak, 2012).

Bringué and Sádaba (2008) indicate that “access outside home involves the lack of supervision (...) or technical support that limit access to certain contents or enable subsequent monitoring (...)”. Since this is one of the trends in internet use, it is worth reflecting on how to promote autonomy in children



and young people as well as critical thinking towards today's new media. Taking into account these aspects, and based on qualitative approach, we formulated the following three research questions:

RQ1: How do children perceive the role of their parents and teachers in the mediation of their relationship with the internet?

RQ2: What role do children assign to peers in the learning of routines for safe internet surfing?

RQ3: What strategies do children perceive as effective to manage online risk situations?

### 3. Methods

Although the quantitative fieldwork carried out by the EU Kids Online research network (Livingstone *et al.*, 2011) aimed to establish the prevalence of the online risks, according to the classification formulated by Hasebrink (Hasebrink *et al.*, 2009); the qualitative fieldwork presented here aims to delve into children's perception of these risks. In other words, this study aims to examine from the point of view of the participants these risky situations and the ways they perceive them the different mediating actors (Burgess, 1984). In this sense, the qualitative approach prioritises the internal validity of the results. Its main objective is not, therefore, to generalise the results to other groups but to explain the phenomena, subjects and contexts under study (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983).

Fieldwork was carried out from March 2013 to June 2014 and focused on studying in depth the perceptions of Spanish children aged 9-16, i.e. children enrolled in the last years of primary school and in secondary school. The objective was to cover the 9 to 16 age group, differentiated by gender, and in three age groups: 9-10, 11-13 and 14-16. A total of 12 focus groups and 24 in-depth interviews were carried out. Four focus groups were carried out for each age group –two with girls and two with boys– and eight additional individual interviews –four with girls and four with children–.

The recruitment of children was carried out through eight selected schools, where the fieldwork was carried out, respecting the geographical diversity and plurality of the Spanish educational system. After selecting the schools, we contacted their schools' principals to inform them of the objectives of the research and ask them to select children to be interviewed. The focus group sessions lasted an average of 76 minutes, while the interviews lasted about an hour. The interviews and focus groups were guided by a list of open questions about the internet use and the perception of risks. To preserve the anonymity of the children interviewed, the results only refer to respondents' gender (boy or girl) and age group.

The focus groups and interviews were recorded and transcribed and then systematically encoded according to a list of categories, in order to classify the content extracted from the fieldwork and to respond to different research objectives: direct and indirect experiences with online risks; emotional and attitudinal impact of online risks; perception, knowledge and opinions about the risks of the internet; prevention and management of online risks; online activities; mediation of and interventions

in children's online activities by other people; and learning and educational opportunities and skills, and identified opportunities for the internet use and established categories.

In addition, a second coding and analysis was carried out according to the following variables: potentially problematic situations (meeting with online contacts, bullying and harassment, sexual images, unwanted content, annoying commercial content and technical problems, and health and addiction), access platforms (social networking sites, email, chats, websites, mobile, platforms, tablets, video games) and actors involved (friends, peers, siblings and relatives, parents, teachers, media). Both analyses were compared and employed for the discourse analysis by areas and the formulation of conclusions. This article focuses on the content referred to mediation in a generic way, which involved siblings and relatives, peers (friends and classmates), parents and teachers, although other types of relevant information were also into consideration.

## 4. Analysis

### 4.1. Children's perception of parental and school mediation

The references to parents in the discourse of children were grouped together based on two ideas: regulation and warnings. Firstly, and particularly in the case of younger children, parents usually appear to control their relationship with the internet, which translates into control of time of access and the more or less explicit prohibition to access content deemed unsuitable.

I don't use the internet for gaming a lot, because I'm almost never alone, only on weekends... my sister also likes Friv, we find a game and play together. And I don't watch videos a lot. They almost never let me (boy, 9).

I have been told to be careful with the internet, that there are sites I shouldn't visit, and that if they saw me watching those sites I would be punished, for example, with a month without Nintendo (boy, 10).

I've got a computer in my room, but my father watches over me. For example, when I'm looking for something, they watch over me, so that I don't look anything like that... They are near me. I'm in my room, I have the door open, and my parents come from time to time (boy, 12).

I can't download Google Chrome because my mother won't let me do it... she says I'm going to download shit on the computer and slow it down (boy, 14).

And she has an app that lets her see what her daughter is doing. I mean, she is super controlled because whenever she does something she has to be very careful because her mother is watching over her via the tablet. And this application is useful for many things, especially to know whether she is watching nasty videos (girl, 10).



Parents are perceived as agents that regulate access in terms of time and type of content and as vigilantes who should be avoided, as much as possible and more and more as children get older. When discussing the role of their parents in relation to internet use children mentioned that they try to ban their parents from their social networks; close the webpages they are watching whenever their parents come near them if the former senses this will lead to a reprimand; and delete their browsing history.

I think that there are some kinds of rules and that we shouldn't do some things... and the first is of these things is: do not add your parents to your Facebook, so that they do not know what you do (boy, 15).

Secondly, and less frequently, children mentioned that their parents have talked to them about safe internet use and risk management on the internet. Some of them claim their parents have installed specific filters and some have shared supposedly effective warnings and basic rules for the safe internet use by children. In some cases, it is quite striking to confirm how many children have appropriated a paternal alarmist discourse that groups together the alleged risks associated with the internet as a single, much more generic danger that is not strictly linked to ICT.

Parents, whether deliberately or not, convey the idea that children should not establish online relations with strangers or provide personal information to strangers to prevent abductions and kidnappings. The risks of becoming a victim of grooming, bullying, phishing and the risks related to the management of personal data or encounters with online contacts are concealed under the fear of "kidnapping" which, even though does not have a direct relation with most risks derived from unsafe internet use, is a direct, easy-to-understand and effective image.

Yes (my parents allow me to use social networking sites), but only as long as I do not upload photos, because kidnappers could start chatting with me... That's what my parents have told me... that and that I should not chat with people I don't know. They do not want me talking to strangers in case they are kidnappers, and want to meet up with me (boy, 12).

Because they can just say 'come to this neighbourhood, blah, blah, blah' and kidnap me or whatever (boy, 9).

Yes, and sometimes it is dangerous because people know that you are not at home and go and break in. And when you post a picture, you can no longer control it. As soon as you post it, you can no longer control it (boy, 9).

Children's not very *realistic* view of the potential risks of the internet is also reinforced by the fact that most school activities related to internet safety are lectures, conferences and meetings with police. Barnard-Wills (2012) analyses the case of education about internet safety given by police in the United Kingdom, and points out the limitations of an exclusively police discourse that focuses on concrete particularly extreme situations. In addition, according to Martínez, Sendín and García, in

the eyes of children these perspectives do “not provide new knowledge” (2013) and consider the presentations on online safety for children aged 13 to 16 years contain excessively childish content.

In some presentations they show us drawings for little children, if you get a little more serious (girl, 13).

The last presentation about technology was a cartoon showing than a woman showing her tits, taking a picture and sending it to a male friend, who then sent it to the whole world. That was it, nothing more. They always teach us like this, with cartoons (boy, 15).

With regards to school, children are aware of the different policies in relation to internet access and dissemination of contents, which vary from school to school. Teachers are given the responsibility to regulate. Their role is comparable to that of parents: they monitor and may mediate conflicts that occurred inside the school, mostly cases of cyber bullying. However, the older children get the less they are trusted to use the internet properly. In a short period of time adults cease to be perceived as managers of internet access, those who install filters and “always catch you” (boy, 9-10 years old) and decide whether contents are appropriate or not.

- It is because there are some teachers who are a little awkward.
- Teachers know the basics, what you have been told about how this and that.
- Children know more because they know more programs.
- Although they are older I think we have more experience with computers, we use them more. We know more about technology (boys, 11-12-13).
- I believe that it should be us who give the lectures (girl, 14).

This perception, and the finding that still many parents ask their children for help to search content on the internet and download films and still feel uncomfortable in the social networking environment, feeds the image of children as empowered subjects in a world of little skilled adults whose control becomes easier to avoid as children get older.

Regarding the media, their often alarmist discourse is accepted by parents and children themselves end up internalising it. The case of Amanda Todd, a Canadian teen whose suicide in 2012 was attributed to cyberbullying through Facebook and was widely covered in the print media and television, is often mentioned by the interviewed children, particularly girls, as an example of the dangers associated with the internet.

#### **4.2. Peer learning**

In a context in which neither the school nor the parents appear to respond to the expectations regarding internet use, as children transition into adolescence their network of friends and classmates is perceived as the main source of information. Online content is disseminated in the classroom and among circles of friends and acquaintances and this contributes to the popularity of online tools and platforms. The type of shared content and the way it is assimilate varies across each age group. Thus, children, for whom YouTube videos are the most attractive content on the internet, usually watch (with company), recommend and discuss the most eye-catching (funniest or shocking) videos. As

users get older the assimilation, sharing and use of social networking sites and the knowledge is shaped by what their peers do or prefer. In this sense, peers turn out to be a mobilising force.

A video I showed them some time ago was the one they showed us in class [some time later]. It's called 'Cow Matrix'... [which seems to be known also by other children]. It is about a cow that fights a guy and it is hilarious (boy, 9).

- This comes in trends. Lately, since this summer many people have started to open accounts (in Ask).
- You see other people have them [online accounts/profiles] and you say "all right, I'm going to do it too".
- For example, I had a Twitter account long time ago, but didn't use it, as I didn't know well how to use it. Then they began to use it, and asked me to "try it"... and now I do like it (girls, 11, 12, 13).

Shared discovery and consumption, thus, support learning and management of online content and tools. The activity of peers is an element that encourages children's incorporation into various social networks and a source of help when children cannot use these platforms.

The girls from my class have WhatsApp, they have groups, and girlfriends there. And they say "come on, download it, download it" (girl, 9).

Since many people have it, you want to have it too... you want to follow the trend (boy, 11).

There are social networks with people you don't know and they post videos: Omegle for example. One of my classmates has it and video-chats with strangers. It is called Omegle (boy, 14).

Moreover, this primary source of socialisation can promote or discourage the consumption of materials considered to be conflicting. Images of sexual nature are probably considered the biggest taboo. The prevalence of this perception among of younger children is reinforced by the elusive and evasive terms they use to refer to this type of content: "those images", "filthy images", "things that should not be talked about" (girl, 9-10). This approach occurs among boys, who assimilate the tendency to concealment, and girls of all age groups, who mention that they occasionally receive pornographic comments or images from people of their own age in order to make feel uncomfortable. As boys age, the consumption of pornography becomes implicitly accepted among peers, which does not mean that the taboo disappears, but that the attitude of classmates and friends modulates its perception: watching pornography goes from being perceived as wrong and shameful to a hidden but real and widespread activity.

Internet consumption in the company of peers helps children to understand and interpret the contents accessed, and to include them in conversations and the popular knowledge. Thus, the shared knowledge of reality or the specific cases of risks associated with the internet is part of the daily lives

of children, who are aware that there is a universe of possibilities on the internet and to which all people around them has standardised and easy access.

The analysis of some interventions shows that it depends on the circle of contacts of each child whether children's use of social networks will be problematic or not. The circle of peers is, according to this perception, which determines the level of risk that each child will face in the use of social networks. On the other hand, it should be emphasised that shared experiences with friends, like participating in online chats with strangers, are understood as activities that involve some risks. The power of the group invites children to assume those risks.

I do have used Chatroulette [5], for a laugh, because there are many people in there doing funny things. So I use it with friends and we started to laugh at them. There are people who are maybe in their house and we ask them to do something stupid and they do it (girls, 14).

When you have a night-in your girlfriends, we are silly, seating there, and suddenly one of us jumps and says 'Let's do this... but let's not show our faces', because we never show our face. At least when I do I don't show my face, we only show from the nose down. It is difficult to recognise us this way. And we start laughing, greeting people, or watch men who say "take off your shirt or whatever..." And we respond "What are you saying? You are crazy...!" (girls, 12).

In addition, peers may be effective in the instruction of practices and in raising awareness about the attitudes and behaviours that should be avoided:

I did upload some pics to my profile, but I don't do that anymore. My classmate explained to me some things... and I uploaded a photo, or they tagged me in one, but then I removed it (...) because this friend told me that you can have problems with that (boy, 15).

On the other hand, friends also weave a network of solidarity and support that is used as a refuge in uncomfortable or problematic situations. Peers, friends and classmates, constitute a pillar in these problematic situations, and they *report* these situations in the self-control mechanisms provided by the own social networks as an initial measure of protest:

We all reported it...because if only one person reports it they won't remove it... So I told my friends about it (girl, 12).

In any case, probably the most substantial element in peer learning is the knowledge of more or less close conflicts related to the internet, which children experience as they join social networks. These cases serve as topics of discussion and for the development of criteria on how to act in similar situations. Thus, the difficulties and tensions that are experienced by children's friends, acquaintances or classmates, and transcend their inner circles, become leaning experiences that are shared, discussed and commented on.

This type of vicar knowledge seems to be much stronger in the discourses of children than the experiences or teachings shared in this regard by families or schools, and appear to become learning lessons that are very useful to deal with the future problems they may face. These are fields of training based on situations perceived as real, feasible and close.

The findings explained so far also apply to siblings and cousins, which are understood as a particular type of peers. However, we confirmed that the family element appears to produce a significant nuance. Returning to the point made by Martínez, Sendín and García (2013), children with older siblings receive a kind of indirect control from these, and this control comes with timely and informal assistance about services, pages or modes of use. In their role of siblings and cousins, children learn or simply observe the activity of the older ones, receive their help, and in any case, have a close reference they consider reliable and respectable.

I ask my sister for help when I need to download my games (boy, 10).

My sister [tells me] that when I get a mobile [phone] I should not talk to strangers (boy, 9).

My siblings have many contacts in Tuenti and things like that, so they tell ask to be very carefully with the photos I post, and say I should first get permission from the people [that appear in the picture], because it happened to a girl and now she is destroyed (girl, 10).

Moreover, the participant children mention that when they have younger siblings and cousins they worry about the quality of the content watched by the youngest relatives, who are perceived as more vulnerable.

What worries me is that my little cousins, being so little, will search for anything as soon as their parents lend them the mobile or the computer (girl, 12).

In these cases, children assume two things. First, they assume that the internet is a potentially dangerous platform whose use requires people to take preventions and precautions, and second, that children do not have knowledge of the alleged risks they will have to face, nor criteria to manage them.

#### **4.2. Risk management strategies and assessment of their effectiveness**

Based on the assumption that using the internet involves certain risks that can become real problems, some of these risks will tend to be assumed under the protection of peers, siblings and classmates. They are the main source of information and reference and encouragement and incentive for the discovery of new content and platforms. However, children do not perceive their peers as the most effective agents in the solving of serious problems.

Most children believed that when children face a serious online problem, which for them tend to be theft and dissemination of videos and pictures that can damage their public image (basically as a result of sexting), they must share their anguish with someone, because “to deal with this secretly, or by yourself hurts you much more than if you tell your parents and they help you” (girl, 14). This position is based on the idea that children must share their suffering and ask for help to solve their problem.

In the case of aggression which originated or developed in schools, as in the case of a boy who was photographed while several classmates stripped naked in front of the girls –“before they photographed while he was pissing and posted it on Tuenti” (girl, 14)–, children tend to take for granted that the responsibility of these schools is to mediate the conflicts between victim and offender. In this regard, in the interviews and focus groups children narrated several cases of intervention by the school management, which involved parents and even leads to the temporary expulsion of offenders.

Children’s interventions suggest that children understand that schools have the responsibility to manage conflicts between students. However, when faced with problems, children do not seem to trust the school. In general, teachers are not understood as a figure of mediation to take into account in the event of a conflict, and when the school’s management is involved it is because the aggression took place there or because the offenders have been identified and children expect them to be punished. Children do not suggest, at least not spontaneously, that turning to teachers for help is a valid option for them. And this possibility is overshadowed by the risk of reprisals.

When the origin of aggression is not easy to identify and the aim is to stop the dissemination of nude images obtained through a webcam or disseminated by ex-boyfriends or ex-girlfriends, children believe that the situation must be managed by the police. And this means to inform parents, which in turn means facing a shameful situation.

The following fragment is particularly enlightening with respect to what can be done when control is lost over a photograph whose dissemination wants to be avoided:

- I would talk with my parents, and ask someone for help.
- I would ask the offender to please delete it and not to be such a bad person to post it on the internet.
- I would go to the police directly.
- Well, I would maybe also talk to my parents.
- I think my parents would make a bigger drama. It would be worse (...) I don’t know. I think I would tell my parents...
- What would tell them? Would you tell them you took a picture of yourself naked?
- That’s the problem, isn’t it?
- That’s exactly what they would have a problem with. “Why were you doing that?” (girls, 11, 12, 13).



Children have grown up with some awareness, more or less explained at home, that there are things that should not be made on the internet: like visiting inappropriate pages, having contact with strangers or posing nude in front of the web camera.

It could search for dirty things, images (...) but I didn't want them to know... If someone would get closer I would close the page, but the truth is that when I'm doing something good I don't watch those things, so if I close it is because they would suspect. I happened to me last year and my dad found out and didn't let me see dirty things and use the computer during that year (boy, 10 years).

My brother told me that he had received [a banner with sexual content] but I didn't tell anyone. Not to my parents because they could think my brother had visited those kinds of pages and that why he received that banner (girl, 9).

My mother would say "what are you doing talking to this and that person"... (girl, 12).

Facing the consequences of taking risks implies shame (because in most cases the problems are of a sexual nature), fear (of the response from parents), punishment, reprimand and disappointment. That is why most children prevent at all costs parents from knowing about internet-related problems and prefer to share the anguish with friends.

However, children believe this is not particularly effective on a practical level. And in fact, we confirmed that effectiveness is associated with parents, assuming that they know how to handle the situation. When children make reference to their behaviour in real cases in which their friends have asked advice or assistance, their suggestion for the victims is precisely to tell their parents:

I told her to tell her father, and she said 'no, no I'm going to tell him' (girl, 12).

That is what happened to my sister, who did not want to tell them [parents]. But a friend of hers and I convinced her and at the end she understood... she didn't want to tell them because she was afraid they would tell her off, because the problem was pictures of her posted on the internet (girl, 12).

When it comes to safety they [parents] really know better than us. We can know more about computers, but when it comes to the consequences they know more than us. That's why sometimes it's good to listen to them and to think about what they say. Because they know more than you about life; they have had more experiences; they know other cases (girl, 15).

## 5. Conclusions

Children are aware of the importance of their parents as regulators of their access to certain contents on the internet, particularly in the phases in which navigation is incorporated. However, as children

grow, the role of the parental figures loses relevance in favour of the influence peers acquire in the discovery of online content and platforms.

The analysis of children's testimonies suggests that friends and classmates play a fundamental role in regards to the use of ICT and the internet in particular. However, friends and classmates also seem to be an important element when it comes to take risks and adopt behaviours with known possible negative consequences. As a general rule, children know about many of the risks associated to the internet and some of them take those risks. However, children do not always admit to adults that they have disobeyed, or acted in a reckless way, because they fear to their parents' reaction and because some behaviours that imply that they have challenged some of the implicit and explicit prohibitions set by their parents.

In the majority of cases, it would be violent for children to appeal to their parents when facing a serious problem, but children still attributed greater efficiency to their parents when it comes to dealing with the problem or see talking to them as a previous step before reporting the problem to the police. Children claim they need "someone who can help, understand and listen to them and not someone who is always reminding them what they did wrong" (girl, 12). Still, for the final management of their problems, children trust parents, and not peers, who are a source of learning, because parents are perceived to be the most efficient in solve conflicts.

However, and given that there is evidence that on some occasions friends are the most immediate option to solve problematic situations, it should be emphasised the need for children to get to know the tools and resources they need, not only for self-protection, but also to be able to help each other if necessary. Basic measures of caution, such as not meeting online contacts without company, shall be known and spread as much as possible, taking advantage of the influence of peers and the trust placed in them.

The new problems that derived from the introduction and widespread use of mobile internet among children make it advisable to strengthen communication and channels of trust between adolescents and adults, and to establish other ways for children to feel safe to raise the different problems they can face on the internet. In the same way, it seems essential to advance in the vindication of the concept of media competence as a need, and to go beyond the traditional demand for an education programme that, in general terms, educates children on how to critically consume information. Today, more than ever, internet users, regardless of their age, are responsible for the content they constantly generate on the new platforms and, in the same way, should be aware of the consequences of their activity and know how to manage them.

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## 6. Notes

[1] <http://www.prnoticias.com/index.php/marketing/1105-publicaciones-e-informes-prmarketing/20120961-espana-pais-con-mayor-penetracion-de-smartphones-en-eu5-con-un-66-de-los-usuarios-de-movil>

[2] <http://www.europapress.es/portaltic/Internet/noticia-penetracion-usuarios-Internet-movil-espana-alcanza-84-2013-20131219120549.html>

[3] According to the work of the European NetChildrenGoMobile network, European children (from Denmark, Italy, the United Kingdom and Romania) aged 9 to 16, access the internet through *smartphones* more than through desktop computers (53% vs. 34%, respectively).

[4] In this case, the data refer to the whole European sample, because the Spanish sample was small and the subgroup of Spanish children who reported being bothered by internet-related problems was not statistically significant.

[5] Chatroulette is an online chat website that pairs random people for webcam-based conversations.

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