

Book Review: Children, Risk and Safety on the Internet: Research and Policy Challenges in Comparative Perspective

by blog admin

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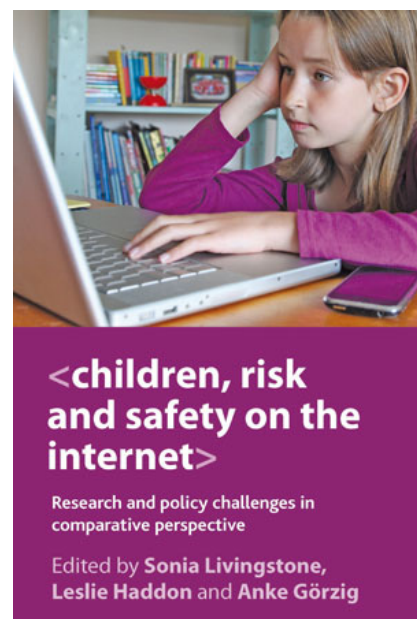
*This book examines the prospect of enhanced opportunities for learning, creativity and communication set against the fear of cyberbullying, pornography and invaded privacy by both strangers and peers. It argues that, in the main, children are gaining the digital skills, coping strategies and social support they need to navigate this fast-changing terrain; but it also identifies the struggles they encounter, pinpointing those for whom harm can follow from risky online encounters. **Lisa Jones** finds this book's overall framework is a refreshing one, given the level of alarm that often surrounds discussions of youth internet safety.*



Children, Risk and Safety on the Internet: Research and Policy Challenges in Comparative Perspective. Sonia Livingstone, Leslie Haddon, and Anke Görzig (eds.) Policy Press. July 2012.

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Public fears that new technology might result in corruptive and dangerous outcomes for children is not a new phenomenon. Some of these fears seem silly in retrospect: in the 1940s and 50s, for example, concerns about a link between comic books and juvenile delinquency culminated in televised U.S. congressional hearings. But the rapidity with which the internet has become integrated into children's lives has brought a new wave of anxieties for parents today that feels very real. Stories of internet predators, cyberbullies and sexting fill media headlines regularly. How do parents and teachers weigh these risks, while also providing children with opportunities to build critical computer and internet literacy skills? *Children, Risk and Safety on the Internet*, edited by [Sonia Livingstone](#), [Leslie Haddon](#), and [Anke Görzig](#) provides detailed information from a sophisticated, cross-national European survey on the size and nature of internet risks for youth, and finds that they may be lower than many parents might guess.



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The book's overall framework is a refreshing one, particularly given the level of alarm that often surrounds discussions of youth internet safety. The authors begin the book by arguing that in order to understand risks, a research-based theoretical understanding is needed that defines the scope of youth internet use against the rates of negative and positive outcomes. They also remind readers of the relationship between risk and resilience — and challenge us to consider that a small level of risk may actually improve resiliency in children as they learn to navigate new and unexpected experiences. The methodology chapters highlight how carefully the study was conducted, an impressive undertaking considering the complexity of cross-national research. And the remaining chapters provide important summaries for students, policy makers, educators, and others interested in research on social networking, bullying, excessive internet use and parental, teacher and peer influence on internet safety.

The EU Kids Online survey results confirm the sense many have that the internet is increasingly ubiquitous in children's lives. Children are spending a large amount of time online, communicating with each other, gaming, using social networking sites, and completing school work. One wonders given the speed of integration of the internet into our lives, whether even our language about using the internet may need to change. For example, asking youth about whether and when they "go online," or how many hours a day they use the Internet, may become difficult to answer. Increasingly, as we communicate, work, study, and play, we move off and online without even necessarily being aware that we are doing so.

However, even with the pervasive and increasing use of the internet by youth, the dangers that parents fear most appear to be relatively infrequent compared to their portrayal in the media. According to the book's chapters on bullying, sexting, accessing pornography, and meeting online contacts, a minority of youth report such experiences, and most who do, report little to no harm or distress as a result.

Nonetheless, the book identifies subgroups of youth who have an increased chance of negative experiences using the internet and the authors highlight the importance of understanding these subgroups better. What emerges is a complex relationship between exploration and risk, and a reminder that online and offline behavior is highly related. Younger children are less likely to encounter risks using the internet, but when they do, they are more likely to be bothered or distressed than older children. Children who use the internet extensively and in numerous ways are most likely to experience risks, but are also the least likely to be bothered or distressed by the problems they encounter. Children suffering from psychological and social problems offline are more likely to run into problems online and to experience distress as a result, a process described by the authors as risk migration.

This suggests that the popular approach to thinking about youth online behavior as something very mysterious and new may lead us in wrong directions. Much of what we have learned over decades of research about reducing youth victimization and increasing ethical and kind behaviors will likely translate to the online world pretty easily. Additionally, concerns we have about at-risk youth should lead us to examine how to prevent harm across all of their environments.

The EU Kids Online survey finds that opportunities and risks are positively related. They note that this means that "...efforts to increase opportunities will be likely to increase risks, and that efforts to reduce risks will be likely to restrict opportunities" (p. 327). Any decisions about reducing risk must be balanced with cautions about the impact on opportunities.

The goal of minimizing risks for children has led to a wave of valuable policy and educational improvements over the last 50 years, improvements that have increased children's ability to thrive. Although adults often bemoan the "good old days," the truth is that numerous health and well-being indicators for children are much better than they were decades ago. The trick is focusing policy and prevention on the most meaningful and impactful risks for children—those that result in the greatest harms. We tend to make mistakes when we guess about the dangers posed by cultural changes and new technologies. Research data, on the other hand, are critical to informing wise policy and educational choices for youth. *Children, Risk and Safety on the Internet* provides sound data that policy-makers, educators and parents can use to make judgements around children and the internet and will be a valuable asset for those seeking an informed understanding of online risks.

Dr. Lisa M. Jones is a Research Associate Professor of Psychology at the University of New Hampshire and faculty at the Crimes against Children Research Center. Dr. Jones has 15 years of experience conducting research on child victimization and evaluating national, state, and community-level prevention and intervention responses to youth victims. She was principal investigator on an evaluation of internet child safety materials, funded by the U.S. National Institute of Justice (NIJ) and is currently serving as co-investigator on a national survey of technology-based harassment. [Read more reviews from Lisa.](#)