Exploring European childrenʼs self-reported data on online aggression

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## Editors

Kalmus V.; O'Neill

## Authors

Ponte C.; Maria João Leote de Carvalho ;Batista S.

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## Topics

Risks and harms

## Sample

1414 European children (9-16) who reported having done online aggression in the last year.

## Implications For Parents About

Parenting guidance / support

## Implications For Educators About

Digital citizenship

## Implications For Policy Makers About

## Other PolicyMaker Implication

Effective legal interventions that contradict the aggression punishment

# Abstract

Abstract: To address the topic of children’s online aggression, this article explores a subsample from the EU Kids Online dataset (2017–2019) of 1404 children, aged 9–16, who reported having engaged in aggressive acts online in the previous year. Through a cluster analysis, respondents were classified into three groups. Find- ings emphasize the risk factors for aggression and how they relate to age-specific developmental tasks. Boys predominate, but the gender gap is not as wide as in offline contexts. For almost half of the children, aggression goes hand in hand with victimization. All the clusters share high levels of emotional deprivation. A sense of lacking social support, from both adults and peers, becomes more relevant among those children with high and more problematic engagement in online aggression. Results confirm that online aggression must be considered within the complex and fluid offline–online continuum cutting across the social contexts in which children grow.

# Outcome

The three groups identified in the cluster analysis share high levels of emotional deprivation, which is visible in the children’s low levels of well-being and self-control as well as (possible) social isolation translated into their search for exciting contacts, attention, visibility, and social acceptance. Children also present an exacerbated sense of online safety and trust in their own skills for dealing with problematic situations despite the victimization experiences. Furthermore, they face a relative social control deficit and poor/inadequate digital supervision from their parents; teachers and professionals whose work is to help children are almost absent. This may be decisive for the way in which they anticipate and perceive their behaviors to be seen by others, which facilitates the non-internalization of conventional internal controls.
Although the clusters share a male predominance, the gender gap is not as wide as reported in most studies on offline aggression.
The analysis confirms that age is a stronger predictor than gender among children who reported online aggression. The relation between internet uses and engagement in online aggression is not straightforward, suggesting the prevalence of personal and social traits over online access and use.
Age seems to explain certain differences among the clusters. The ages of 12–14 emerge as the critical stage of development, a period of turning points marked by the search for affiliation to new social groups, as children broaden their horizons, moving from the closed dependence on the family towards an increasingly autonomous involvement with peers and digital environments. Although the existence of adult reference persons in children’s everyday life proves to be deci- sive, the sense of powerlessness experienced in the communication with adults should not be overestimated: When young people have little confidence that their opinions are respected and taken seriously, feelings of resentment and frustration emerge (Ang, 2015). The value of excitement, the pleasure of risk-taking, the notion of smartness associated with aggression could prevail as expressed in cluster 2. The confrontation with others, following a line of autonomy and exercise of power, prevents the consideration of any external control.
Findings underscore that more effective prevention policies should address the persistent impact of ineffective parenting responses to children’s problematic behaviors. The observed relationship between victimization and aggression suggests the need to offer educational programs and communication tools specifically targeting the critical years of early adolescence, but particularly the early school-age years, with a view to supporting children, parents, and professionals working with them by ensuring that they benefit from learning digital skills and more effective relational strategies.