Factors influencing interactions between adolescents and unknown people from the internet: Findings from five European countries

# Details

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## Sample

11 to 16 years old adolsecents from Spain, the Czech Republic, Serbia, Finland, and
Switzerland

## Implications For Parents About

Parental practices / parental mediation

## Implications For Educators About

Digital citizenship

## Implications For Stakeholders About

Other

## Other Stakeholder Implication

Youth services, wellfare organisation

# Abstract

A considerable amount of adolescents’ interpersonal communication takes place online. Adolescents use the
internet to interact with friends and family, but also with people who were previously unknown to them. This
study focuses on two types of interactions with unknown people from the internet: online communication and
offline face-to-face meetings. We used theoretical frameworks of adolescent developmental tasks and risk-taking
behavior to identify the psychological and social factors that relate to the likelihood that adolescents will interact
with unknown people. We further examined the differences between the two types of interactions. Using a
sample 6647 adolescents, aged 11–16 (50.4% girls), from five European countries included in the EU Kids Online
IV project, we examined the association of selected factors for both types of interactions.
Our results support only some of our developmentally framed hypotheses – specifically, though age predicted
both types of interactions, the quality of family relationships only predicted face-to-face meetings, and we found
no association between the social support of friends and either type of interaction. In line with our risk-takingframed
hypotheses, sensation seeking, and emotional symptoms predicted both types of interactions; however,
self-efficacy predicted only face-to-face meetings.
Supporting our reasoning that online communications and face-to-face meeting are distinct behaviors, selfefficacy
and the quality of family relationships predicted only face-to-face meetings, while disclosure in online
communication only predicted online communication. Thus, future research and preventive efforts should be
mindful of the differences and not conflate these behaviors. We also recommend preventive efforts for adolescents
with elevated emotional symptoms who spend a lot of time online.

# Outcome

Age, sensation seeking, and emotional symptoms all increased the likelihood of both
types of interactions with unknown people on the internet. The likelihood of online
communication was further increased by disclosure in online communication, and time spent online. The likelihood of offline meetings was further increased by self-efficacy, and
time spent online and the decreased quality of relationships with family.
The quality of relationships with friends was not associated with either type of interaction,
and disclosure in online communication was not associated with offline meetings.