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Children and young people's emotional literacy in a networked world

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Abstract

After nearly 15 years of research into the risk and harm of the internet for children and young people, research attention is beginning to turn towards investigating the social and emotional skills children and young people need to successfully engage in the digital world. This turn, from a protectionist-only approach to a more nuanced research agenda, examines the positive and negative implications of minors' internet use, including all the protective factors children need to engage effectively and safely online. This change in research agenda will go some way towards helping children develop the skills they need to participate and navigate in a networked world. This paper analyses qualitative, exploratory research, which focussed on children and teenagers' experiences and parental concerns about internet usage, finding that children and teenagers' social and emotional maturity (along with well-developed digital skills) is a key element in their thoughtful and constructive use of the internet. It explores links between social and emotional literacies and digital literacies, and their influence on children and young people's ability to use the internet in beneficial and safe ways. Along with a call for further research in this area, the paper also discusses how it makes good sense to include a 'risk and resilience' approach to internet safety. Online resilience (like offline resilience) can be developed through exploration and some experience with risk.

Introduction

The importance of the interplay between cognition and emotion in human behaviour has been recognised for some time. Based, in part, on Gardner's (1983) concept of multiple intelligences, Emotional Intelligence (EI) "considers the extent to which individuals can recognise, understand, process, manage, monitor and utilise emotional information" (McKenna 2007 cited in McKenna & Mellson 2013, p. 427). This "involves the ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one's thinking and actions" (Salovey & Mayer 1989, p. 189).

Studies have shown that there is a correlation between low EI scores and problematic internet behaviours such as cyber bullying (Ojedokun & Idemudia 2013), internet addiction (Engelberg & Sjöberg 2004) and online gambling (Parker, Taylor & Eastabrook 2008). However, there seems to be minimal research investigating the relationship between emotional intelligence and digital literacy—especially how the relationship between high levels of EI keeps children and young people engaging with the

internet in a productive and safe manner. Nevertheless, Chakraborty and Nafukho (2013) recently found that EI helped individuals make "self controlled informed decisions when….on social media outlets" (2013, p. 5525).

In today's networked environment minors are spending many hours online. Most teenagers are on social networking sites like Facebook, Instagram, Tumblr and Snapchat, and younger children play in virtual worlds with social network functions embedded in them; game sites such as Club Penguin, Minecraft or Webkinz. These spaces involve inevitable risks and potential harm. These risks range from contact risks such as meeting online strangers offline, conduct risks such as cyberbullying and content risks such as viewing inappropriate content while online. Conventional, risk-averse approaches to protecting children from online harm seem to be "highly protective, even over-protective approach to children" (Staksrud & Livingstone 2009, p. 365). Newer, risk and resilience, approaches emphasise that children and young people "must [also] learn for themselves how to navigate the wider world, including learning from their mistakes and recovering from accidents" (p. 365).

The current dilemma for parents and educators, therefore, is how do we protect children from potential harm, while at the same time allow them the freedom to play, communicate and explore with new technologies (Underwood et al. 2015). This paper takes an intermediate position. It recommends that parents, educators and policy makers include a 'risk and resilience' approach alongside the range of protective mechanisms (parental, teacher and technical mediation). In this way, children and young people should have in place a range of protective mechanisms to safeguard them from potential harm. However, as children grow up their developing social and emotional competencies, and digital skills, should be acknowledged and taken into consideration as they learn to cope with the adult world.

Multiple Literacies in a Networked World

Literacy in our globally networked world involves multiple skills and abilities beyond the traditional understanding of literacy—being able to read and write. There are two distinct theoretical approaches to the notion of digital literacy. The traditional approach, often called the skills model, views digital literacy as a group of particular technical skills such as being able to use search engines. The other more recent approach, in contrast, regards digital literacy "in terms of context and social practice—this is a situated approach to literacy" (Casey et al. 2009, p. 6).

As early as 2004, Eshet-Alkalai proposed a context driven framework for digital literacy. His model entails (1) photo-visual literacy, learning to read from visuals, (2) reproduction literacy, the art of creative duplication or recycling of existing materials, (3) branching literacy, hypermedia and non-linear or multi-domain thinking, (4) information literacy, the art of skepticism, and (5) socio-emotional literacy. In today's media environment which is:

> both digital and social, where media are incoming (consumable), outgoing (producible, spreadable), and often collective or expressive of community (shareable, remixable) [digital] literacy has to include technical, social and information handling skills. (Collier 2012)

Thus, in a media environment which is both digital and social, children and young people require good social literacy skills. If children using social media used their emotional intelligence online as well as offline there would be fewer mixed messages, online harassment or cyberbullying. (Collier 2012) The established relationship between lower EI scores and problematic internet behaviours suggests that effective Social Emotional Learning will go some way towards shielding children and young people from harmful or problematic internet behaviours. Thus, claims and calls have been made to include social and emotional skills as part of digital literacies (Aviram & Eshet-Alkalai 2006; Chakraborty & Nafukho 2013; Collier 2013; Eshet 2012; Eshet-Alkalia 2004; The Aspen Institute 2014; Youssef & Youssef 2001).

Emotional Intelligence (EI), Social Emotional Intelligence (SEI) and Social Emotional Learning (SEL)

The term Emotional Intelligence (EI) is sometimes referred to as Social Emotional intelligence (SEI), especially in the field of education. The process of learning EI or SEI is termed Social Emotional Learning (SEL). These terms have been applied to, and generally accepted, in the fields of education, management and leadership, psychology and medicine. Management and leadership studies have established that interpersonal skills and empathy are particularly important aptitudes for successful management and leadership, that there is a correlation between Emotional Intelligence (EI) and leadership effectiveness, and in particular between EI and transformational leadership (Barbuto & Burbach 2006; Butler & Chinowski 2006; Ciarrochi 2005; Gardiner & Stough 2002; Rosete 2005). Educational research demonstrates a positive link between academic performance and EI, as well as the efficacy of social and emotional learning programs in reducing deviant behaviour and improving academic performance (Petrides, Frederickson and Furnham 2004; Zins et al. 2004).

However, differences exist about what abilities or traits constitute emotional intelligence (Cherniss 2010). While the "original definition of EI conceptualised it as a set of interrelated abilities" (Mayer & Salovey 1997; Salovey & Mayer 1990 cited in Mayer et al. 2008, p. 503) other researchers have defined EI as a set of traits; for instance self-esteem, happiness or optimism (Mayer et al. 2008). There are now three main models of emotional intelligence. These are the Ability Model (Solovey & Mayer 1989), the Trait Model (Petrides & Furnham (2001) and the Mixed Model (Goleman 1998). Despite these differences it is commonly agreed that EI predicts success in life:

> While a distinct construct of EI remains debatable many of the attributes encompassed by this term do predict that life success and programmes of socio-emotional learning in schools may usefully contribute to the development of these attributes. (Qualter, Gardner & Whiteley, p. 11, 2007)

Social Emotional Learning (SEL) is an educational pedagogy which focuses on the study and use of Emotional Intelligence (EI). In the early 90s, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) was established "to apply the construct of emotional intelligence and its related theory, research, and practice to schools and education" (Elias et al. 2008 p. 252). Drawing on Goleman's

construction of five key skills clusters, CASEL expanded on these clusters in an attempt to "capture the aspect of education that links academic achievement with the skills necessary for succeeding in school, in the family, in the community, in the workplace, and in life in general" (Elias et al. 2008 p. 252).

Method

This paper uses interview excerpts from two qualitative studies carried out in Western Australia involving children and their parents. One of the studies, carried out in collaboration with 15 member countries of EU Kids Online, Exploring children's understanding of risk was carried out in 2013. This involved qualitative individual interviews and focus groups with children and teenagers aged between 9 and 16. The other ongoing, research project used for this paper, is an ARC Discovery project titled Parents or peers: Which group most affects the experiences of young people online and how? These research projects involved qualitative interviews with primary school aged children, teenagers and parents, and the excerpts used in the following section are but a few of the many examples available from the two studies which highlights the connection between emotional intelligence, digital skills and children's effective and safe use of the internet.

The findings below are broken down into five segments using CASEL and Gores' five core competencies in order to highlight the connection between social emotional skills and children and young people's beneficial and safe use of the internet. This section does not contain definitive evidence that social emotional skills are integral to safe and beneficial internet, but rather, points out the connection between resilient and self-assured youngsters and their efficacious use of the internet.

Figure 1: Social and emotional learning five core competencies. Source (CASEL, 2014

Findings

Self Awareness

> The ability to accurately recognize one's emotions and thoughts and their influence on behavior. This includes accurately assessing one's strengths and limitations and possessing a well-grounded sense of confidence and optimism. (CASEL, 2014)

In the excerpt below when the interviewer was talking to a parent (Leanne) of a 13 year old girl (Kim) it is apparent (from the mother's point of view) that her daughter has a limited awareness or perception of her 'digital self' and how this is being perceived by others. When discussing her daughter's use of social network sites, Leanne communicated that Kim had difficulty in expressing the subtlety or nuances of expression when using chat facilities.

> She [Kim] is very blunt, she just says what she thinks. When she says it-face to-face it is fine because you have the tone in your voice, but I've had to say to her – when you are writing something when you are messaging someone, on Facebook message or whatever – you need to think about what you write because sometimes it comes across wrongly. She got to the stage where – or I thought about getting rid of her Facebook because of the trouble she was going through.

Kim's mother acknowledges that Kim has little trouble using her larconic style of communicating in face-to-face communications with friends because she uses nuances like tone-of-voice to give more meaning to her utterances. However, her mother feels that she inaccurately assesses her own communication strengths and limitations in the area of online social networking.

Children and young people may act in a disinhibited manner due to the inherent characteristics of social networking sites. (Dunkels 2008). These include the allowances of the medium in use, anonymity and asynchronicity (Dunkels 2008; Suler 2005). Suler (2005) suggests that the use of text without facial "cues can alter self-boundaries. [and] People may sense that their mind has merged with the mind of the online companion" (Suler 2005, p. 186).

Without emotional indicators such as voice modulation, facial expressions and gestures which can modify the emotional intent of a message immensely, messages can be misinterpreted. Text driven chat also prevents the display of reactions to each other "that can make us forget that those are fellow human beings behind the text messages, comments, avatars, etc" (Collier 2012). The social and emotional skills needed to communicate effectively and safely online, therefore, involves the ability to understand the online medium in which communications takes place and the way in which its affordances can change the intended message. Awareness of others emotions is also a key social emotional skill needed to effectively communicate.

Self Management

The ability to regulate one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively in different situations. This includes managing stress, controlling impulses, motivating oneself, and setting and working toward achieving personal and academic goals (CASEL 2014).

In the transcript excerpt below, Ryan aged 11, talks about overcoming his disappointment with being griefed within Minecraft games. Being griefed involves being harassed or teased by others on the server, having your constructions destroyed by others without permission or any other online behaviour that annoys others or sabotages their games. In anticipation of the possibility of being griefed, Ryan first joins white-listed, anti-grief servers, and when this was not satisfactory, set up his own private server available only to known friends. The extract illustrates how Ryan was able to modify his online activities in response to (what he thought of as) negative interactions online. He focused on the task at hand, displaying a sense of optimism by problem solving the issue.

Ryan: Well Minecraft, there wasn't ... everyone that would play, like when you join a server, me and Angus got really frustrated because everyone that would play would sometimes just go up to a house that you built or a building and they would just destroy it. […] Yeah, like troll view…

Interviewer: Why would people do that?

Ryan: Because they're mean.

Interviewer: So aren't there special servers where they say no trolling allowed?

Ryan: Yeah, there are some anti-grief servers. Like people still grief on that but they get banned.

Interviewer: Right. So it … so they only do it once I suppose and then they get thrown out.

Ryan: Well on anti-grief servers yeah but on normal servers when there's no anti-grief, people just can grief your things as many times as they want and nobody cares.

Interviewer: Why would you play the game on a normal server if you had the choice of playing one on an anti-grief server?

Ryan: Well the anti-grief servers would be whitelisted so sometimes only some people can join them. And most of them would be offline like they would be down every time we'd try to get an IP. Because you would get the IP as just a bunch of numbers like 162.5. Yeah and you would type that into your Minecraft and it ... and if it's a server you would be in that game. Yeah but sometimes they wouldn't work and there was only like a few out there.[…]

Interviewer: I see, yeah. So you ... so that meant that you had to go to places where there were griefers?

Ryan: Yeah, pretty much. […]I just made my own server so my friends could join like people from school only that I know and yeah, we just played on it. So I just whitelisted it so only they could join because I didn't want anyone else joining. But it's like really low chance that they would even get into it because I don't give my IP out to anyone, the number that the server is, the website of the server. Or I don't ... because there's a website called Planet Minecraft and it's ... and you can put heaps of stuff on it. You can put server IPs and then it ... like people who see it, anyone can see it can join your server.

Ryan shows that he can set and work towards achieving a personal goal. His ability to motivate himself, and work towards resolving his online problem by eventually setting up his own server also

demonstrates a high level of digital skills. Quantitative surveys have also found that a higher level of digital skills provides children with the ability to handle online risks. AU Kids Online and EU Kids Online large surveys of children's internet use found that those children who are more digitally literate will gain from their online use. At the same time they are better equipped to cope or avoid the risks they encounter online. (Green et al 2011; Livingstone & Helsper 2010).

Social Awareness

> The ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others from diverse backgrounds and cultures, to understand social and ethical norms for behavior, and to recognize family, school, and community resources and supports (CASEL, 2014).

Some children have the extra burden of being bullied while online. Ten year-old Jordan describes a Minecraft session, he and a group of friends were playing, which turned sour when other unknown children began to racially abuse one of his friends. Jordan showed empathy and sensitivity to his friend's predicament.

> Jordan: One of my friends has brown skin and this guy was teasing him and I felt really sorry for him, and on the server I started hearing him crying and when I went to karate I saw him and asked him and he said he was fine. He was teased really bad.
>
> Interviewer: What would you do about something like that? How would you stop it?
>
> Jordan: I'd just say get off the server right now, and delete it. That's what I did because we were playing Minecraft.
>
> Interviewer: Were you online with him at the time that he was being teased?
>
> Jordan: I'm the highest rank on Minecraft in my clan so.
>
> Interviewer: How would they know what colour skin anyone has got?
>
> Jordan: Because remember we were doing the face thing [FaceTime] and it was accidentally made public.

By stating that the group's FaceTime session (run at the same time as the group's Minecraft session) "was accidently made public" Jordan reminds us that, even though many primary school aged children are seemingly very competent users of the internet, it only takes one team member in a group to inadvertently omit a safety feature to put the others at risk of outside harassment. However, Jordan's decision to "get off the server right now, and delete it" reveals that he is a 'good decision maker' who processes 'empathy for others'—two basic social emotional skills. In his role as "highest rank on Minecraft" in his clan, it seems also that Jordan has been able to practice and develop useful leadership skills.

Relationship skills

> The ability to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships with diverse individuals and groups. This includes communicating clearly, listening actively, cooperating, resisting inappropriate social pressure, negotiating conflict constructively, and seeking and offering help when needed (CASEL 2014).

The teenage girls quoted below discuss, during a focus group session, nude requests they receive when online. These 15 to 17 year olds describe how they navigate the nuances of romantic relationships online by clever management of possible rejection or conflict when they refuse these requests.

> Teen 3:... and I'm just like no, no, I'm not going to show my boobs, thanks, it's a bit chilly so I'm not going to ...
> [Laughing]
> Teen 2: If it was just like even in summer I can't it's a bit chilly.
> Teen 4: Always a bit chilly.
> Interviewer: So is that something ... or when you're getting into a relationship people are asking for?
> Teen 3: No, it's not. Even in a relationship ...
> Teen 5: It's not relationships.
> Teen 4: ... it's just like guys ...
> Teen 5: Random guys….
> Teen 4:   It was grotty…. Some guy once [unclear]… I sent him a picture of a [nude] fat guy
> Teen 5: Someone sent me nudes so I sent them [a picture of] Nudie juice.
> Teen 4: Nude [by Nature] make up.
> Teen 5: I always like Nudie juice, is this good enough for you?
> Interviewer: How does that make you feel? I know you were just saying you're just going no.
> Teen 6: No, I go no. I might be like oh, no, I'll be like ... I'll like make it into a joke 'cause I don't want to say embarrass them 'cause if I like the person I'm just going to be like, you know, no but ...
> Teen 5:   Joke about it anyway.
> Teen 6: ... and then, yeah, then they'll joke around, they'll just say I'm joking and I'm just like ...
> Interviewer: But they didn't say they were joking first?
> Teen 6: ... if I ... they ... you know, I'll make it clear and then they'll be like oh, I was just joking, 'cause they won't cross the boundaries…

These teenage girls are able to resist inappropriate social pressure. They are negotiating in a situation where their boyfriends or potential boyfriends may just be testing their luck and be okay with the girls' humorous responses. Others may get may be more persistent:

> Even though you're getting wiser the guy asking you gets more persistent as well and they'll be like oh, why not, don't you trust me or something, it's just like fine, we're not friends anymore, it's like wow, that was all fast (Teen 1).

These girls' approach to negotiating these requests demonstrates that they have the ability to manage possible conflict in an assertive but humorous manner. When this does not work they seem composed about it.

Responsible decision making

The ability to make constructive and respectful choices about personal behavior and social interactions based on consideration of ethical standards, safety concerns, social norms, the realistic evaluation of consequences of various actions, and the well-being of self and others (CASEL 2014).

d'Haenens, Vandonick and Donoso (2013) found that when children encounter online risks their decision making or coping strategies vary. Some children hope the problem will go away or stop using the internet for a while. Others talk to someone about the particular problem, while some use proactive coping (problem solving) to fix their problems (d'Haenens et al. 2013). This may include blocking or deleting contacts, changing privacy settings or other more complex digital solutions. Sixteen year old Helena, below, engages in self-evaluation and reflection about her online image before posting photographs online.

> Interviewer: You haven't told me about your photo apps … edits, where do you go, what do you do with those?
>
> Helena: Oh, there's all different sites like I used to use Picnik and then they got closed down, Google+ bought that and that was really annoying. And I went on Google+ for a bit but I hated it because there was just so much like it automatically just found everybody that I knew on there and it was like oh, do you want to add them, them, them? And I said, no, I just want to edit photos, I don't want everybody to see me editing my photos, I don't want them to think that I'm up myself, conceited and that I love to do this and that but because when you edit a photo you want to see it, you want to look at it for a bit, you want to see that's a good photo maybe I'll put that up on Facebook, maybe I won't.

Helena reflects carefully about posting her images online out of concern that it might reflect poorly on her social reputation. By saying that she doesn't want people "to see I'm up myself" Helena seems to understand one common social norm about selfies: Others may view her as self-absorbed if she over-posts. Helena also demonstrates that she is also able to evaluate consequences when she takes the time to edit and reflect on her images before she posts. Thus, she seems to exercise social decision making that is more purposeful than some teens her age.

Emotional Intelligence and online resilience

Online resilience is closely related to emotional intelligence. How children and teens perceive online occurrences will influence their emotions, and therefore their resilience. Children or teens who are resilient tend to control their emotions or impulses in order to evaluate a situation, plan any responses and problem solve. In learning how to regulate their emotions, they can direct their attention to constructive or practical response to a situation.

Resilient children are able to tackle adverse situations in a problem-focused way, and to transfer negative emotions into positive (or neutral) feelings. Risk and resilience go hand in hand, as resilience can only develop through exposure to risks or stressful events (d'Haenens, Vandoninck and Donoso 2013, p. 2).

EU Kids Online research has found that less resilient children are more likely to take up a passive or fatalistic approach in response to online risks while resilient children are proactive in their responses to online risks. They are more likely to block, delete or even report unwanted people or messages (Vandoninck, d'Haenens & Segers 2012). They also found that less resilient children "suffer more from online as well as offline risks" (d'Haenens, Vandoninck & Donoso 2013, p. 1). These children are less likely to "employ proactive coping strategies" (p. 1) than more resilient children.

As with children's resilience in the real world, some exposure to online risk is likely to improve children's ability to cope and be resilient and, consequently, reduce the likelihood of harm. (Duerager & Livingstone 2012). Some of the parents interviewed for this paper also indicated their belief that using the internet, in age appropriate ways, allows children to learn important life skills—especially when it comes to social network sites.

> You can't hide them from things like Facebook, and it makes them street wise. They have friends that are not allowed to use it, but their mums pick them up from school and drop them off and they are not learning any life skills (Geraldine 2013).

Geraldine (above), mother of 13 year old Bec, indicates that she is confident that Bec's use of Facebook can help prepare her, with the knowledge and experiences needed, to deal with the social challenges of life. Just as calls have been made for parents and teachers to allow children to be more autonomous, to provide them with the space and time to play and socialise with each other (without hovering), in order to develop a range of resilience-friendly skills such as the ability to negotiate, work in teams, problem solve, share, make decisions or self-advocate (Chawla et al. 2014; Gibbs 2009) Geraldine recognises that allowing her daughter some digital freedoms also helps her develop these life skills.

Digital skills go hand in hand with children and teenagers' ability to respond to internet risk in a resilient and proactive manner. They need to learn how online tools and applications work in order to respond constructively to bothersome content and conduct online. Nine year old Shelly reported in her interview about a time when she was bothered by rude messages left for her on Moshi Monsters. She described these events as bothersome. However, she still plays on the site and as she states at the end of this excerpt "you can block them, delete them or report them".

> In Moshi Monsters – once I just went on there and I got a new message because when you have a message there is an exclamation mark that glows, so I went on there and it was from a stranger and it said that I'm a bum for some reason, and I don't even know who they are...... You can block them, delete them or report them (Shelly 9).

All the children and teens cited in this paper (apart from Kim) displayed digital skills which enabled them to proactively respond to bothersome or risky events online. Ryan (eleven) knows how to create his own server in order to avoid griefers on Minecraft: Helena possesses the online photo editing skills to enable her to reflect and choose suitable images before posting: The teenage girls who cope with nude requests by posting funny images know how to capture and reproduce these images online.

Conclusion

Previous research regarding Emotional Intelligence and the internet indicates that individuals with low EI scores on certain traits or abilities are more likely to be involved in cyberbullying, internet addiction or online gambling. This paper has analysed how EI can act as a protective factor for children and teens using the internet. EI and online resilience allows children to be proactive in their responses to online risks as compared to less resilient children and teens who tend to get upset yet passive in their responses to risk. Online resilience allows children and teens more opportunity to learn, participate, create, share and communicate with others. Hopefully, the preliminary findings in this paper will inform parents and educators of the importance of children and young peoples' social and emotional development and exposure to some risk, in their successful engagement with, and enjoyment of, digitally networked environments.

Current research about children and teens' online risk tends to associate risk prevention strategies that support "an over-protective, risk-averse culture that restricts the freedom of online exploration that society encourages for children in other spheres" (Staksrud & Livingstone 2009, p. 364). This paper recommends that parents, educators and policy makers also approach internet safety from a risk and resilience perspective, where children and teens who experience online risk, have in place a range of protective mechanisms to safeguard them from harm. These protective mechanisms include a range of social emotional competencies and the digital skills needed to cope and respond to online risk in an adaptive manner.

This exploratory paper investigates and discusses how social and emotional literacy can be a protective mechanism for children and young people engaging with the internet. However, more research is needed regarding online risk, emotional intelligence and the minimisation of harm to children and teens. This includes virtual ethnographies which explore when and how children and young people access, express and enact emotionally literate discourses and responses.

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