CORE
Children Online:
Research and Evidence

Theories and Concepts for Understanding Children's Digital Lives: An Annotated Bibliography

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This annotated bibliography provides a roadmap for understanding nine key areas of children's digital lives. It has been designed for researchers and research users and provides essential and supplementary texts on each of the areas.

Key areas of children's digital lives

Children and young people	Digital environment	Access
The child, children, young people	Technology and affordances	Place and time of access
Development and evolving capacity	Uses, users and domestication	In/equality and in/exclusion
Structures and cultures of childhood	Normative values in design	Fixed, mobile and wearable
Diversity and difference	Innovation, datafication and AI	Transcending on/offline
Opportunities and benefits	**Skills and literacies**	**Risk and harm**
Internet engagement	Learning and information skills	Content, contact, conduct, contract
Engagement and participation	Digital skills and competencies	Familiar and emerging risks
Information and exploration	Data literacy and e-Safety	Cross-cutting risks including privacy
Play, creativity, fun	Civic and other literacies	Relation between risk and harm
Health and wellbeing	**Social support**	**Policy and regulation**
Digital wellbeing and health	Parental mediation	Children's rights in the digital age
Mental ill health and anxiety	Socialisation, family and school	Law, policy and regulation
Resilience and coping	Sociality and peer support	Agency, voice and activism
Vulnerability	Professional help services	Responses to emerging challenges

RISK AND HARM

This section addresses the theories and concepts for analysing the relation between technology, risk (related to content, contact, conduct and commerce) and children's experiences. Several sources point to the need to first distinguish and then theorise the relationship between risk and harm, risk and wellbeing, likelihood and severity of harm, and between risk, resilience and vulnerability. Other resources focus on building an understanding of children's experiences of risk in a digital world, differentiating between risks generated by children themselves (such as creating negative content or acting in a hurtful way towards others or themself) or risks associated with the online environment (such as inappropriate or commercial content).

The approaches are somewhat unified in their recognition of risk as a lived subjective experience, and the agreement that risk needs to be considered in relation to children's individual circumstances and the wider social context in which risk occurs. Some authors go further and argue in favour of approaching risk from a children's perspective in light of children's agency and child rights.

Aven, T. & Renn, O. (2009). On risk defined as an event where the outcome is uncertain. *Journal of Risk Research***, 12(1), 1–11.**

This article sets out a quantitative sociology perspective on risk as comprised of two dimensions – the likelihood of harm and the severity of harm. It argues for the importance of conceptualising risk as referring to 'uncertainty about and severity of the consequences (or outcomes) of an activity with respect to something that humans value' (Aven and Renn, 2009, p. 1).

Beck, U. (1992). *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity***. SAGE Publications.**

Beck's critical sociological analysis of contemporary life in the West builds on theories of late modernity to capture the particularly painful nature of everyday lives spent grappling, unequally, with risks of humanity's own making (by contrast with the natural disasters of previous periods). His focus is on the reflexive and deeply problematical experience of ordinary people's lived reality in the risk society.

🔓 **boyd, d. (2014).** *It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens.* **Yale University Press.**

This book is an ethnographic account of the digital risks experienced by US teenagers, carefully contextualised and presented with a socio-cultural sensibility that respects youth voice. It is an insightful corrective to some of today's moral panics about online youth, without downplaying the very real risks that face them, but also showcasing their resilience.

🔓 **Chassiakos, Y.R., Radesky, J., Christakis, D., Moreno, M.A., Cross, C., Hill, D., Ameenuddin, N., Hutchinson, J., Boyd, R., Mendelson, R., Smith, J. & Swanson, W.S. (2016). Children and adolescents and digital media.** *Pediatrics***, 138(5).**

The American Academy of Pediatrics has been hugely influential in setting guidelines for policy-makers, professionals and practitioners, as well as the general public. In this article they present a critical review of the evidence, framed within a public health theoretical perspective.

🔓 **Ging, D. & Garvey, S. (2018).** [**'Written in these scars are the stories I can't explain': A content analysis of pro-ana and thinspiration image sharing on Instagram**](#). *New Media & Society*, 20(3), 1181–1200.

This article explores how pro-ana identities and discourses manifest themselves on more open, image-based platforms, such as Instagram. It suggests that mainstreaming such practices renders visible pro-ana sensibilities in the broader context of distressed girls' lives and Western culture more generally. This increased visibility may, in fact, be a positive development.

Hurwitz, L.B., Montague, H. & Wartella, E. (2017). [**Food marketing to children online: A content analysis of food company websites**](#). *Health Communication*, 32(3), 366–371.

This article presents a content analysis of food websites to see how they market their products to children, with interesting findings in terms of obesogenic foods marketing strategies.

🔓 **Livingstone, S. (2013).** [**Online risk, harm and vulnerability: Reflections on the evidence base for child internet safety policy**](#). *ZER: Journal of Communication Studies*, 18, 13–28.

Livingstone distinguishes risk from harm, drawing on theories of risk, harm and wellbeing, and explains how resilience and vulnerability mediate between risk and harm, for children's experiences in a digital world.

🔓 **Livingstone, S. & Haddon, L. (eds) (2012).** [*Children, Risk and Safety on the Internet: Research and Policy Challenges in Comparative Perspective*](#). **Policy Press.**

Drawing together the findings of the first phase of the EU Kids Online project, this book integrates the complex interaction of socio-demographic factors that are strongly influenced by context at a number of levels: parent/family, societal and cultural/country. These impact not only ownership but also use. The book also sets out the 3C's approach to risks and opportunities, in which digital content, contact and conduct are related to children's agency, contexts and outcomes.

🔓 **Lupton, D. (1999).** [*Risk*](#). **Routledge.**

Lupton provides a critical analysis and review of a wide range of social science theories, including socio-cultural and social constructionist positions; risk and governmentality; risk and subjectivity; risk and otherness; and risk and pleasure. It is helpful for framing the analysis of children's risk online.

🔓 **McDaniel, B.T. & Radesky, J.S. (2018).** [**Technoference: Parent distraction with technology and associations with child behavior problems.**](#) *Child Development*, 89(1), 100–109.

This article introduces the concept of 'technoference' and investigates whether parental problematic technology use is associated with technology-based interruptions in parent–child interactions.

🔓 **Patchin, J.W. & Hinduja, S. (2017).** [**Digital self-harm among adolescents.**](#) *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 61(6), 761–766.

This article provides a good overview of the problem of self-harming and pro-ana, pro-mia content on social media platforms and the communities that emerge around this issue; the article outlines the issue of digital self-harm or self-cyberbullying, which is an emerging trend that requires further research.

🔓 **Patchin, J.W. & Hinduja, S. (2020). [It is time to teach safe sexting.](#)** *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 66(2), 140–143.

This article is interesting because it contextualises the issue of sexting as something that may not be harmful per se, and it acknowledges its increasing prevalence among young people, which may not go away. Rather than seeing it as inherently wrong or harmful behaviour, it proposes that practitioners may wish to acknowledge that perhaps the best policy response is to explain its possible consequences and also teach safe sexting.

🔓 **Peter, J. & Valkenburg, P.M. (2016). [Adolescents and pornography: A review of 20 years of research.](#)** *The Journal of Sex Research*, 53(4–5), 509–531.

This article uses the authors' differential susceptibility to a media effects model to review research on the effects of pornography exposure on adolescents, using the theory to predict differential effects.

🔓 **Slovic, P. (2010). [The psychology of risk](#).** *Salude e Sociedade*, 19(4), 731–747.

Slovic contrasts rational models of the study of risk with people's irrational reactions to risk, and argues for the importance of trust and affect.

🔓 **Smith, P.K., Mahdavi, J., Carvalho, M., Fisher, S., Russell, S. & Tippett, N. (2008). [Cyberbullying: Its nature and impact in secondary school pupils.](#)** *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 49(4), 376–385.

This article discusses online bullying or cyberbullying – sending (often anonymously) repeatedly intentional hurtful texts or online messages. Cyberbullying, as other types of bullying, may fuel a child's mental health problems and risky behaviour such as self-injury and disordered eating.

🔓 **Spencer, J., Olson, J., Schrager, S., Tanaka, D. & Belzer, M. (2015). [Sexting and adolescents: A descriptive study of sexting and youth in an urban population.](#)** *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 56(2), S22.

This article discusses sexting – the electronic transmission of nude or seminude pictures or explicitly sexual text messages. It has been found to be related to either sexual abuse or risky psychosocial behaviours (like substance abuse) and depression in different studies.

🔓 **Stoilova, M., Livingstone, S. & Nandagiri, R. (2019). [*Children's Data and Privacy Online: Growing up in a Digital Age*](#). London School of Economics and Political Science.**

This research reviews the existing evidence relating to children and young people's data privacy, identifying three privacy contexts in the digital data ecology: interpersonal, institutional and commercial.

Wartella, E., Cingel, D.P. & Lauricella, A.R. (2018). [Controversy sells, but what about science? Press coverage of *Thirteen Reasons Why*](#). *Journal of Children and Media*, 12(3), 368–372.

This commentary offers food for thought to reflect on how, when it comes to the tough topic of media, public discourses tend to be oriented towards a narrative focused on risks rather than

opportunities. The case of the press coverage of *Thirteen Reasons Why* is mobilised to support this argument.