

# Recognising online hurtful behaviour among peers

## A Global Kids Online research paper

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### Overview

Since the advent of widespread access to the internet and mobile phones, there has been growing concern over hurtful online behaviour among children and young people. But the definition, scope and measurement of this behaviour varies which can be problematic; this is especially the case for 'cyberbullying.'<sup>2</sup> The resulting confusion is exacerbated by mass media that generally promote alarming statistics without inquiring into definitions or measures used.

As a result, it is difficult to know what practical and policy priorities and interventions are appropriate to address such online hurtful behaviour among peers. Rather than offering yet another narrow definition, this research paper recognises and measures a wide range of online hurtful behaviours in order to reveal which problems undermine children online.

Global Kids Online examines children's online risks and opportunities using a research framework and toolkit developed to generate new evidence to inform policy and practice.<sup>3</sup> The findings, which vary by country, include:

- Children find a wide range of online experiences upsetting. Between 14 and 36% of internet users aged 9–17 experienced something upsetting online in the past year.
- Between 12 and 36 % of 9- to 17-year-old internet users experienced hurtful peer behaviour in the past year, with the exception of Argentina, where figures (for teenagers) are much higher. Most of the hurtful behaviour

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occurred offline, not online.

- Only a few 9- to 17-year-old internet-using children (between 1 and 11%, depending on age and country) experienced hurtful behaviour online in the past year; most of this occurred just once or twice.

By measuring the wide set of hurtful behaviours that children encounter online, our approach:

- Recognises the connections between online and offline experiences. We look at the extent to which children engage in or experience hurtful behaviour, whether online or face-to-face, to see if the use of digital technology might facilitate such hurtful exchanges.
- Acknowledges children's voices and that their perceptions of problematic experiences may differ from adults. While definitions vary, children certainly recognise the notion of hurtful, nasty or upsetting behaviour.<sup>4</sup> By asking children about their online experiences, we include them in evidence-informed policy.
- Avoids the assumption that all online risks are inherently harmful. Instead, we ask children separately about their encounters with online risk and then whether they found this harmful as a result (e.g. being bothered or upset, feeling uncomfortable or scared by something they saw online).

We conclude that policy and practice aiming to reduce online hurtful behaviour should address the full range of problems that children are concerned about, rather than just focusing on any single problem (e.g. cyberbullying). In widening the lens to consider the range of problematic experiences that upset children, it is important to consult children in the process. As we argue elsewhere, it is also important not to over-protect children online at the cost of their rights to online provision and participation.<sup>5</sup>

### Methodology

Global Kids Online is an international research project designed to research the experiences of children aged 9–17 who use the internet at least minimally and the role of their parents/carers. The project is a collaboration between [UNICEF Office of Research–Innocenti](#), the [London School of Economics and Political Science \(LSE\)](#), and the [EU](#)



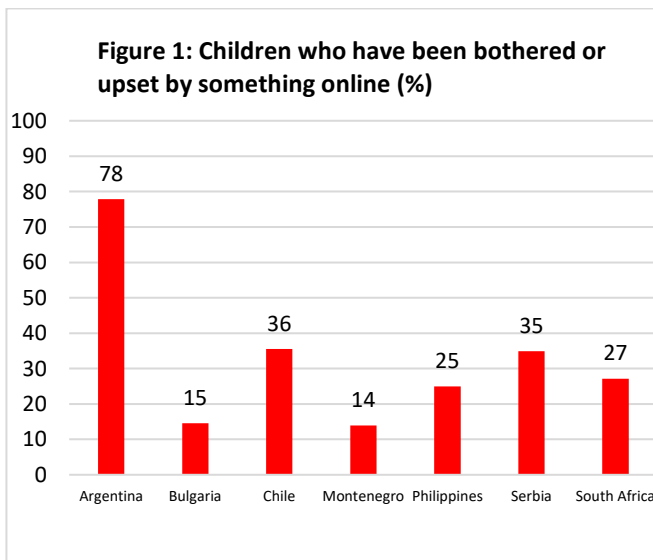
[Kids Online](#) network, working with country partners.

Surveys were conducted by our country research partners between October 2015 and October 2016 in [Argentina](#), [Brazil](#), [Bulgaria](#), [Chile](#), [Montenegro](#), [the Philippines](#), [Serbia](#) and [South Africa](#), some using nationally representative samples and some pilot studies. We make country comparisons with caution, however, acknowledging the limitations of comparability due to sampling methods (probability and convenience sampling) and sizes (nationally representative, subnational and pilot samples) (see the [Overview](#)).

### Upsetting online experiences

Between 14 and 36% of internet users aged 9–17 experienced something upsetting online in the past year, with higher figures for teenagers only, and especially high figures in Argentina (see Figure 1).

We deliberately asked about ‘something’ upsetting online before any of the specific survey questions, so as not to ‘put ideas into children’s heads’. This gives us an overall indication of the scale of the problem to be addressed, although not all of this is specifically hurtful peer behaviour.



Question: In the PAST YEAR, has anything happened online that bothered or upset you in some way? Base: Children who use the internet aged 9–17, except those aged 13–17 in Argentina. Valid n: Argentina (n=876), Bulgaria (n=1,000), Chile (n=1,000), Montenegro (n=911), Philippines (n=96), Serbia (n=186), South Africa (n=643).

Note: Some of the figures are based on pilot research and small samples (e.g. the Philippines and Serbia), and the sample of Argentina includes older children. Thus, findings reported here should be considered indicative only.

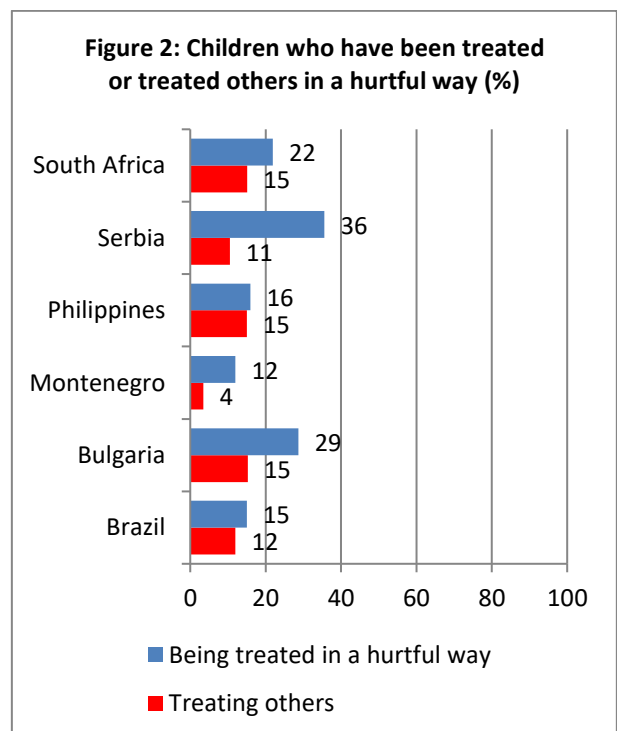
We asked, further, how upsetting these events had been. Between 36% in Montenegro and 56% in Serbia of those who had encountered something upsetting said they had been ‘fairly’ or ‘very’ upset (i.e., 5% of all 9- to 17-year-old internet users in Montenegro, 20% in Serbia).

How often did this occur? For most children who had encountered something upsetting, this had happened only once or twice in the past year. However, between one in ten and one in three children (depending on country and age) who have been bothered or upset by something online said they had experienced this at least monthly.<sup>6</sup>

*So, of the minority of children who report an online problem, a minority of incidents are either repeated or ‘fairly’/‘very’ upsetting. Still, this represents substantial numbers of children, and so interventions are needed. What kinds of problems are involved?*

### Hurtful peer behaviour

Before focusing on hurtful online behaviour, we asked about hurtful behaviour overall, whether on- or offline.



Question: In the PAST YEAR, have you been treated in a hurtful way by others? In the PAST YEAR, have you treated others in a hurtful way? (% ‘Yes’, by country); Base: Children who use the internet aged 9–17. Valid n: Bulgaria (n=1,000), Brazil (n= 3,068), Montenegro (n1 & 2=911), Philippines (n1=107; n2=110), Serbia (n1=191; n2=197), South Africa (n1 & 2=643).

Figure 2 shows that the proportion of children who are treated in hurtful ways by others varies

across the countries, ranging from a third of children in Serbia (36%) to about one in nine in Montenegro (12%). Fewer children report treating others in this way – from 15% (in Bulgaria, the Philippines and South Africa) to 4% in Montenegro.

Analysis in selected countries found a substantial overlap between children who have been treated in a hurtful way by peers and those who have treated others in that way. *This means that policy and practice designed to address hurtful behaviour should recognise that ‘aggressors’ may also be ‘victims’, and vice versa.*

How often does this happen? This question is important in relation to bullying and cyberbullying, where definitions often emphasise that hurtful behaviour is repeated. Among children who report having been treated in a hurtful way, between a half and two-thirds said this had happened just once or twice, while the others said it had happened more often. So, up to half of those treated in a hurtful way by peers might be considered to have been bullied.

Additionally, we can report that about one-third of those who were treated in a hurtful way (whether or not this was repeated) say that they were ‘fairly’ or ‘very’ upset the last time this happened.

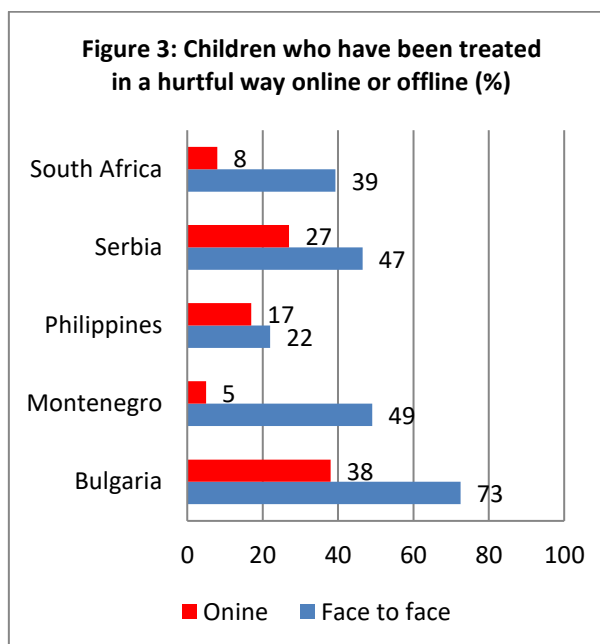
*It is possible, therefore, that while repeated problems indeed merit attention, problems that occur just once or twice may also need attention.*

### Hurtful peer behaviour on- and offline

Before examining hurtful online behaviour more carefully, we compare the incidence of hurtful behaviour on- and offline. Figure 3 shows that much depends on the country. Between 1 and 11% of all internet-using children aged 9–17 have experienced online hurtful behaviour. But importantly, in all the countries studied, face-to-face hurtful behaviour is (still) much more prevalent.

This raises questions about cultures of childhood on- and offline. For instance, why, in Serbia, is the difference between online and face-to-face hurtful behaviour is less than in Montenegro, where children are 10 times more likely to experience hurtful behaviour offline than online? Further questions (see our [Synthesis report](#))

reveal that online hurtful behaviour occurs especially on social network sites in all countries.



*Question: If someone has treated you in this way, how has it happened? Base: Children who use the internet aged 9–17 who were treated in a hurtful or nasty way at least once. Valid n: Bulgaria (n=287), Montenegro (n=108), the Philippines (n=107), Serbia (n=71), South Africa (n=138–173). Note: sample sizes for these follow-up questions are small, so answers should be treated with caution. Also, in all countries except Bulgaria, children could also choose further options (phone calls, mobile phone messages, some other way, don't want to say), which explains why the overall percentages are lower.*

### A wider range of hurtful behaviours

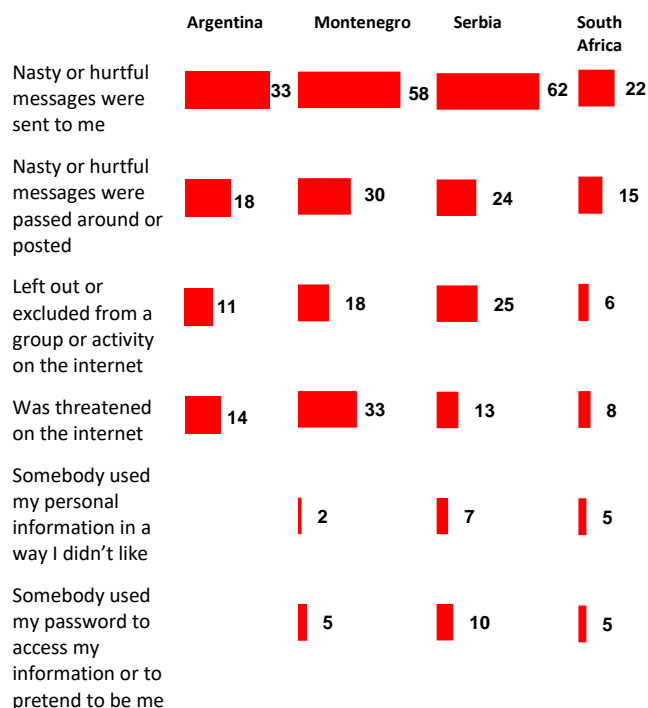
Having found that less than half of hurtful peer behaviour is repeated, and recognising that other behaviours than cyberbullying are raising public concerns, we asked about a variety of hurtful behaviours that children experience online.

Figure 4 shows that nasty or hurtful messages, whether sent directly or circulated and posted online, are among the main concerns for children in all the countries studied. Two-thirds of Serbian children who use the internet received hurtful or nasty messages and one in three children in Montenegro say that they have been threatened on the internet.

However, being explicitly the target of aggression is not the only source of hurtful experiences, and more ‘passive’ forms, such as exclusion from a group or an activity, must be considered in relation to the online environment. Being excluded from online groups is troublesome for a quarter of children in Serbia. Also problematic for some is having someone use their personal information in unwelcome ways, or using their

password to access their information or impersonate them.

**Figure 4: Variety of hurtful online peer behaviour**



*Question Have any of these things happened to you in the PAST YEAR? Base: Children who use the internet aged 9–17 (except 13–17 in Argentina). Valid n: Argentina (n=1,106), Montenegro (n=83–108; n=911 for the last two answer options), Serbia (n=70–194), South Africa (n=643).*

## Responding to hurtful behaviour online

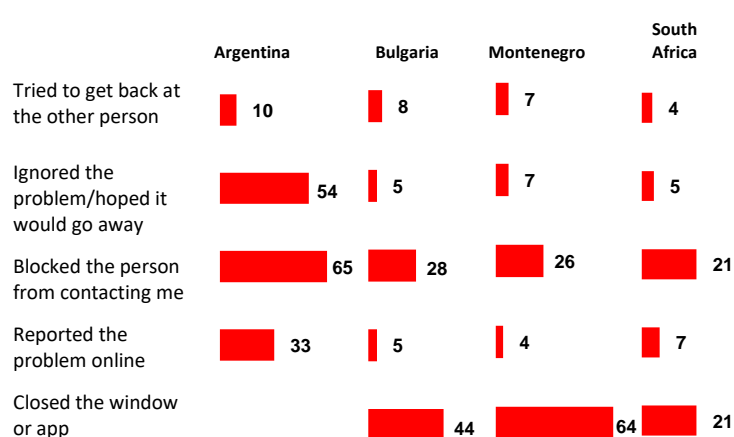
How do children respond when something upsetting happens online? Many children close the window or app (between 64% in Montenegro and 21% in South Africa) or block the person (65% in Argentina and about a quarter in Bulgaria, Montenegro and South Africa) (see Figure 5).

Active strategies such as reporting the problem online (e.g. to a helpline or online service provider) or changing privacy settings are less popular in most countries than using online tools to block the aggressor – this is done by at least one in five children who encountered such hurtful behaviour online. A few children respond to hurtful behaviour by trying to get back at the other person, which suggests that hurtful behaviour can result in further harm.

As we explore further in our [Synthesis report](#), few children turn for support to professionals, such as child support workers or educators. Friends and parents are the key sources for help, but between

a tenth and a fifth do not tell anyone when something upsetting happens online.

**Figure 5: Responding to hurtful behaviour online**



*Question: The last time something happened online that bothered or upset you in some way, did you do any of these things afterwards? Base: Children who use the internet aged 9–17, except 13–17 in Argentina, who were treated in a hurtful or nasty way at least once. Valid n: Argentina (n=1,106), Bulgaria (n=287), Montenegro (n=126), South Africa (n=180).*

## Key messages for policy and practice

- Policy-makers and practitioners need to be able to recognise the wide range of ways in which children can be hurt online by their peers to be able to better respond to children's diverse needs.
- Hurtful behaviour is not new or unique to the internet – it happens far more often face-to-face than online. Yet, in terms of its scale, complexity and consequences, online hurtful behaviour merits efforts to redress it in relation to the new environment in which it exists. Battling online hurtful behaviour should not automatically apply definitions based on traditional bullying, but be tailored to the online environment and the variety of risks it poses to children.
- In particular, although hurtful online behaviour often happens only once or twice a year, because of the very nature of the internet, it can remain online (even forever), and so may continue to be upsetting for longer. It is important to address *any* form of hurtful behaviour, not only repeated behaviour.
- The categories of 'victim' and 'aggressor' may overlap, especially as some victims may hit back as a response to hurtful behaviour and so become aggressors themselves.<sup>7</sup> An

understanding rather than a punitive approach is therefore vital.

- A comprehensive approach to addressing online hurtful behaviour is needed – one that focuses on collective online cultures as well as individual bullying behaviour.<sup>8</sup> Practical and policy responses should also recognise the interrelatedness of online and offline hurtful behaviours, and children’s active roles in both initiating hurtful experiences and offering peer support. This approach should also recognise the need for an early intervention and preventative focus.
- Cross-country comparisons suggest significant national and cultural differences in hurtful online behaviour. Global Kids Online’s country partners have worked further to identify the key issues at national and regional level, and to build collaborations with stakeholders for finding the best solutions. Jointly as a network, tailored policies are advocated that account for the specificity of children’s contexts and experiences, and are able to address the complexity of online hurtful behaviour.
- Policy and governance approaches promoting internet use for children in the Global South as a way of improving opportunities for education, communication and participation must recognise and address the fact that this

also brings risks to children, including online hurtful peer behaviour, and work on educational initiatives to address this effectively. It is also important that efforts to address risk do not result in restricting children’s valuable online opportunities to provision and participation.

- Polls and quick studies conducted for promotional or persuasive purposes often generate higher estimates of harm than independent and robust social science research. It is important that policy responses are based on solid evidence and an in-depth understanding of the problems.

For further information, see:

- The Global Kids Online research framework: [www.globalkidsonline.net/framework](http://www.globalkidsonline.net/framework)
- Qualitative and quantitative tools: [www.globalkidsonline.net/tools](http://www.globalkidsonline.net/tools)
- Comparative findings: [www.globalkidsonline.net/synthesis](http://www.globalkidsonline.net/synthesis)
- Comparative methodology: [Overview](#)
- Country studies: [Argentina](#), [Brazil](#), [Bulgaria](#), [Chile](#), [Montenegro](#), [the Philippines](#), [Serbia](#), [South Africa](#)

<sup>2</sup> See Smith, P. and Steffgen, G. (eds) (2013) *Cyberbullying through the new media: Findings from an international network*, London: Psychology Press.

<sup>3</sup> Freely available online under a creative commons licence, the Global Kids Online research toolkit was developed and tested by the London School of Economics and Political Science and UNICEF Office of Research–Innocenti, in collaboration with EU Kids Online, country research partners and international experts. See [www.globalkidsonline.net/tools](http://www.globalkidsonline.net/tools)

<sup>4</sup> See Finkelhor, D. (2013) *Trends in bullying and peer victimization*, Durham, NH: Crimes against Children Research Center.

<sup>5</sup> See Livingstone, S. (2016) *A framework for researching Global Kids Online: Understanding children’s well-being and rights in the digital age*, Method guide 1, London: London School of Economics and Political Science, [www.globalkidsonline.net/framework](http://www.globalkidsonline.net/framework)

<sup>6</sup> 35% in Serbia, 29% in South Africa, 24% in the Philippines, 19% in Bulgaria and 11% in Montenegro; Argentinian children reported much higher proportions – 50% say they are upset by something online weekly or more.

<sup>7</sup> At the same time, other research suggests that aggressors can attract the attention of others in ways that also make them victims; see Livingstone, S., Stoilova, M. and Kelly, A. (2016) ‘Cyberbullying: incidence, trends and consequences’, in Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children, *Ending the torment: Tackling bullying from the schoolyard to cyberspace*, New York, <http://srsg.violenceagainstchildren.org/sites/default/files/2016/End%20bullying/bullyingreport.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> See Ringrose, J. (2017) *Addressing gender, power and conflict at school and online*, Position Paper #WABF2017, [www.academia.edu/33066519/Position Statement WORLD ANTI BULLYING FORUM 2017 WABF2017 What is bullying](http://www.academia.edu/33066519/Position_Statement_WORLD_ANTI_BULLYING_FORUM_2017_WABF2017_What_is_bullying)

