



# The notion of child and youth online risks in the context of health education

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## ABSTRACT

In this study, I discuss the perspective of the social construction of risks in children's and young people's interactions with digital media. I develop the understanding that the notion of online risks for children and youths should not be guided by fixed and reifying categories, whether from traditional individualistic psychology or medicalization. Finally, I introduce the perspective of the differential effects of media and the crucial importance of exploring the three Cs: which child; which content; and in which contexts? The perspectives of social construction and the differential effects of media can enrich health education about such online risks, contributing to a nuanced view and approaching the multidimensionality involved in this issue.

**Keywords:** Risks, Digital media, Social construction, Prevention, Youth.

## A noção de riscos *online* infantojuvenis no âmbito da educação em saúde

### RESUMO

No presente estudo, discorro sobre a perspectiva da construção social dos riscos nas interações de crianças e jovens com os meios digitais. Desenvolvo a compreensão de que a noção de riscos infantojuvenis *online* não deve ser guiada por categorias fixas nem reificantes, sejam da psicologia individualista tradicional, sejam da medicalização. Ao final, introduzo a perspectiva dos efeitos diferenciais das mídias e a importância crucial de explorar os três Cs: qual criança; qual conteúdo; e em quais contextos? Essas duas óticas (da construção social e dos efeitos diferenciais das mídias) podem enriquecer a educação em saúde sobre tais riscos *online*, contribuindo para uma visão nuançada e abordando a multidimensionalidade envolvida nessa temática.

**Palavras-chave:** Riscos, Mídias digitais, Construção social, Prevenção, Infantojuvenil.

## El concepto de riesgos online infanto-juveniles en el ámbito de la educación para la salud

### Resumen

En este estudio, analizo la perspectiva de la construcción social de los riesgos en las interacciones de niños, niñas y jóvenes con los medios digitales. Desarrollo la idea de que la noción de riesgos online para la infancia y la adolescencia no debe guiarse por categorías fijas y reificadoras, ya sean provenientes de la psicología individualista tradicional o de la medicalización. Finalmente, introduzco la perspectiva de los efectos diferenciales de los medios y la importancia crucial de explorar las tres C: ¿qué niño, qué contenido y en qué contexto? Estas dos perspectivas (la de la construcción social y la de los efectos diferenciales de los medios) pueden enriquecer la educación para la salud sobre dichos riesgos en línea, contribuyendo a una visión matizada y abordando la multidimensionalidad de este tema.

**Palabras clave:** Riesgos, Medios digitales, Construcción social, Prevención, Juventud.

## INTRODUCTION

Despite descriptions of multiple ethical, creative, and safe uses of digital media by children and young people, alleged risks have been described, such as: excessive use of the internet; accessing pornography or receiving sexual messages; cyberbullying; accessing harmful content, such as hate speech against minorities and racism, pro-anorexia, self-harm, drug use, suicide; malicious use of personal data; and contacting unknown people over the internet and meeting with them (Comitê Gestor da Internet no Brasil, 2020).

In this theoretical essay, I address the focus on the social construction of risks in the interactions of children and young people with digital media. I develop the understanding that the notion of online child and youth risks should not be guided by fixed and reifying categories, whether from traditional individualistic psychology or medicalization. In this sense, it is worthwhile to maintain a critical vision on the constructions and categories stemming from inside-the-box thinking — which, when rethought, can lead to an attitude of being with the other, transforming ways of being, vision, and listening (Anderson, 2012).

Some questions guide the focus of this work: How do modern or postmodern mentalities operate in considering the plural uses of digital media by children or young people? How are different perspectives constructed: in more fluid reasoning or in fixed categories? How to consider local contexts and relational processes in the unique histories of interaction between children and young users, as well as their paradoxes?

## MODERN AND POST-MODERN PERSPECTIVES

Here, I explore how the adopted perspectives regarding child-youth risk differ, mainly because they stem from modern or postmodern conceptions. What constitutes the difference between the assumptions used for reflection?

A modern perspective seeks findings that claim to be pure truths; these are truths taken as objects of reality that “are there” *a priori* to be apprehended through a definitive explanatory mode (Anderson, 2020). Thus, binary oppositions predominate in the modern perspective. In general, affirming fixed truths is valued in modern perspectives. Therefore, some truths tend to prevail over others or even exclude each other. That is, an exclusionary mode of reasoning may prevail between views, such as: either this... or that. To describe this way of thinking, which comes from traditional models of science, the vocabulary thinking inside the box is often used. [Thus, in the theme of digital media, this more rigid mentality can generate restrictive views on the use of these media by young users.]

On the other hand, postmodern perspectives are a broad umbrella of concepts that challenge objective truth and individualistic knowledge (Anderson, 2020). They conceive the fluidity of truths, which come to be seen as local and transitory truths, depending on multiple contexts. Realities are seen as socially constructed, which, as such, must be subjected to the critique of ideologies, based on historical contextualization. Instead of the pretension of making *a priori* assertions or truths with a capital T, the postmodern mentality usually values the practice of questioning, as a way to broaden the investigation of new perspectives. Thus, the supposed truths, when (and if) they are reached, may prove to be changeable and constantly renewed. This view then requires a more inclusive reasoning, of the this *and also* that type. Furthermore, paradoxes can be part of the postmodern investigative perspective.

In this perspective, theories and concepts, instead of being affirmed as grand narratives of knowledge, yield to a position of plurality and are presented as *truths in quotation marks*. Hence, the perspectives of experts become relativized, and many other voices can begin to question the technological view. In other words, smaller narratives and alternative and multiple explanations are also valued. Complex explanations are preferred by scholars who adopt postmodern perspectives, as are multiple viewpoints and multiple versions surrounding the topics addressed. Moreover, the postmodern perspective primarily focuses on the processes and contexts in which specific phenomena are constructed (since realities are not considered *a priori*, but rather constructed within historicity and prevailing ideologies).

It is important to analyze which dominant discourses can operate by closing understandings into unified truths that are categorically affirmed. Here too, the supposed neutrality of the sciences, which would be able to eliminate deviations and risks, can be questioned through this postmodern view, especially when it comes to the human and social sciences. Consequently, the observer’s perspective on a phenomenon or investigator and their bias are considered critically and questioningly as part of the observation processes.

Such a more fluid and contextual thinking invites us to see realities outside the box, to think outside the square, and to look beyond the grand theoretical narratives. The proposal of this new paradigm is a more horizontal construction of knowledge and a possible humanization (unlike modern technicism, which values the autonomous knower and isolationism).

As an illustration, in the field of media studies, it is possible to critique an example of modern discourse. There are views that support the position that the internet is “leading” contemporary individuals to be more superficial (such as Carr, 2010). I consider this to be a modern perspective on the issue, as it is based on essentialism and prioritizes a linear explanation. In this binary opposition between supposed “depth versus superficiality,” Carr (2010), like other authors or lay commentators on digital media, seeks to universalize a supposed truth about digital media based on preconceptions and fixed categories, without considering the multidimensionality required to address such a topic.

As a more amplifying way of understanding, it would then be appropriate to invite out-of-the-box thinking, seeking to promote more reflexivity and criticism. In this way, we must avoid framing the experiences that children and young people describe in digital media through dichotomies such as deep *versus* superficial; true *versus* false; feminine *versus* masculine; mature *versus* immature; functional *versus* dysfunctional; healthy *versus* sick; integrated *versus* fragmented; unique *versus* multiple. I observe that remnants of these binary oppositions are common in traditional medical and psychological approaches and in health education regarding online risks for children and adolescents.

Despite the distinction made in this text regarding these points of view, it is worth considering that the contrast between modern and postmodern perspectives should not seek to establish a polarizing tone (Anderson, 2009).

Family practices have been influenced by the postmodern perspective, since theories and explanatory assumptions cease to be considered definitive and are themselves subject to continuous questioning. As Anderson (2009) warns it, based on postmodern assumptions,

[...] diagnostic categories and histories are the byproduct of human relationships and communicative interactions. This emphasis on the social and relational entails an important reconsideration of the notion of self or the individual (whether the object of inquiry is a single central self or multiple collective selves: self-construction, self-identity, the self in relationship and the connection of the I with the You) (p. 24-25).

The same author further emphasizes that, with postmodern questioning, the focus is not on the interior of the individual or the family, but rather on the person(s) in relationship (Anderson, 2009).

For the postmodern systemic family perspective, normality and abnormality are seen as a social construct; they are ideologies and historical discourses that are expressed in the family system and in communities. So, in conversations with young people/families/educators, I notice that it is important to go beyond the descriptions proposed within psychiatric classifications, also seeking possible interactive meanings in the various contexts of action. Looking at young people through the exclusive lens of risk can be a way of assuming prior and fixed characteristics of their essence.

## CHILD-YOUTH RISKS AND SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONIST PERSPECTIVE

A postmodern approach to understanding youth use of digital media can help deconstruct essentialisms regarding the problems, risks, and diagnoses stemming from the rhetoric of addiction or addiction to technology. In an amplifying line of reasoning, it is fruitful to consider that both the notion of child and youth, as well as the notions of normality/abnormality and risk, are all social constructs. These notions are constructed ideologically and historically and mobilize multiple meanings. Risk, from the postmodern perspective of social construction, is not considered a neutral and invariable concept throughout history.

In terms of the historical evolution of the notion of risk, in the modern era, risk was contained and controlled with a view to coercion or punishment. However, in the historical context of contemporaneity, it has come to be seen as a manageable human responsibility with voluntary self-discipline, under values of normalization (of a neoliberal democratic humanism). According to Lupton (1999),

Those who are determined to deviate significantly from the norm are typically identified as being at risk. To be designated as “at risk”, therefore, is to be positioned within a network of factors stemming from the observation of others. The implication of this rationalized discourse, again, is that risk is ultimately controllable, provided that expert knowledge can be brought to the forefront to impact it (p.4-5).

On the one hand, Lubeck and Garrett (1990) pointed out that the rhetoric of risk involves blaming either parents or educators, suggesting, therefore, that we deconstruct the notion of a child “at risk,” examining how this meaning is produced and for what purpose. In turn, Tulloch (1999) stated that, in media discourses, the notions of danger and risk are constructed by intelligibilities that build a supposed balance between subjectivities of a “self at risk” and a “self in control.”

The technical-scientific discourse (in medicine, epidemiology, and psychology) takes the conceptualization of risk as an objective phenomenon, defined by its prior conditions, even if in a decontextualized way. This discourse can, in some way: exert control over the body in political terms; shift the motives of risk processes to the individual (and not to the relational and the context), blaming the agents involved. This can generate indignation by viewing risk as something socially unacceptable (Lupton, 1993). Many discourses—markedly biased by psychiatric epidemiology—regarding digital media are limited to mapping high-risk youth and risky online behaviors, such as the one by Guan and Subrahmanyam (2009), for example.

In conversations with parents about supposed risks, ambivalence and contradictory descriptions can often be noted. This resonates with the observation that adults (whether parents, doctors, or educators) show ambiguities, sometimes positioning themselves as protectors, sometimes as permissive, or even projecting personal content, fantasizing about imaginary risks (Tursz, 1993). Thus, both ambivalence and contrasting feelings are commonly aroused, that is, the notion of risks as something problematic *versus* risks as opportunities (Lightfoot, 1997). Also, regarding the language about risks circulating in media outlets, two poles in tension can be described: accountability/blaming *versus* challenge/adrenaline (Spink et al., 2002).

Regarding the experience of living with young people in contemporary society, some authors have pointed to an anxiety about risks on the part of adults (parents/educators/institutions). The anxieties about risks, on the part of parents and institutions, are reflected in the monitoring of young people’s lives and are noted in the constant negotiations that adults and young people must make around values such as autonomy/protection and danger/security (Scott et al., 1998).

A supposed quantitative dimension of risks circulates in media commentary, in which risk becomes spectacle (Spink et al., 2002). Studies from modern perspectives can generate limiting questions and overvalue the quantification of risks in relation to digital media. I can cite one, among many of these studies: the use of social networking sites for more than 2 hours a day was associated with higher levels of psychological stress, suicidal ideation, and poorer mental health (Sampasa-Kanyinga & Lewis, 2015). This view of the researchers supposedly reinforces risk anxieties in institutions and families, as they tend to generalize fixed truths without contextualized case-by-case analysis.

With the strict delimitation of what is considered risk, a uniformity of subjectivity can be created, that is, we are restricted to what is or *is not* allowed to us. A postmodern perspective on the notion of risk critically argues that we can resist authoritarian assertions about how individuals should behave uniformly. Conversely, we can assume a “perspective on ‘risk-taking’ as the active process of choosing as life unfolds” (Fox, 1999, p. 30). In my understanding, Fox (1999) invites an appreciation of risks without slipping into a dichotomy between realism *versus* culturalism.

“Risk,” like “health,” is a concept that contributes to how we think about modern life. These concepts are linked to the values of a culture and to the moral rights and responsibilities of members of that culture, and to how such factors are implicated in how people understand themselves as reflective and ethical subjects (Fox, 1999, p. 30).

In the health field, language about risky attitudes and behaviors can: imply negative judgment about the social agents in question; create an increased sense of vulnerability in the addressed populations; and contribute to surveillance and interventions seeking moral rectification about their lives (Petersen & Wilkinson, 2008). In contrast, it is important to focus on this theme without essentializing the notion of risk.

It is also worth noting that adolescent risks constantly mobilize a certain ambivalence: they can be perceived both as causing harm and as an opportunity for growth (Lightfoot, 1997). Thus, when we reformulate this notion reflectively, childhood and youth risks can be seen as opportunities for renewal and transformation. In my view, this is a relevant facet in considering the use of media by children and young people.

On the one hand, parents/educators/professionals from older generations often assume worldviews that contrast with those of children and young people. Often, these tense realities seem not to communicate with each other. Having autonomy and protection can be paradoxical values, a constant theme in discourses about risks to children and adolescents (Scott et al., 1998). For example, among the children and young people who describe their experiences with digital screens to me in clinical conversations, many do not formulate any perception of danger, illegality, or harm in their narratives. As I emphasize in parts of this article, we must not be silent or omit serious impasses experienced in terms of ethics and morality but rather create open space for reflection with young users and many spheres of society.

We can interpret that some adolescent risks have an appeal to novelty, with the power to transform social status, through a struggle between the authoritarian discourse of the other and the creation of one's own discourse. These risks can lead to the modification of emotions and mental states, providing learning opportunities (Lightfoot, 1997). [However, I consider that all this depends on relational contexts in which there may or may not be benefits.]

From the children's perspective, the construction of the notion of risk changes according to contexts (of time, space, actions and people); children use knowledge from their direct experience, expecting their parents to protect them, but also negotiating between protective/restriction attitudes (Harden et al., 2000). Instead of focusing on adolescent risks as natural dispositions of pre-existing causes, it may be a useful way of interpretation to focus on them as a meaningful action, a form of experience relevant to cultural development and that has to do with multiple contexts (Lightfoot, 1997).

I also consider relevant to point out that, when children and young people feel insecure, the discourse of risk emphasized in institutions does not necessarily lead to an improvement in the perception of trustworthiness. For example, children and young people may report that they do not feel comfortable asking for help in institutions because they feel barriers to seeking support, notice that they are not known enough there, and think that things may get worse; thus, often when they find themselves in unsafe situations, they ask for help from their peers or parents, instead of doing so in institutions (Moore et al., 2016).

I believe that focusing on risk through limiting premises may seem practical and easy, but it does not free young people from a lack of alternatives and their barriers to seeking support from other trustworthy people. I emphasize how interesting and useful it is to open new avenues of access to children and young people, offering ourselves in a more available way to dialogue and to shared playful exchanges throughout the life cycle. To this end, it is a fruitful exercise to position ourselves closer to the child and young person, to listen to their stories regarding risks or situations in which they feel insecure, anxious, or embarrassed when using digital media. In this listening, prior values should not be formatted in an adult-like manner. This also resonates with promoting dialogues in which prior knowledge, which can interfere with listening, is suspended, and which conceive of transformation as something that occurs in the relational dynamic, through the acceptance and valuing of the subject, and not through judgment (Anderson, 2012).

In this sense, it is beneficial, in my view, to seek the interactive meaning of the supposed risks and their implications for the various systems and the relational environment. An interesting metaphor to represent adolescent risk is that of a badge which young people use displaying certain symbolism (Lightfoot, 1997): they express forms of autonomy, belonging to peer groups, and self-declarations. Thus, risks imply a textual construction, that is, narratives that transform interpersonal relationships and, consequently, must be interpreted in historical-cultural terms. In other words, they are "symbolic or emblematic markers of social identity" (Gergen et al., 2004, p. 394).

It is thus emphasized that the traditional individualistic view of psychology is not sufficient to define what constitutes a risk for children and adolescents based on pre-existing and fixed characteristics. In other words, it is necessary to consider that, when taking risks, the behavior of a child or adolescent is constructed in relational processes within networks, involving institutions/culture/history/friends/family. Therefore, taking risks is not an individual behavior; and risks can be seen as something worthwhile for what is communicated to others (Gergen et al., 2004; Lightfoot, 1997). Adolescent risks are a communicative form and provide material for creating meaning through symbolic processes, expressed in the form of language and group histories (Gergen et al., 2004).

If the notion that risk behaviors can be manifestations related to the construction of identity in adolescents is accepted, this leads us to always examine their contexts of interaction, their exchanges with family, educators, and peers. In this way, the adolescent's identity construction should be analyzed in the light of intersubjectivity (Zimmermann & Quartier, 2014). Similarly, in working with adolescent risks, we must recognize the priority role of relationships. Instead of perceiving them through a label or as a deficit, we can listen to young people's stories as critiques of culture and attempts at creative adaptation, seeking to explore proactive potentials mobilized from them (Gergen et al., 2004).

It is worth mentioning that the broadening perspective on online risks that I propose here does not minimize serious impasses involved in the relational management between parents/educators/children or young users. The questions about the social construction of adolescent risks do not seek to simplify decision-making in the practical lives of children, young people and their surroundings, nor to lessen the difficulties in building relevant public policies. Furthermore, I think it is advisable to conceive that, in supposed risk contexts, choices are procedural and continuously reconsidered (Fox, 1999).

Would it be possible to conceive of childhood and adolescence as 100% risk-free? How might this lead to the sanitization and control of children's and young people's spontaneity? The proposition of a life without risks can be criticized as an illusion of control or a search for totalizing certainty; in contrast, accepting life with the presence of risks implies dealing with aspects of instability and uncertainty (Lupton, 1999). Other thought-provoking questions

remain as a way to rethink concerns about supposed risks. In whose service is the moral panic surrounding the prevailing discourse of risk for children and young people in the virtual world? Which groups are privileged to the detriment of which others?

It is important to emphasize, once again, the importance of the bond and the attentive look at relational aspects; dialogue and shared and creative play in coexistence with children and young people. A fruitful perspective seeks to understand that adolescent risk is not a behavior, but a manifestation of psychosocial processes which have to do with playing (Lightfoot, 1997). In adolescence, taking risks can be part of normality, like a test drive<sup>1</sup> or experimental behaviors, as a way of playing with the body (Tursz, 1993).

On the other hand, in some adolescent risks, there may be variant psychosocial histories in which there may be no transformative experience at all and, depending on the contexts, no generation of meaning (Lightfoot, 1997). It is worth emphasizing that, to elucidate the distinction between these facets of risk-taking as a form of play, it is crucial to investigate the relational history (Lightfoot, 1997).

Therefore, in this vein, understanding youth risks as a social construction (Austen, 2009; Gergen et al., 2004; Lightfoot, 1997), risks require exploration of the multiple meanings involved in their constitution. Hence, it is necessary to create spaces for reflection on the contexts, since, on a case-by-case basis, there is a wide range of variability regarding the risks involving digital media for connection in the experimentation of children and young people. It makes sense to critically reflect that, depending on the histories and psychosocial processes, taking risks can function “as a type of activity of hope” (Lightfoot, 1997, p. 129).

Excessive surveillance of children’s and young people’s experimentation and attempts to eliminate risks in the virtual world may not bring solutions to the complexity involved. Additionally, whether in the areas of health education or digital literacy, generating understandings about the risks to children and young people online and their complex processes requires including the voices of children and young people, based on their own lived experiences.

## THE CONCEPTION OF DIFFERENTIAL SUSCEPTIBILITY TO MEDIA EFFECTS CASE BY CASE

As I outlined before, separating digital media from the processes and contexts involved (multiplicity of modes of use, forms of interpretation, and relational histories of users in each case) can generate fallacious generalizations. Notwithstanding, as already mentioned, many studies with modern traditional methodology on the “effects of media” that achieve much-touted public dissemination can start from binary questions. These supposedly create limiting bias. Examples of such questions are: Do violent media generate aggressive behavior? Yes or no? Do social networks create risks to child and adolescent sexuality? Yes or no?

Instead of focusing on these types of questions, curiosity could be directed to which users benefit or may experience disadvantages and when. In contrast to the binary or restrictive view, it may be more beneficial to conceive that susceptibility to media should receive a differential look. In other words, depending on the content, the diversity of users, and the unique contexts, the implications for media use can be plural and sometimes difficult to generalize. It is necessary to inquire: in what ways are some individuals more susceptible to the effects of media than others; how does this differential influence occur on a case-by-case basis?

With this in mind, it is worthwhile to investigate: the role that media plays in each family system; its uses that sometimes bring parents and children closer together and sometimes maintain boundaries; the ways in which such members of the system accommodate, assimilate, or reject media messages (Strassburger et al., 2011).

To consider this differential susceptibility (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013), one must consider the supposed effects at the microlevel; attempt an integrative reasoning between media variables/non-media variables; and observe the user in a unique way.

Taking into account, then, a differential susceptibility to the effects of media (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013), conditional effects must be conceived, among which would be:

1. In the original, *conduite d'essai*.

- The variables of the user's disposition: gender, personality, temperament, attitudes, values, beliefs, cognitions, moods and motivations (some more stable and others more transient, but all being relevant);
- The developmental variables, which have to do with the emotional, cognitive and social development, operating throughout the life cycle (although more influential in childhood and adolescence, decreasing in older ages);
- The social variables, which include factors of relationships with friends/peers/family/school/work/religion, as well as cultural norms and values. I comment, however, that Valkenburg and Peter (2013) do not mention fundamental social categories here, such as ethnicity, geographic region of origin, social class, sexual orientation, and body or abilities.

According to the authors, indirect effects of media should also be considered: emotional, cognitive, and excitatory effects. As a metaphor, Valkenburg and Peter (2013) formulate that these three response states would be distributed like three small levers on a music mixing panel.

Thus, the framework of differential media effects can be enriching as a way of understanding child-youth online risks. I highlight here the elucidative formulation for practical use, of the need to investigate the 3 Cs: Which child user? What is the content? In which contexts? (Guernsey, 2007 *apud* Lauricella et al., 2015).

## FINAL COMMENTS

In my understanding, it is worthwhile to maintain a postmodern perspective in exploring the topic addressed, as open as possible to multiple voices in the construction of discourses on risks, prioritizing appreciative and nuanced listening to the broad relational aspects involved. Since this is a topic that involves complexities, subtle aspects, implicit meanings, and local contexts must also be considered. Thus, this reflection should start from recursive thinking and generative logic. This listening should seek empathetic curiosity towards the accounts and lived experiences of the various participants in the conversation, without any of them being the single truth, thus opening new dialogical possibilities.

The focus on the social construction of risks and the exploration of the three Cs (the child, the content, and the context) can be useful for designing health education strategies that take into account the multidimensionality and case-by-case relational aspects that operate in such online risks.

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### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Nothing to declare.

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