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Exploring how children express feelings and emotions in an online support group



Jennifer G. Tichon*

Griffith Institute for Educational Research, Griffith University, Australia

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ABSTRACT

Support groups provide opportunities for participants to express and get in touch with their feelings and emotions. For children such groups provide a non-threatening environment in which they can share their feelings and concerns openly with one another. The wide range of social networking options made easily accessible via mobile technologies has seen children increasingly connecting with their peers in search of emotional support. For parents and professionals alike the question arises as to whether these online groups provide the positive support environment necessary to ensure children feel comfortable sharing their emotional concerns. In this study qualitative content analysis of the communications shared between the young members of an online support group for siblings of children with special needs revealed that participants felt confident to openly express a range of strong feelings and emotions, including hate, love, confusion, hurt, fear, jealousy and embarrassment.

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1. Introduction

The number and range of topics covered by online support groups is ever increasing with research having reported on many groups including those accessed by caregivers of people with AIDS (Brennan, Moore, & Smythe, 1992), survivors of sexual abuse (Finn & Lavitt, 1994), breast cancer patients (Sharf, 1997; Sillence, 2013), haemophiliacs (Scheerhorn, 1997), parenting support (Nieuwboer, Fukkink, & Hermanns, 2013), people with physical disabilities (Braithwaite, Waldron, & Finn, 1999), and individuals with eating disorders (McCormack & Coulson, 2009). Despite the widely acknowledged attraction of computers and the Internet to children and young adolescents, however, their communication via this medium has received less attention from researchers. This is an area in need of more study as children online are only just beginning to learn about feelings and how to cope with emotions when interacting with others (KidsMatter, 2015).

An important aim of support groups is to provide a non-judgemental opportunity to identify and express feelings and emotions (Johnson-Schroetlin, 2000) and help members bring their feelings into the open. Support groups also provide children and young adolescents with a forum for expressing their feelings and concerns and a safe place where they can get in touch with

these feelings (Lehmann, Jimerson, & Gaasch, 2001). Although young people are increasingly accessing online support groups, little research focuses on the extent to which children and young adolescents communicate and express feelings in these online environments.

Revealing emotions can be difficult at any age. 'Positive face' work involves a natural wish to be perceived as competent and desirable, whereas 'negative face' work concerns the desire of individuals to be autonomous and unimpeded by others (Goffman, 1963). People have a desire to maintain a balance between different types of face work; therefore, they need to manage the risks of revealing emotions and feelings (Brown & Levinson, 1978; Tracy, Craig, Smith, & Spisak, 1984). Young children, in particular, can often find it hard to only identify their emotions but also work out how to express them. They may in frustration hit out when they find it hard to reveal more negative emotional states (Moyses, 2013). Children who have trouble dealing with emotions may become depressed or anxious, while children who understand and express emotions are more empathic and more likely to be able to cope with negative emotions (Joly, Giard, & Lewis, 2015). Participants of support groups, at any age, need to feel comfortable in the context of a support group to reveal private feelings and emotions.

When accessing the Internet people are not only solitary information processors seeking new information but also social beings looking for affiliation, support and affirmation (Savolainen, 2015; Sproull & Faraj, 1997). Similarly most members join online support

* Address: Griffith Institute for Educational Research, Mt Gravatt campus, Griffith University, 176 Messines Ridge Road, Mt Gravatt, Queensland 4122, Australia.

E-mail address: j.tichon@griffith.edu.au

groups not merely to gather information to help them cope with individual concerns but to seek affirmation about how they feel emotionally. Emotions have been found to be contextual factors that actually affect the extent information is shared or not in online discussions (Savolainen, 2015). Recent research suggests collective emotions in online groups influence how the online community feels as a whole (Chmiel et al., 2011). This occurs because online groups facilitate emotional sharing through the nature of online communication. Expression of some emotions has been found to encourage sharing more than others (Shontell, 2014). When members recognize the limitations of not being able to convey support nonverbally they make more explicit statements about their feelings in their written communications to compensate (Bloom & Walz, 2000). This may result in more specific statements in messages that they care for another member, that they understand that person's feelings, and they hope things improve for him or her (Weinberg, Schmale, Uken, & Wessel, 1995). Because participants in online groups must explicitly state, rather than nonverbally imply, these messages, recipients may feel even more strongly emotionally supported than they would in face-to-face exchanges (Weinberg, 1996). In an early analysis of adolescent messages in both online and face-to-face support group sessions it was reported the online communication was more reflective of feelings and encouraged more frequent mention of interpersonal issues (Zimmerman, 1987).

1.1. Siblings of children with special needs

Growing up with a child who has special needs often has some problematic consequences for young siblings (Giallo & Gavidia-Payne, 2006; Meyer, 1997; Seligman & Darling, 1997; Young, 2007). At the individual level, prior research indicates that these problems can undermine emotional and psychological well-being and social functioning (Seligman & Darling, 1997; Siegel & Silverstein, 1994).

Online support groups have been shown to greatly assist siblings of children with special needs to cope with their concerns (Tichon & Shapiro, 2003a,b). Positive outcomes include young sibling's discovering that they are not alone with their difficult experiences and that others share the experience of coping with special needs in the family (Meyer, 1997). As a result of discovering others share similar life situations, siblings have been more willing to share their thoughts and feelings so that parents and professionals better understand their concerns and worries (Seligman & Darling, 1997). As the large number of children and adolescents logging on to Internet support sites increases, the importance of examining the content of online communications increases. For any type of support group its ability to provide participants with an effective environment in which to share feelings and emotions is integral to its success. For groups that involve young and vulnerable children and adolescents the question of whether these forums are a safe environment for them to explore their emotions is an important one.

This study explored the discussion of feelings and emotions by children and young adolescents in the context of an online support group for young siblings of children with special needs.

2. Method

The study is an exploratory content analysis of the Sibkids online support group using both qualitative and quantitative data. Sibkids is a peer support group for young siblings with special needs and the messages posted to the site by members comprise the data used for the study. Each message was broken into

relatively small units of content and submitted to qualitative content analysis. A coding scheme was developed to describe:

- (1) the topics addressed in messages posted to the forum,
- (2) the types of social support exchanged, and
- (3) the nature of self-disclosure shared by individual participants.

The content of messages were coded according to the topic addressed in the posting. The coding scheme allowed for multiple topics within messages. QSR NUDIST 4 was used to analyze the data.

Throughout the content analysis, analytical notes and memos concerning the topics that emerged from the preliminary data and the relationship of topics to the general issue of being a sibling of a child with special needs were compiled. For example, the following email led to the attached analytic note about the feelings and emotions experienced by a young sibling:

My brother has autism. He gets a lot of extra attention and sometimes I get sick of it too, but I love him.

(Analytic Note: Feelings/Emotions, possible topic theme: experience of ambivalent feelings? Alternatively, concern over conflicting feelings - are negative feelings always/primarily followed by a positive feeling/emotion? Less acceptable to express negative feelings due to special needs?)

Once core categories emerged, cross participant comparisons were sought to identify similarities among individuals, peculiarities of single cases, and relationships among categories (Kelle, 1995). The task was facilitated through the use of memos and the analytical notes. As the comparative analysis of messages proceeded, categories were expanded, modified, or discarded. Emerging topic themes were explored to identify patterns and to identify relationships among themes. It was the constant moving in and out of the context of the original data that produced qualitative results and propositions.

To assess reliability of the coding decisions, a second coder independently coded a subset of original data (10%). The subset was generated from a random number list of the messages posted to the Sibkids listserv. The second coder had explicit criteria for rating. The percentage agreement was 96.7%.

2.1. Sampling

Three consecutive months of messages were selected for the sample to permit postings to be followed over time. The three months yielded 655 separate emails originating from 58 unique senders. Age and gender characteristics of participants are shown in Table 1.

Posted messages identified the sender, and topic of each message, followed by the actual text itself. Communication in this support group did not happen in real time so much of the interaction developed in threads sometimes over several days or weeks. Where messages were responses to previous postings, parts of the previous posting were typically reproduced in the current message, and could be used as a way of reconstructing the original

Table 1
Age characteristics of participants.

	All (n = 58)	Female (n = 33)	Male (n = 23)	Unknown (n = 2)
Age range	7–17	8–17	7–14	
Median age	11.2	12	10.2	
SD	2.59	2.40	2.54	

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