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Risky Online Behaviors and Young People

Editor's note: This article explores a study investigating whether there is a connection between children and young people disclosing their identities online and the occurrence of child sexual exploitation. It is important to note that there are many risks associated with disclosing personal information that extend beyond sexual abuse, such as identity theft. It is a generally accepted rule that all Internet users use caution regarding the sharing of personal information online.

Much of the attention  to Internet safety over the past 15 years has been focused on discouraging young people from posting identifying information such as their names, addresses, or schools online. Often, they are taught not to use their real names or to disclose “clues” that could allow a potential predator to stalk and find them at their home, neighborhood, or sports team.

However, in 2008, a team of researchers looked into the reality of sexual offenses that occur in the context of Internet contact and found that actual crimes do not fit the stereotypes at all. *The National Juvenile Online Victimization Study* and the second *Youth Internet Safety Survey* were funded by the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children and the U.S. Department of Justice. The study showed that it is not uncommon for young people, ages 12 to 18, to be solicited for “real-life” meetings or sexual contact by adults they meet online and that certain characteristics and behaviors place young people at higher risk.

What are high-risk characteristics?

History of physical and sexual abuse. Broadly speaking, a history of physical or sexual abuse increases an individual’s risk of future abuse and exploitation. This finding also holds true for the risk of aggressive online solicitation and real life victimization, possibly because the youths are more affection and attention-seeking, possibly because they are more responsive to inappropriate contact and possibly because the previous experiences of abuse have impaired some of the controls needed to avoid risk-taking behaviors in general. Adolescents with previous experiences of physical and sexual abuse are significantly more likely to experience aggressive online solicitations to send or receive nude photographs, engage in sexual conversations, or to meet in person for sexual contact.

Gender. Seventy-five percent of victims involved in real life exploitation are female.

Sexual orientation. Of the male victims of real life exploitation and aggressive solicitations, the majority have entered chat rooms and discussion groups to explore gender preference. Self-identified homosexual youths and those who are questioning find themselves targeted by adult males who use the Internet to develop relationships and initiate real life contact with adolescent boys.

What are high risk behaviors?

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Initiating sexual conversations. Most adolescents are interested in and curious about sexual matters. This is developmentally appropriate and part of the inherent vulnerability of teens to online solicitation. Most youths who interact online do not talk with unknown people about sexual matters. However, the five percent of youths who do talk about sex with unknown people are at higher risk for aggressive solicitations and Internet-initiated sexual crimes.

Sending personal information. In the majority of Internet-initiated crimes against youths, the perpetrator seduced the young person over time and used the Internet to establish a relationship of trust from the perspective of the youth. Most young people do not send personal information such as their name, telephone number, and/or address, but those who do are at higher risk to become the victims of crimes.

Using foul or abusive language online. Anti-social behavior online is another risk factor for exploitation and aggressive solicitation. Even when the language or discussion does not involve sexual content, “acting out” online puts young people at higher risk.

What does NOT appear to pose a higher risk?

It does not appear that simply posting information online and participating in social networking places adolescents at higher risk. Also contrary to what many believe, younger children are not the most common targets for solicitation or sexual abuse by offenders they met online. The study showed that 99 percent of Internet-initiated sex crimes were perpetrated against 13 to 17 year olds; none were younger than 12.

What are the dynamics?

The typical adolescent who is exploited by an online offender knows he or she is interacting with an adult; only five percent of the offenders pretend to be teenagers when they initiate contact. The adolescent female who is exploited is not deceived about the age of the individual or his or her interest in personal contact. Most often, the deception lies in the promises of love and affection when the offender’s primary interest is sexual.

Of the victims of sexual abuse from an offender they met online, the vast majority know they are meeting for the purpose of sexual contact. Seventy-three percent of victims have met an adult in person more than once. Typically, the crimes are prosecuted as statutory rape for non-forcible sexual activity with an adolescent who has not reached the age of consent.

What does this mean for prevention?

These findings have serious implications for our online sexual crime prevention efforts. Experts in the field have offered the following recommendations:

- Avoid descriptions of the problem that characterize victims as young children or emphasize violence and deception.
- Be clear about why sex with underage adolescents is illegal, wrong and can cause harm, even when it is not violent.
- Focus prevention efforts more on adolescents and less on parents.
- Provide parents with factual descriptions of at-risk youths and their behavior online.
- Focus openly toward concerns relevant to adolescents, including issues of autonomy, privacy, romance, and sex.
- Focus prevention more on the interactive aspects of Internet use and Internet-based relationship development, and less on posting personal information.

- Educate adolescents about criminal sexual behavior and child pornography.
- Develop targeted prevention approaches for the most at-risk youth populations.

* For more information, review the original publication by Janis Wolak, David Finkelhor, Kimberly J. Mitchell, and Michele L. Ybarra "Online 'Predators' and Their Victims." February–March 2008, *American Psychologist* 111, Vol. 63, No. 2, 111–128.

Article Posted on: 2011-08-29 10:09:03.0 - It has been viewed 208 times

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