

Identifying vulnerable children online and what strategies can help them

Aims

This report is based on a seminar with two aims. Firstly, it aimed to provide a forum to bring together the latest research regarding vulnerability online, both from academic researchers and practitioners. Secondly, it aimed to identify how, on the basis of available evidence, to take matters forward in order that we might develop a cohesive national response to vulnerability online and target resources accordingly.

Key Findings

Research findings

- Findings from the Canadian Centre for Child Protection study revealed that of 166 cases of children groomed online, 8 cases made reference to some form of vulnerability.
- Interim findings from the Risktaking Online Behaviour Empowerment through Research and Training project found that children groomed online felt that nobody asked them 'the right questions' whilst it was happening that might have protected them.
- The EC online groomers study found that that victims were predominantly females, mean age 13-14. The study identified three categories of children: the majority were 'resilient' and least likely to interact and of low risk of meeting the groomers offline; the 'disinhibited' were willing to interact but unlikely to meet; the minority were 'vulnerable' and willing to interact, seeking relationships and of high risk of meeting groomers offline.
- The EU Kids Online study found that children whose parents lack education or internet experience tend to lack digital safety skills and parental support online, leaving them vulnerable to online risk; children with psychological difficulties tend to encounter more online risk and to be more upset by it; disabled children tend to have more digital skills but they encounter more online risk and may lack peer support; minority children have more skills yet encounter more risk, and their parents wish to help them more.
- Sexting research in 2010/11 for the BBC3 programme 'websex: what's the harm?', based on 1150 participants aged 9-11, found: 38% have friends who have sexted; 13% say it happens all the time; 56% were aware of distribution to other people; 70% would turn to friends if they got into trouble; 38% see nothing "inappropriate" about a topless image; 14% see nothing "inappropriate" about naked images.

Practice findings

- Online activities and digital lives of the most vulnerable are not routinely explored, and thus the risks may be undetected. However, it is a difficult and sensitive area to inquire, particularly with adolescents, for reasons such as plurality of the activities, and issues of embarrassment and shame about things that may be going on online. Suicide contagion is not new, but the technology does facilitate speed and transmission. The three areas of vulnerability to suicide contagion are: attachment disorders, developmental disorders, and physical and mental disorder.

- Of the children groomed online for sexual abuse online and/or offline: girl victims are most unlikely to report the abuse for reasons such as the sexualised nature of the exchange, feelings of complicity, lying about their age, emotional dependency on online 'boyfriend' and fear of others' responses. Very few of them had a history of troubled backgrounds. The boys' victims were often gay or bi-sexual, and were eager and needy for relationships. Most were aged 12-13 when first encountered abusers, and started coming out of the abyss around 16-17 years old.
- The 'Virtual violence I and II' reports, published respectively in 2009 and 2012, found that there were no absolutes regarding vulnerability online. However, children with special educational needs, pupils receiving free school meals, children of non-British ethnic background and females, and children who looked after a disable/ill family member reported high incidences of online bullying.

Children with special needs or disabilities

- The 'Munch Poke Ping' project, based on excluded youth in Pupil Referral Units, found that youth who have low self-confidence, fluid learning environment, have experienced abusive relationships or environments, are under the influence of alcohol, substance and gang, and lack supportive adults are more likely to be vulnerable online. And social media may amplify their vulnerability.
- A literature review on research evidence in relation to children with special needs or disabilities found that very few broad studies have been carried out in the area. There are some studies focusing on more niche areas such as risk in identity negotiation and using assistive techniques. But more work is needed.

Policy Context

- Policymakers and stakeholders working in a range of areas that provide welfare, clinical, educational or commercial services for children are not always aware of the particular ways in which children can be vulnerable online. Indeed, many have asked for both evidence and recommendations on how especially to meet the needs of these children. The report of the seminar therefore presents evidence-based recommendations relevant to a range of stakeholders.

Methodology

This report of a seminar arranged by the UKCCIS Evidence Group on 24th January, 2012 is based on 10 speakers' presentations on their research findings, plus panel discussion with seminar attendees.

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