UKCCIS

UK COUNCIL FOR CHILD INTERNET SAFETY

European Online Grooming Project_

Young People's Online Behaviour: Findings from the European Online Grooming Project

Aims

The aims of this research on young people's online behaviour in the context of groomers' accounts were to understand: the nature and extent of Internet use; young people's understanding and awareness of online safety; their experiences, behaviours and strategies to stay safe online; social networking behaviours; their knowledge and attitudes regarding online groomers; and their attitudes to online safety awareness advice and training.

Key Findings

- Time spent online ranged from 5 minutes to 6 hours as a maximum. The older group age 14-16 spent longer online, consistent with literature about online behaviour in the teenage years. Personal computers (PCs) and personal laptops were used during the week for searches related to homework. At weekends more time was spent social networking and, in the case of the older group, this was conducted from their mobile phones rather than PCs or laptops.

- Young people described where they used the Internet as a matter of convenience and expediency; however, the bedroom did seem to be the preferred location and was influenced by the need for privacy.

- Three risk awareness themes emerged from the group discussions. First, was the concept of non-disclosure and encompassed people not sharing information about their private life to strangers, or meeting people they do not know (stranger-danger). In schools where there had been no safety awareness training, some young people (particularly those from the 'vocational' education stream) talked about meeting someone under particular circumstances. For example, if they were attractive. Second were risks to the health of their computer and thus the young person. Here, getting hacked and/or people taking control of webcams to spy on them were discussed. The final category was labelled 'no knowledge' as some young people were unable to articulate any awareness of risk.

- Risk-management strategies for the young people meant having settings to 'private', not giving out phone numbers or addresses and specifically not giving out passwords. It appeared that much of the online safety practice had been learnt 'by doing' rather than through explicit advice. This was particularly evident where there had been no awareness training in school. Sources of unstructured learning tended to be from siblings and parents.

- Some young people had their profile settings on 'public'. This meant anyone using the Internet could access the page and discover personal details about the young person. These young people tended to come from 'vocational' education streams. For those that had their settings on 'private', influencing this behaviour were safety awareness sessions in school, or parents that were aware of safety issues and also users of Facebook.

- Young people developed multiple profiles in response to safety risks and so posted different information on each profile according to who they expected to view the page.

- Young people's responses to an approach (from a 'stranger' online) covered three themes. Immediate action - consistent blocking of messages or ignoring inappropriate requests. Risky behaviours - keeping strangers phone numbers and continuing to chat online until things seem suspicious. Extent of disclosure – a common feature across boys and girls accounts was that they dealt with things alone and doing so was not much of a problem. Boys in particular tended to be more resistant to the idea of telling anyone about inappropriate online approaches, girls tended to tell a friend. There was some resistance to telling parents or carers, influenced by a fear that their computer privileges would be removed.

- The style or approach of the training provider distinguished attitudes to safety training. In Italy all training seemed to be welcome. In the UK, some young people wanted to relate to the provider. This did not necessarily mean the provider needed to be someone of a similar age, but people who liked Facebook. There was a sense that some parents were fearful of Facebook, and so some young people were sceptical about the advice the parent gave. Therefore an open and balanced delivery does seem to influence the credibility of the message.

Policy Context

The potential scale of victimisation of children and young people online makes the issue one of public health, given the population base of potential victims and the damaging impact on children's mental health and even physical health following abuse and sexualised contact initiated online. Safer Internet Programmes have led to much greater provision of information and awareness across Europe. However, lack of awareness about online risk is still a problem. There are specific gaps in safety campaigns regarding the content of messages and how they were delivered. It may also be necessary to target provision at more vulnerable groups in a specific way.

Methodology

Twelve focus groups were conducted across the UK, Italy and Belgium with young people age 11-16 years. The purposive target sample group was school-aged young people at secondary school, therefore encompassing an age range of between 11 and 16 years. Previous research indicated differences between younger and older children in the incidence and nature of internet use, as well as gender and socio-economic background differences. The achieved sample of 98 young people comprised two age ranges of 11-13 years and 14-16 years, a mix of boys and girls with two of the groups being single sex (girls only), and where possible socio-economic variation to capture these differences in awareness, behaviours and attitudes

Background

The European Online Grooming Project was funded by the EC's Safer Internet Programme.

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