To Tell Or Not to Tell? Youth's Responses to Unwanted Internet Experiences.

Aims

The 3rd Youth Internet Safety Survey (YISS-3) investigated youth responses to reported unwanted Internet experiences. The analysis examined the following responses: Telling someone about the incident, and ending the unwanted situation by active or passive coping. Responses to the following unwanted Internet experiences were analysed: Sexual solicitation, online harassment and unwanted exposure to pornography.

Key Findings

Telling or Not Telling about Unwanted Internet Experiences

- Youth told someone significantly more often about online harassment (75%) than about sexual solicitation (53%) or unwanted exposure to pornography (42%). 15% of those who told someone about online harassment disclosed this to a teacher or counsellor, though few told these adults about sexual solicitation or unwanted exposure to pornography. For all types of unwanted Internet experience, youth most often told a friend or parent (e.g.,69% who experienced sexual solicitation told a friend; 60% who experienced unwanted exposure to pornography told a parent).

- For all types of unwanted Internet experience, the most often mentioned reason for not telling anybody was that the incident was not serious enough or that it happened all the time (e.g., 62% who experienced sexual solicitation, 66% who experienced unwanted exposure to pornography). A smaller proportion did not tell anybody because they were too scared or embarrassed (e.g., 10% who experienced sexual solicitation, 14% who experienced unwanted exposure to pornography and harassment respectively). Others did not tell anybody because they thought they might get in trouble or lose Internet access (e.g., 2% who experienced sexual solicitation and harassment respectively, and 7% who experienced unwanted exposure to pornography).

- Youth were more likely to tell someone about sexual solicitation if the incident went on for two days or longer (e.g., 48% told someone vs. 30% who didn't). They were also more likely to tell someone about sexual solicitation if they had known the perpetrator in person before the incident longer (42% told someone vs. 22% who didn't).

- Youth who were distressed about sexual solicitation were not more likely than non-distressed youth to tell someone about what happened. On the other hand, youth who had experienced online harassment were more likely to tell someone if they had been very or extremely upset by the incident (48% of those who told someone vs. 16% who did not).

- Youth who experienced sexual solicitation or online harassment reported that they had harassed or sexually solicited somebody else more often than those without such experiences (e.g., 73% of those who had been harassed reported that they had done the same to someone else).

- Youth who experienced any kind of distress were significantly more likely to tell a parent about any type of unwanted Internet experience (sexual solicitation: 36% of distressed had told a parent v. 12% of non-distressed; online harassment: 55% v. 29%; unwanted exposure to pornography: 36% v. 22%). Youth who told a friend did not significantly differ from those who did not tell a friend with regard to distress.

Active and Passive Coping with the Unwanted Internet Situation

- The most often mentioned response to sexual solicitation was active coping, mainly blocking or warning the person/telling the person to stop (42%). 29% of those who had experienced online harassment used active coping, although 38% used other, unspecified responses.

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- Incident characteristics and most youth characteristics were not related to whether youth used active or passive coping.
- Distressed youth more often used active coping if they could not stop thinking about the incident (e.g., 28% who experienced sexual solicitation, 37% who experienced online harassment), did not want to use the Internet because of the incident (36% who experienced sexual solicitation), or felt jumpy/irritable/had trouble sleeping (35% who experienced online harassment).
- Passive coping (e.g., leaving the site, logging off) was the response most often used in response to unwanted exposure to pornography (77%).

Methodology

Data collection occurred between August, 2010 and January, 2011. The study was based on data from the Third Youth Internet Safety Survey (YISS-3), a telephone survey with a nationally representative U.S. sample of 1,560 Internet users aged 10 to 17 and their caretakers. The results presented here are based on data from those participants who reported unwanted Internet experiences (e.g., sexual solicitation, online harassment, unwanted exposure to pornography) and who answered follow-up questions about whether they had told someone about the experience (n = 134, n = 174 and n = 346 respectively) or how the situation ended (n = 134, n = 170 and n = 348 respectively).

Policy Implications

Two pathways toward a healthy development of youth have been suggested in an integrative model by Kia-Keating, Dowdy, Morgan, and Noam (2011)[1]: (a) a protective pathway, which, when risk is mediated or buffered by protection, support or intervention, leads to a positive outcome; (b) a promoting pathway, by which assets lead directly to healthy development. When applied to online risks, both pathways are needed. The results of this study suggest that efforts to encourage distressed youth to tell someone about unwanted Internet experiences in order to get protection are needed. Taking away Internet privileges no longer seems to be an effective way of trying to protect youth with unwanted Internet experiences. A promoting pathway would enhance youth's coping strategies so that they are able to use a variety of strategies. It is important to find both ways to support youth who have been harmed by unwanted Internet experiences and to encourage youth to find their own adequate ways to respond to these experiences, whether they are distressed or not.

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[1] Kia-Keating M., Dowdy E., Morgan M. L., & Noam G. G. (2011). Protecting and promoting: An integrative conceptual model for healthy development of adolescents. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 48(3), 220-228.