ARTICLES

Grooming Cybervictims:
The Psychosocial Effects
of Online Exploitation for Youth

Ilene R. Berson

ABSTRACT. The social and cultural communities of the Internet provide a virtual venue with unique perspectives on power, identity, and gender. This paper presents an overview of the benefits and risks of Web-based interactions for youth. As an illustrative example, the psychosocial effects of online grooming practices which are designed to

Ilene R. Berson is Assistant Professor in the Department of Child and Family Studies at the Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute at the University of South Florida in Tampa and serves as Director of the Consortium for Child Welfare Studies. She is a member of the United Nation's Education, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) North American Child Health Task Force Advisory Committee on Internet Safety. Ilene's research focuses on children's online safety and the creation of safe, supportive school environments for child victims. She can be contacted at The University of South Florida, Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute, Department of Child and Family Studies, 13301 Bruce B. Downs Boulevard, Tampa, FL 33612 (E-mail: berson@mirage.fmhi.usf.edu).

lure and exploit children are discussed. Constructive solutions and a plan of action which foster protective and productive learning experiences are explored. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress. com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com> © 2003 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

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INTRODUCTION

According to a quote by Rossetto, the digital age has brought with it "social changes so profound that their only parallel is probably the discovery of fire" (Hudson, 1997, p. 7). Just as fire has brought us warmth and light, the Internet has ignited an excitement for learning in a global medium. Conversely, as the destructive force of the fire necessitates careful use of this unpredictable element, online interaction can expose youth to an insidious threat to their well being. Like the fire, the potential brilliance of the Internet may only be obscured by the hidden dangers which lurk beneath a mesmerizing façade.

Technopessimists have warned that the Internet spells the end of civilizations, cultures, interests and ethics. During the 1990s many reports in the media described the Internet as a portal to pornography for the innocent eyes of children and a new source of addiction. Subsequently, public opinion was swayed by news stories that users of the Internet experience increased levels of loneliness, depression, and social isolation (McKenna & Bargh, 2000).

Nonetheless, apocalyptic prophecies of dystopia are slowly being transformed into selective discourse on the impact of technology on the lives of youth. The amplified forecasts of disaster represent the mixture of opportunity and anxiety which surround cyberspace. This discourse captures the ambivalence of the wondrous aspects of the Internet and the anonymity it affords which can mask something more sinister.

Predictions of utopia or doom have accompanied most new communications technologies, and the same rhetoric of pessimism and optimism has enveloped the Internet. When Alexander Graham Bell first displayed his telephone at the 1876 Centennial Exposition, *Scientific*

American noted that the new device would bring a greater "kinship of humanity" and "nothing less than a new organization of society" (Lubar, 1993, p. 130). Other observers were less hopeful, worrying that telephones would transmit germs through the wires, eliminate local accents, and provide a mechanism for governments to monitor the activities of their citizens. Some organizations fretted that the phone might destroy family interaction, deter people from visiting friends, and create nationwide inactivity.

In the United States many families precariously juggle the fragile balance between the dream and nightmare of Internet access (Turrow & Nir, 2000). Online opportunities to access information, share ideas within a global community, and extend education, social and leisure experiences are weighed against risks of exposure to offensive or explicit content (pornography, racism, violence, drugs and other illicit items), contact by predators or harassers, deceptive marketing directed toward children, and violations of privacy through the collection of personal information. The relatively unregulated system of the Internet requires our attention due to its status as the fastest growing communication medium and its universal accessibility.

Among the potential risks, access to children by pedophiles online is of the most substantial concern to caregivers and child-serving professionals. The stranger danger campaigns of the past portrayed stereotypes of men luring children on the playgrounds with candy and lost puppies. However, the new threat is from an online friend who sounds just like any other youth, using chatrooms to form relationships. Considered to be the newest sidewalk for child predators, the perceived anonymity of cyberspace provides a cloak for those who prey on children. We are increasingly aware of child abductions and sexual exploitation which were initiated through the Internet, and in the United States computer facilitated child sexual exploitation has been acknowledged as a pervasive crime (Allinich & Kreston, 2001). Often the numbers of children who are being lured through the computer are captured among the reports of nationwide runaways and missing children, but the actual prevalence of these exploited youth is largely unknown. Although parents are the first line of defense in advocating for children online, the technological gap in knowledge across generations has left many young people accessible, vulnerable, and unprotected.

CYBERCRIMES AGAINST CHILDREN

The vast majority of the Internet is a valuable resource of educational and entertaining resources. Yet, it is the allure of the problematic aspects of cyberspace that pose a challenge to the socio-emotional functioning of children. This unregulated, expansive environment where access to power is not dependent on age, gender or ethnicity is often appealing to young people searching for wondrous discoveries and encountering potentially frightening realities. This is an area which requires specialized knowledge to understand the complicated process of child victimology in cyberspace. As an area in which researchers are only in the preliminary stages of investigation, cyberspace has developed into a virtual world where electronic interactions can result in physical repercussions. It is a global medium, spanning the international arena.

Although an exciting world can be found online, the Internet also creates a new context for sexual exploitation and victimization of children. Without much effort, a child may inadvertently or deliberately be exposed to on-line content that is obscene, pornographic, violent, racist, or otherwise offensive. The lack of oversight of the content in cyberspace means that misinformation is rampant and access to contraband, including drugs, alcohol, guns, and gambling activities, goes unchecked. Among young people, computer misconduct can be more tempting in an environment that at least appears to be anonymous and devoid of standard rules of conduct. Additionally, chatrooms are the new playgrounds for youth and the pedophiles stalking them, resulting in serious implications for adults in roles to protect children's well-being.

Children are often naïve and trusting of others and simultaneously are in need of attention and affection. This combination of traits contributes to an easy target to be enticed into illicit interactions with predators. Chatrooms, bulletin boards, games, surveys, contests, promotions, and other online forums have facilitated the disclosure of personal information to strangers. Both passive and active information collections have resulted in detailed accounts and profiles of young people online. This widespread accumulation of personally identifiable information about children undermines their privacy. Children are at risk of having their safety compromised when this information is accessible to others interested in online and offline contact.

Cyberpredators have taken advantage of computer technology as a mechanism to exploit children. The information superhighway has provided a forum for sharing preferences on adult-child sexual relation-

ships and finding supportive communities for sexual fantasies with children (Davis, McShane, & Williams, 1995). The perceived anonymity of the Internet has benefited pedophiles and provided an environment conducive to the exchange of pornography, identification of children to molest, sexual interactions with youth, and support and validation from other adults who share their sexual preferences.

We are lacking evidence-based cybervictimology profiles of youth. Impressionistic observations have led many to believe that children most at risk tend to be lonely and detached from their families, creating an opportunity for the predator to magnify the distance between the child and parents through a secret alliance. Preliminary data suggest that children who are susceptible to online exploitation tend to minimize the potential dangers or risks online (Berson, Berson & Ferron, 2002). Children who are encountering other problems in their family, at school or in peer relationships also may be increasingly vulnerable. The number of known computer-based sexual exploitation cases are just a fraction of the number of attempts to lure a child into a sexual relationship. This reflects the need to make children aware of these online dangers and the need to educate parents on the protective myth and false sense of security that they may feel because their child is in their bedroom at home on the computer.

GROOMING

Grooming involves a clever process of manipulation, typically initiated through a nonsexual approach, which is designed to entice a victim into a sexual encounter (Brown, 2001). The inhibitions of a child are lowered through active engagement, desensitization, power and control. It is often characterized as a seduction, involving a slow and gradual process of learning about a child and building trust. This also contributes to the difficulty in detecting the activity.

Grooming is also a deceptive process in which a child is unprepared to interpret cues which signal danger of risk. Predators are skilled at gaining the trust of a child before luring them into interactions. The process of grooming through the formation of a close bond creates a victim who is more likely to comply with sexual advances.

Our interpretations of the grooming process have been primarily anecdotal, based on the accounts of child victims and predators who might recall gifts given, and tactics used to gain trust and establish confidence. In addition to these narrative accounts, evidence might be found of adult

or child erotica, photographs of children, photography equipment, or children's play items. However, grooming evidence is now more available in the form of chat logs, stored communication and downloaded child and adult pornography, gifts, notes about online conversations, and profiles on youth met online.

Traditionally, the grooming process required close physical proximity with children. Predators could lurk on playgrounds, at children's sports events, or other youth-oriented venues, and many would often take on jobs as child-serving professionals or volunteers which placed them in a position of trust and authority. In these situations, the perpetrator could selectively befriend vulnerable children. Yet, the process required personal risk to the pedophile since someone may become suspicious of the special attention or affection directed toward the child.

Predators have relied on deception and manipulation to avoid detection and secure trust of the child and the confidence of other adults. Pedophiles are skilled at gradually progressing the intensity of the interaction with a child, carefully seducing the child to lower his or her inhibitions. In addition to attention and friendship, the seduction can include the sharing of gifts and special activities or trips. The pedophile often preys on the child's loneliness or emotional neediness. Once the predator has developed an alliance with the child, he or she may begin gradually exposing the youth to pornography and subsequently suggest photographing the child in sexually seductive poses. This process is intended to desensitize the child to nudity, stimulate the child's curiosity about sex, and validate adult-child sexual relations.

With the Internet the cyberpredator simultaneously has access to multiple victims in an environment where the pedophile can hide behind the protective cloak of anonymity, masking as "one of the kids." They can portray any persona or lifestyle which will be enticing to the child. Chatrooms, IRCs, electronic bulletin boards, e-mail addresses and Websites can be used to attract potential victims and manipulate the child into a face-to-face interaction. The illusion of a private context provides a venue where youth will chat and flirt with strangers who may be taking advantage of the opportunity to befriend and subsequently deceive the child with charm and feigned affection.

The online predator is skilled at collecting information from children, searching profiles for vulnerable targets, and acquiring personal information on a specific child. Information available online can be used to engage in an online friendship which is the initiation of the grooming process. Trust is established between the predator

and the child through the sharing of information, the use of false identities, sending of gifts and pictures, and eventual desensitization to pornographic content. Subsequently, a meeting between the predator and the child may be arranged.

> On the Internet, child molesters are able to shorten the trust-building period and establish trust with many more potential victims at once. Because the Internet is anonymous, child molesters can pretend to be virtually anyone in order to deceive the victim into thinking that they are understanding and sympathetic. One good example is from a case in which the defendant pretended to be the same age as his victim. Like his victim, the defendant said that his parents were recently divorced and he was having trouble adjusting to his new life. After a certain period, the defendant said his father "banned" him from the Internet, but his older brother would be able to continue the Internet friendship. Thus, over time, the victim not only came to trust the defendant, but gradually accepted the fact that the defendant was older than him and an adult. (Brown, 2001)

The grooming process often is initiated in online chat rooms and may extend to deceiving the parents of a potential victim into a false sense of security about the stranger's presence within the family structure (Mahoney & Faulkner, 1997). Adult child relationships include an imbalance in power in which friendship and intimacy are leveraged for sexual interaction.

These preferential offenders may be pedophiles who prey on children in cyberspace; however, adolescents are also at risk for engaging in situational offenses as they search online for pornography and sexual opportunities. The vast and loose-knit network of the Internet masks identities and provides a new context where curious and rebellious minors can be seduced and manipulated into indirect victimization through the transfer of sexually explicit information and later direct exploitation.

THE DYNAMICS OF CHAT

Online chatrooms are a popular venue for initiating the exchange between youth and individuals who are threats to their safety and well-being. In this virtual world, children assume new identities through their

nicknames and then are expected to manage control over their private information while trying to build relationships, engage in self-expression, explore their own identities, and find validation. This process has been referred to as a complicated juggling act which requires sophisticated skill in performing chameleon-like behaviors and attitudes (O'Connell, 2001a).

Existing knowledge on psychosocial implications for sexual exploitation provide an initial frame of reference for understanding the impact of deception and online interactions. However, our theories and models of mental health functioning need to be reconsidered in a virtual context. Although cyberspace mirrors some aspects of other experiences, there are major differences which may mediate behavior. For example, it is difficult to merely classify the online enticement of a child as an acquaintance abduction versus stranger abduction since it has dynamics of both. After months of forging an online relationship with someone, a child no longer perceives this individual as an outsider. Additionally, the defenses against strangers often are not triggered when a youth perceives that they are interacting with a peer.

In cyberspace, mutually anonymous interactions lead to the development of close relations with others without benefit of visual cues which are typically important in social categorization of others and subsequent interaction. Online identities are self-constructed and can be repeatedly modified to recreate one's online persona. Usually one's self identity is relatively static and strongly associated with physical characteristics (gender, age, weight, race). Identity construction on the Internet allows experimentation with various possible selves. The usual constraints of particular roles are nonexistent and identity can be fluid (Gurak, 2001; McKenna & Bargh, 2000).

Our first impressions, which are often based on a brief observation, define how we categorize people. Once this categorization has been made, reinterpretation of ambiguous events will typically align with the original classification and accommodate conflicting information into existing schema. Changing our perceptions of others and questioning our observations are not intuitive processes even when confronted with new information. Problems with online relationships may be magnified for youth who lack the knowledge, experience, and maturity to detect distortions in what they see and read online.

> An adult or adolescent engaged in online solicitation by posing as a child engages in category deception by giving the target child the impression that they are talking to another child. The

adult manipulates the child's initial interpretations of their interactions and continues to present as a child so that when the contradictions become apparent, children will attempt to reinterpret the actions rather than disbelieve the original identification of a child. (O'Connell, 2001a)

Identity deception is an inherent part of online communication, and transformations can have positive and negative repercussions for youth who also experiment with their online personas. In the chatroom young people first create an image of themselves by selecting a nickname and proceed with molding their identity within the social structure of online interaction. Some youth may engage in high levels of identity reconstruction as part of a playful experience or fantasy, seamlessly transitioning between honesty and deception.

The deindividuation which occurs online also is associated with a tendency to diminish self-regulation and engage in disinhibited behavior. There is an increased likelihood of nonconforming or aggressive interaction, but there is also a tendency to share more intimate disclosures (McKenna & Bargh, 2000). As youth and adults participate in sexually explicit activity online, they may gradually seek out more intense levels of excitement when they become satiated or no longer satisfied (Freeman-Longo, 2000). Offline functioning may be similarly affected when intensified online roles transfer into daily activity.

The social and cultural communities of the Internet have unique perspectives on power, identity and gender. Identity is confounded in a virtual venue where the self is socially constructed and changing. Children may feel that they can better represent their authentic self online where social roles and personalities are formulated from more limited cues. The inner self is dynamic in a virtual venue and multiple presentations of one's identity may enhance the positive and negative development of the individual.

In a Web-based study conducted in conjunction with Seventeen Magazine Online, CyberAngels, the College of Education at the University of South Florida, and the Department of Child and Family Studies at the Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute, 10,800 respondents to an online survey identified behaviors of adolescent girls that placed them at-risk in cyberspace (Berson, Berson, & Ferron, 2002). Several respondents noted the benefits of online dialogues which provide a mechanism to empower youth and provide a forum in which they have a voice. In face-to-face interactions young women may perceive that body size, facial features, and other superficial characteristics

are judged as more important than personality (AAUW, 1999). Conversely, online exchanges take place in a context that often is devoid of these visual cues (Berson, Berson, & Ferron, 2002).

However, negative consequences also arise in a medium where adolescents may minimize the risks due to perceived anonymity and distort the potential for harm. Lack of experience in a global community also may lead to errors in judgment regarding level of risk or contribute to actions which reflect a culture of deception in cyberspace (Berson, Berson, & Ferron, 2002; Berson, 2000). Since technology can mediate available feedback on the direct consequences of actions to other people, an individual's decision making may be guided more by the perceived personal benefits than the moral components of his/her actions. Each of these perspectives has implications for prevention programs designed to safeguard youth online.

A Case Example

To illustrate the kinds of encounters that a child may experience in a chatroom consider the following case. The adult with a sexual interest in youth successfully utilized grooming practices to lure the young girl into a dangerous face-to-face encounter.

A fourteen-year-old eighth grader received a new computer as a gift from her parents. Within two months she was engaged in regular e-mail correspondence and chat with an adult male. When her parents became aware of the relationship they took steps to end it, removing the keyboard from the computer, monitoring mail and phone calls, and placing their daughter in counseling. However, the youth continued her communication via a mobile phone which the predator had sent. Several months later, the girl was missing from her home. When authorities searched her home computer they discovered a trail of e-mails which led them on a manhunt that spanned two continents and involved law enforcement agencies who overcame barriers of language, distance, and different criminal justice systems. In a complex scheme, the predator had coordinated with other child pedophiles in the United States to disguise the youth, secure a false passport, and provide funds to send the child out of the country to his residence in Greece. Five months after being lured away, the youth was recovered and returned home to her parents. Initially she professed her continued love and adoration for her abductor; however, after extensive therapeutic support she began revealing details of sexual and physical torture, became suicidal, and required psychiatric hospitalization. Her recovery process has been very gradual, but her experience and trauma will be unforgettable.

CONSTRUCTING SOLUTIONS AND A PLAN FOR ACTION

Research has confirmed the presence of threats to children's safety on the Internet (Berson, Berson, & Ferron, 2002), and, more specifically, has revealed that 25% of adolescents in the United States report receiving unwanted sexual solicitation online (Finkelhor, Mitchell, & Wolak, 2000). The public is becoming increasingly aware of cases of adults seeking to meet children for sexual contact following communication in chatrooms. Moreover, there is now an interplay between exploitative activity online and the use of other technologies, such as Instant Messaging, ICQ, mobile phones, and handheld computers, which intensify the degree of risk as new communication technologies evolve and children, parents, and teachers remain unprepared to protect youth in the ever-changing information age.

While studies have been underway to better understand cybervictimology, cybersafety initiatives have also emerged to counter illegal activity online and promote safe and responsible use of the Internet. Efforts to safeguard children on the Internet have included the implementation of federal and state statutes; creation of school-based policies and rules; development of family guidelines; recommendations for adult supervision and monitoring; application of content control measures to filter, block, and monitor children's access to sites; and Internet safety awareness campaigns. In 1999 UNESCO coordinated an expert meeting of specialists who prepared a plan of action to guide efforts to combat child pornography and pedophilia in cyberspace (Arnaldo, 2001).

Nigel Williams, Director of Childnet International, assessed the success of programs to safeguard children on the net (2001). He noted that lack of funding and coordination between multidisciplinary entities (law enforcement, Internet Service Providers, parents, educators, hardware and software sectors, and child welfare agencies) has contributed to challenges in implementing comprehensive and effective safety campaigns. There needs to be a collective effort to further refine partnerships and develop educational programs which are designed to augment children's safe navigation in cyberspace. The lapses in preventative intervention have left many parents ill informed, teachers insufficiently trained, and children vulnerable.

To have the greatest impact, stakeholders must acknowledge that the Internet is not strictly an intellectual activity. It has behavioral repercussions and emotional implications. To communicate messages of safety to a variety of audiences (i.e., children, parents, libraries, child-serving organizations, schools), comprehensive education for safety awareness

needs to be introduced as part of a broader net literacy program (Williams et al., 2000).

Successful prevention requires education of parents, caregivers, libraries, schools, youth groups, and others who might provide children with access to the Internet. Many youth are unlikely to heed the simplistic cautions to beware of strangers online, and may tune out directive and authoritative dos and don'ts (O'Connell, 2001a; Williams et al., 2000). Conversely, successful programs will incorporate the voices of youth in the creation of strategies and address the needs of caregivers with a range of knowledge and skill levels, providing information on filtering and monitoring options while acknowledging that technical solutions cannot substitute for direct involvement of parents and child-serving professionals. Online resources need to be complemented with offline public awareness campaigns and the support and backing of local and national governments. Direct instruction for computer literacy needs to maintain a strength-based rather than deficit focus to empower youth through education.

To counter risks online and promote cybersafety it is important to empower children with the knowledge and technical expertise to protect themselves for safe navigation. Developing net-savvy children includes the ability to discriminate between ambiguous events and exchanges which are potentially threatening. This is a challenging process. Children react to the signals of a conversation often without awareness of the isolated cues which are symbolic of online dangers. Cybersafety often touts the importance of children recognizing problematic situations; however, the dialogue exchanged in the context of online solicitation may be devoid of its negative potency when presented in a relationship which is naturally progressing to more intimacy between a child and his/her online confidant. The interaction between people creates a collective experience which fosters the relationship and can be skillfully used to reinforce trust and hide deception. Children need skills which can mediate the potentially harmful intent of others on the net and decloak the power of online anonymity (O'Connell, 2001b). By fostering an awareness of the risk of online exploitation and the circumstances and lures used to entice youth, adults and children can be better prepared to recognize the threat, and avoid it.

CONCLUSION

The Internet has the potential to unite society while simultaneously fragmenting it, amplifying the opportunity for the young to have greater access to information while at the same time remaining susceptible to

misinformation and exploitation. In order to mediate the online forces which can be deleterious to self-identity and social emotional function-ing, children and youth need to be engaged in navigating the Web with awareness. By fostering a sense of agency and control as young people learn about the Internet, youth become proficient with communication technologies while also developing an awareness of issues surrounding widespread Internet use and the necessity of responsible action.

Successful solutions for safety will be based on a fluid collaboration among many partners. Governments, law enforcement agencies, Internet service providers, software/hardware companies, schools, parents, child welfare agencies, and child-serving organizations will need to collec-tively negotiate advancements and foster meaningful initiatives in con-junction with youth. Through these actions our children can be empowered, creative applications of technology can be enhanced, and the potential for the benefits of global connectivity can be realized.

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