

Understanding Children's Online Activities: Developing Research to Enhance Police Practice. A Report Prepared for the London Metropolitan Police

Aims

This exploratory study was commissioned by the London Metropolitan Police in 2011 to explore how young children from different age groups and cultural backgrounds behave online. The objective of this research was to enhance research knowledge and policing practice. The findings of the study have been incorporated into a training course for Covert Internet Investigators (CIIs). Specifically, the research sought to: (1) Explore and review children's online behaviour and activities; (2) Identify the Internet sites used by children from different backgrounds; (3) Explore children's computer language.

Key Findings

Child sexual abuse online is increasingly more difficult to police as the Internet is constantly developing and new social networking sites (SNS) attract more children. There are concerning constraints to policing in the context of online environments:

- Children are online more hours every day - 70% use the internet every day for up to 3-4 hours a day.
- Children use the internet mainly for entertainment, particularly for SNS use.
- 94% of children belong to a SNS, particularly Facebook.
- Children update their profile regularly, the great majority do so every day or every other day.
- Children include variety of personal information in their profile personal photographs (including pictures with friends in school); dates of birth; the names of the school they attend; their location; plans for free time and leisure activities etc.
- Most of the students have their profile public (42%), some private (32%), and some did not understand the difference (26%).
- The great majority of young people have a mobile phone with a camera with Internet access, enabling them to upload pictures that they have taken with their mobile phones almost immediately.
- Most young people claim they post true information. Interestingly, they all lie about their age to become members of Facebook, though this is not perceived as giving 'false information'.
- Children were proud to have a large list of people in their SNS; most children using SNS had from 80 to 500 friends.
- The great majority of students claimed that they know all the people they have added to their SNS. However, when this issue was probed, it was found that there is still a significant proportion of youth who add people they have never met before.
- A small but significant number of students claimed that they have met offline with people they only met online.
- A small minority of young people play online games, and those that do play, do not interact with the people they play with outside the context of the online game.
- A small minority of girls had been approached online by strangers in a seducing manner but knew how to deal with the issue.

- Although most students have a webcam, but they either do not use it frequently or they use it only with people they know.
- The way in which young people use the internet differs greatly depending on the age of a child.
- Furthermore, noticeable differences in Internet use by age group were identified:

10-13 years old:

- Add random friends to increase their number of friends and popularity at school.
- Have a greater number of friends than older students.
- Post personal information more freely. This includes: school name; mother's name; location of where they live.
- Are clearly more naive about the risks they may encounter when online.

14-16 years old:

- Do not add random people as frequently as younger people, but add them depending on having friends in common.
 - Have a smaller number of friends than younger students.
 - Are more aware about posting personal information, but post a large number of photographs of themselves (girls in particular).
 - Show an element of internet addiction.
 - Overall, they show more awareness but still take a number of risks when online.
- Both groups show a lack of understanding of what it is meant by online ethical behaviour.

Methodology

The qualitative study was conducted in 4 schools located in diverse areas of London. It included 16 focus groups with 86 young people (age 10-16), and a small sample of 5 face-to-face interviews with head teachers and teachers.

Background

This research was funded by the London Metropolitan Police.

Source Martellozzo, E. (2012) "Online Child Sexual Abuse: Grooming, Policing and Child Protection in a Multi-Media World" (Routledge).

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