

The Protection of Children Online: A Scoping Review to Identify Vulnerable Groups

Aims

To ascertain what published reviews and key studies exploring internet technology risks reveal about children's exposure and responses to online harm; and what is known about groups of children who might be more vulnerable to specific risks and harm.

Key Findings

Cyberbullying

- Between 8-34% of children and young people in the UK have been cyberbullied.
- Girls are twice as likely to experience persistent cyberbullying than boys.
- Vulnerable groups at greater risk include children with special educational needs (SEN); those in receipt of free school meals (FSM); those from Black and minority ethnic (BME) groups; children of Gypsy-Roma, Travellers of Irish Heritage, European and East European groups; children from Chinese groups; and children of mixed ethnicity.
- Exposure to cyberbullying results in significant levels of distress and stress with the highest levels reported in children aged 9-12.
- Cyberbullying evokes stronger negative feelings, fear and a sense of helplessness than offline bullying and is linked to school failure, depression, anxiety and psychological problems.

Meeting online contacts offline, sexual solicitation and grooming

- A large US survey shows that one in 10 children and young people receive sexual solicitations of a distressing or aggressive nature.
- 69% of online sexual solicitations of young people involve no attempt at offline contact.
- Offenders rarely pretend to be teenagers or deceive victims about their sexual interest; most victims who meet offenders expect to engage in sexual activity.
- Young people may be more vulnerable in early adolescence as they become more sexually curious and experimental.
- Victim typologies do not conform to any specific stereotypical assumptions of vulnerability; victims are a heterogeneous group with a range of characteristics.
- Some victims of grooming would not be perceived as vulnerable offline.
- Understanding the interaction between the offender, online environment and young person is essential to understanding the nature of online grooming, particularly the role of disinhibition.

Pornography and other harmful content

- A US survey reported 42% young people aged 10-17 being exposed to online pornography in a one-year period; 66% of this exposure was unwanted.
- 11% of 9-16 year olds reported exposure to pornography in the UK; 24% of these children and young people were not bothered or upset by the experience.
- Rates of 'unwanted' exposure to pornography have been found to be higher amongst teenagers, young people who report being harassed or sexually solicited online or victimised offline, and those who were borderline or clinically depressed.
- 'Wanted' exposure rates have also been found to be higher for teenagers, those who talked online to unknown persons about sex, used the internet at friends' homes, or appeared to have a significant level of rule breaking behaviour.
- There is a lack of adequate research on the impact that unwanted or unexpected exposure to pornography has on children and young people.
- Gaps in the evidence base include research on hateful or racist content, sites promoting self-harm, anorexia or suicide.

Further research is required to enhance understanding of the characteristics and circumstances that render some young people more vulnerable than others, as well as the interplay between risk and protective factors influencing outcomes. This will support the development of evidence-based policies to promote safer internet use and reduce the number of children suffering harm as a result of online activities.

Methodology

A researcher reviewed the most current, methodologically robust and relevant studies (from a UK policy perspective) on internet technology risks and online vulnerability that were identified by experts from the UK Council for Child Internet Safety (UKCIS) Evidence Group and a network of international child welfare experts¹.

Source http://www.saferinternet.org.uk/Content/Childnet/Safer-Internet-Centre/downloads/Research_Highlights/Munro_OnlinevulnerabilityReporttoDFE-Final-October2011.pdf

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RH#33 has been produced by Emily Munro for the UKCCIS Evidence Group

¹ The scoping review was conducted in 12 days between July-August 2011. It was not possible to undertake a systematic review of the literature in the time available.