

Child abuse through the Internet

Information sheet



Introduction

New technologies such as the internet, although very valuable, can put children at risk of exploitation and harm. The internet can give people who are interested in abusing or exploiting children a new medium to network, share information and fantasies and explore new identities. Use of the internet has both national and international implications which make the monitoring and policing of exploitative practices all the more difficult.

“New technologies make children far more accessible to those wishing to abuse them,” (Tink Palmer and Lisa Stacey)

Sexual abuse through the internet can take many forms including:

- Distributing abusive images of children
- Grooming a child for later abuse through the use of teen chat rooms, bulletin boards and online communities where the abuser befriends the child to gain trust. The act of grooming aims to desensitise the young person to sexual activities which may become increasingly abusive and to feed the groomer’s fantasies of introducing a young person to this material
- Prostituting a child for later abuse either by the perpetrator or by other abusers
- Engaging children in cyber-sex scenarios by abusers
- Children being sold online for live sexual abuse online – the perpetrator informs his online ‘peers’ that he intends to abuse a child on a set date and time and these ‘peers’ can watch this abuse occurring through a webcam.

The Copine Project (Combating Paedophile Information Networks in Europe) based in University College Cork found in 2003 a strong link between viewers of child pornography on the internet and these individuals being perpetrators of actual child abuse. Of the 23 men interviewed who had all been convicted of downloading child pornography,

- 20 had traded in child pornography
- 3 had produced child pornography
- 11 had committed contact offences with children during the period they were downloading and viewing these images

For those children who have been subjected to online abuse a sense of powerlessness is experienced as the digital imagery can stay on the internet indefinitely so the abuse keeps reoccurring. This can also impact on their recovery and treatment needed.

Scale and impact of the problem

It is hard to determine the number of children affected by exploitative practices through the internet. Frequently, the phenomenon is underestimated as the children involved are reluctant to report the abuse out of fear or shame or the abuse continues undetected by authorities. Although some small scale studies have been carried out, mainly outside Ireland, it is hard to paint an overall picture as these small studies often focus on one aspect of sexual exploitation such as child prostitution and do not explore other areas of child abuse such as grooming and children involved in abusive imagery.

Also, given the international dimension to online abuse, child trafficking and child pornography, different definitions apply in each jurisdiction and correspondingly different laws operate within these jurisdictions. As a result it is difficult to compare the scale of the problem in one country from another as investigation and conviction rates vary depending on the offences committed.

Using the information currently available the following picture emerges:

- The COPINE project found in 2003 up to 60,000 individual child victims when studying online newsgroups. Worryingly, these children were identified as being younger in age than previous years, with the abuse being more serious and the venue for abuse usually taking place in a domestic setting
- There are up to 300 separated children who have gone missing from State care in Ireland in the past five years and an unknown portion of these children are feared to have been trafficked into the Irish sex industry. Barnardos 2007 Childhood Poll found that 59% of children surveyed used the internet on a weekly basis. Also 52% of them go onto social networking sites including Bebo and Myspace at least once a week. Both the majority of parents and children either did not know or incorrectly presumed that these sites were responsible for their content.

Given the large scale internet usage among children and young people, their potential exposure to exploitation is heightened yet many are unaware of this. Parents can feel inadequate in monitoring their child's internet usage as they can have less computer skills than their children. Parents also are found to underestimate their child's negative experiences of the internet.

- One third of 9-19 year-olds in a UK study who go online at least once a week report having received unwanted sexual (31%) or nasty comments (33%) via email, chat, instant message or text message. But their parents substantially underestimate their children's negative experiences – only 7% of parents think their child has received sexual comments and 4% think that their child has been bullied online
- 46% of 9-19 year olds who go online at least once a week say that they have given out some personal information on the internet but only 5% of parents think their child has given out such information.

In Ireland, one in ten children (aged 9 to 16 years) who arranged to meet someone they first met on the internet experienced physical threats and abuse and in all these cases the person who had introduced themselves online as a child turned out to be an adult. The study also found that almost 30% of children had encountered someone online who asked for information such as their photo, phone number or address, representing an increase of 19% on a similar study two years ago.

Some educational materials for both children and adults have been issued by the Department of Education including www.webwise.ie and www.watchmyspace.ie. Also plans for the establishment of an Office for Internet Safety and an Internet Safety Advisory Council were unveiled in September 2007, with responsibility for all aspects of internet safety in the interest of protecting users from potential exploitation, including children.

Recommendations

- The introduction of a criminal offence for grooming a child for sexual abuse as recommended by the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Child Protection in November 2006. This offence would cover acts preparatory to or intended to facilitate the sexual abuse of a child at a later date and would include, for example, arranging to meet a child for that purpose, or showing pornographic material to a child.
- Extensive child friendly and parent friendly educational materials to be available in all youth settings warning children and young people of the dangers and risks of online sexual exploitation
- Introduction of common police and government protocols in the area of online sexual exploitation to increase communication and effective policing between jurisdictions to help curb the extent of online child sexual abuse.

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