

Offender Behaviour – Lessons for Online Safety

Aims

The research aims to describe the behaviour of offenders who groom and from these interviews obtain information about behaviours of the young people who are 'groomed'. It will also describe the ways in which information communication technology (ICT) is used to facilitate the process of online grooming and further the current low knowledge base about the way in which young people are selected and prepared for abuse online.

Key Findings

- Offender grooming behaviour appears planned. In general, grooming is either:
 - (i) *targeted*, where a specific child has been identified and singled out for solicitation, with offenders tailoring their communications to appeal to their particular target; or
 - (ii) *opportunistic*, where offenders will make sexual advances toward a large number of young people, working through 'friend' lists on social networking sites to identify vulnerable individuals.
- Offenders report feeling 'obsessed' and 'addicted' to the Internet, using several online identities to make contact with children and young people. Webcams and mobile phones are frequently used in the grooming process. Offenders use these devices to obtain images of their target.
- The grooming process can be *lengthy*, where offenders will gradually sexualise their interactions with a child or young person over a period of weeks or months; or *immediate*, where conversation is immediately sexualised, and there is no attempt to conceal or distort identity. Offenders who sexualised discussions *immediately* reported that they were emboldened by their perceived anonymity to speak in a sexually explicit manner.
- Offenders report that the 'responders' appear to be more 'vulnerable' and open to interaction. Offenders explore a young person's interests and needs during communications, exploiting their character.
- Offenders report cognitive distortions, stating that their behaviour was simply role play, or fantasy, and that they had no harmful intentions.
- Overall, offenders are rejected by most children. Only a *small minority* respond to their advances.

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Policy Context

Grooming is outlawed by Article 23 of the Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse. However, grooming is not specifically addressed in the legislation of many Member states. A proposed Directive on combating the sexual abuse, sexual exploitation of children and child pornography will require Member states to introduce legislation against online grooming. At present, only the UK, Sweden and Norway have such legislation in place.

Methodology

In the light of a lack of empirical evidence regarding the characteristics and behaviours of Internet sexual offenders, this study, the largest of its kind, is based on qualitative extended in-depth interviews with convicted online groomers in the UK and three European sites. Interviews are ongoing, but will be undertaken with 50 – 70 offenders. These in-depth interviews focus upon exploring and describing all phases of the on-line grooming process. The first phase, completed in June 2010, aimed to contextualise these interviews with a comprehensive overview of policy, legislation and safety practice within the EU. Interviews were also conducted with stakeholders working with online groomers and an analysis of offender case files was undertaken.

Background

The European Online Grooming Project is funded through the EC's Safer Internet Plus programme to enhance knowledge of the online sexual abuse of children, with a particular focus on online grooming. 'Grooming' can be defined as a process of manipulation designed to entice a child into a sexual encounter, either online or offline. The findings of this project will inform law enforcement strategies for offender apprehension, education and prevention strategies to empower young people to stay safe online. It will also inform understanding of the ways in which information communication technology (ICT) and particular online services can be used to facilitate the process of online grooming.

Sources <http://www.cats-rp.org.uk/projects.html>; last accessed 25/11/10

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Key Words

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