

‘STRANGER DANGER’ IN THE HOME – Managing the Risks to Children Posed by the Internet

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One of the major concerns with regard to the use of the Internet has been the risk posed to children and young people from paedophiles and pornography. This paper seeks to examine the risks to children and young people posed by the Internet with reference to the behaviour of sexual offenders and the availability of pornography. Ideas are presented as to ways in which risks posed by the Internet might be managed.

Introduction

One of the more horrifying conclusions to have emerged from the sexual abuse field in the past 20 years is the fact that the least safe place for children is, in fact, their own home. Psychologists, and counsellors, parents and teachers have worked hard to correct the myth of ‘Stranger Danger’, arguing that children are most at risk of sexual abuse from someone they know, or from within their own family. The Internet now creates a new paradigm. In the form of child sex offenders and pornographers, The Stranger is now being invited into the home.

Understandably, the mere mention of words like ‘child sexual offenders’ or ‘child pornography’ provokes a strong response from most people. And the association of these terms with Internet use has clouded many people’s perceptions of what lies beyond the “Logon” button. But what is the risk, and can it be managed? This paper seeks to explore some of the risks associated with Internet use with reference to the behaviour of child sexual offenders and the impact of pornography. It will conclude by offering some ways in which these risks might be managed.

The Behaviour of Child Sex Offenders

David Finkelhor (1994) has suggested 4 conditions necessary for someone to sexually abuse a child:

1. The offender must have some inclination or predisposition towards sexual contact with children.
2. The offender must be able to overcome their own inhibitions, beliefs etc which might otherwise prevent him offending. He must be able to justify his behaviour to himself in some way.
3. The offender must be able to overcome the victim’s resistance to the abuse. This might be by either force, bribery, trick or threat, or by means

of grooming, seducing or charming the child into sexual contact with him.

4. Lastly, the offender must have the opportunity to offend.

In addition to this, child sexual offenders tell us that their offending is neither accidental nor coincidental. They *choose* which children to abuse and which to not by means of two main criteria – *availability* and *vulnerability*.

The planned, deliberate way in which child sexual offenders approach potential victims is illustrated in Figure One. The Offending Cycle is a tool used in treatment programmes to assist child sex offenders to better understand and manage their behaviour by breaking it down into stages.

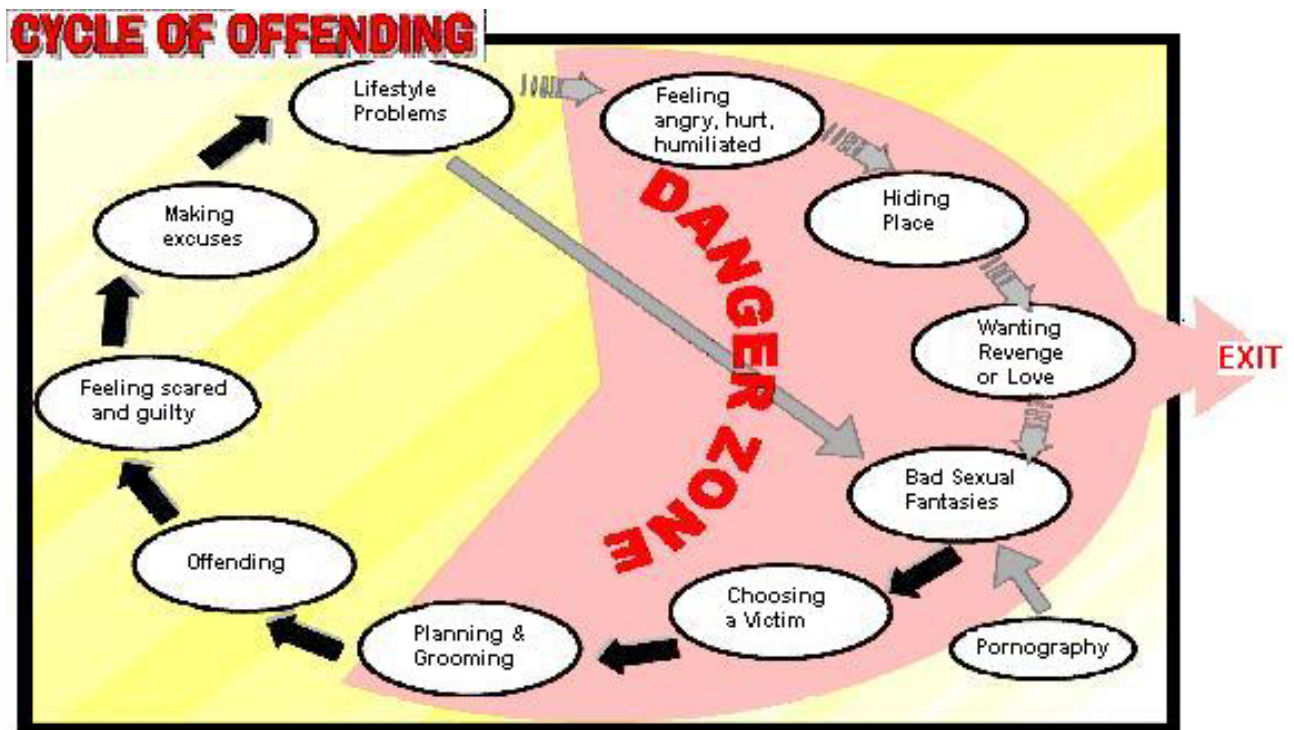


Fig. One: The Offending Cycle
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Beginning with ‘Lifestyle Problems’, the offender advances from one stage to the next accompanied by numerous cognitive distortions – inaccurate or faulty beliefs about children, sex, relationships, harm, abuse –which enable him to excuse, minimise, justify or deny the reality of his behaviour. Successfully challenging and correcting these beliefs is a key element in the treatment of these offenders.

The Internet impacts on the behaviour of child sex offenders in several ways.

1. Pornography and other images of children

After almost 30 years of research and clinical practice with paedophiles and others who sexually molest children, there is still little consistency between research results exploring the link between the use of pornography and sexual offending (Marshall, 2000). From the literature currently available, it is only possible to conclude that, while paedophiles and other child sex offenders use pornography in their offending for a variety of purposes, there exists no proven *causal* link between viewing pornography (including child pornography) and child sexual offending.

We cannot say conclusively that viewing child pornography creates a predisposition or inclination towards having sex with children. The development of this predisposition is such a developmentally complicated matter, that it is highly unlikely that a single factor alone could cause it. However, there is little doubt that someone having such a predisposition greatly increases their chances of sexually offending against a child by viewing child pornography and sexually fantasising about it.

Pornography influences sexual offending against children in a number of ways:

- It sexually arouses the offender. The role of sexual fantasies is important. The Offending Cycle illustrates the place of sexual fantasies about children in sexual offending. No offender molests a child without some level of sexual fantasy having preceded it. Not all those who sexually fantasise about children actually go on to offend against them (any more than any of us act out all our sexual fantasies). But doing so, especially over time, greatly increases the likelihood.
- It may be used by the offender to sexually arouse potential victims.
- It may be used by the offender to groom potential victims by apparently normalising sexual contact or conversations between adults and children. Offenders can gauge their likelihood of ‘success’ by the child’s reaction to the material.
- It may be used by the offender to blackmail children by threatening to inform their parents or others about their viewing pornography.
- Offenders may take photographs of victims and post or trade these on the Internet.
- Offenders may view, or in some cases digitally manipulate, adult pornographic images or otherwise normal pictures of children to create sexually explicit images of children.

Notwithstanding the above, most child sex offenders do not use child pornography. They use adult pornography. More prevalent than their use of child pornography is the use of otherwise normal pictures of children from magazines, junk mail leaflets, TV, and the Internet.

2. Reducing Offender Inhibitions

While there is no proven *causal* link between viewing pornography and sexually offending, there is evidence to suggest that viewing pornography negatively impacts upon the attitudes of the viewer. Viewing child pornography reduces the inhibitions of child sex offenders by normalising sexual activity with children, and by feeding the cognitive distortions about children’s sexuality such as: “She started it”, “She wanted it”, “She came on to me” that underpin much offending.

Additionally, on-line ‘conversations’ with other paedophiles in chat rooms also serve to reduce offender inhibitions. Child sex offenders simply tell themselves that their behaviour is acceptable. Images of children engaged in sex with adults, accompanied by on-line contact with others who behave similarly, reinforce these beliefs.

3. Access to Children in Chat Rooms

This is perhaps where the greatest danger to children lies. The vulnerability and availability of children is nowhere more evident to a child sex offender than through an Internet chat room. Offenders can pose as sympathetic peers and trap or induce unsuspecting children into giving out contact details, pictures, or other their personal information. They can groom the child by engaging the child in sexual conversations and, ultimately, arrange meetings with the child. Pictures sent by children may be used as pornography by the offender, or circulated via chat rooms for others to view. The child is also exposed to the risk of threats from, or stalking by, offenders.

Chat rooms add a new dimension to the grooming of child victims. Historically, child sex offenders have usually groomed children individually, one at a time. Chat rooms, however, provide child sexual offenders with an opportunity to groom multiple victims en masse in a very short time frame.

The risks for New Zealand children are evidenced by the results of a 1999 study (Refer The NZ Internet Safety Group website) which indicated that over one third of a sample of teenage girls had had a face-to-face meeting with someone they met on-line, or had given out personal information. Over a quarter had sent a photo of themselves to someone they met on-line, and nearly 15% had posted a picture of themselves on the Internet. All of these are potential ways for offenders to target children.

Risks Associated with Children Accessing Internet Pornography

Magazines and videos containing pornography and erotica are readily accessible, and are almost considered part of mainstream publishing today. There is little evidence that the occasional viewer of this type of material experiences major adverse effects. So, should we be any more concerned about the effects on our children or teenagers accessing pornography on the Internet than we are about them seeing what is contained in the shelves of the local dairy or video store?

Significant differences have been noted between pornography on the Internet and the traditional, more mainstream material, which give considerable cause for concern. Included among these are:

- Its content – including children, degradation, violence, torture, bizarre sex, fetishism etc.
- The enormous number of images available.
- Its relative ease of access and, perhaps more significantly, the real possibility of *unintended* access.

- Deliberate targetting or inaccurate advertising by pornographic websites, giving rise to the possibility of accessing pornography far more extreme than was being searched for.
- The risk that some children will be traumatised, feel sexually averse, become eroticised, or sexually compulsive by the nature of the material.
- The impact on children's sex education, especially to very young children.
- The risk of offending, knowingly or otherwise, by accessing, downloading, or distributing objectionable material.
- The possible crime associated with misuse/stealing of credit cards to fund Internet pornography use.
- Given the ease of access to the material, the risk of Internet addiction is being increasingly recognised in the literature.
- The impact on children's developing ideas about sexual relationships.

Managing the Risks

The risk of harm to children on the Internet may never be able to be fully controlled, but there are steps which can be taken to manage and reduce the risk. Overall, we need to reduce the risk that children will:

- view pornography
- meet an offender online
- offend online
- develop a sexual problem as a result of on-line activity

Some suggestions for reducing the above risks are as follows:

Reducing the risk of viewing pornography

- Install filtering software
- Use passwords to restrict access
- Locate your computer in the living room
- Supervise, supervise, supervise
- Identify safe sites and search engines for your child to use
- Install software to track internet use on your computer
- Use an ISP which regulates against pornography
- Sign an internet safety contract with your children
- Educate your children about safe internet use
- Read the Internet Safety Kit (refer: www.netsafe.org.nz)
- Educate yourself about the Internet
- Talk to your child's friends and their parents about Internet safety

Reducing the risk of meeting an offender on-line

- Locate your computer in the living room
- Identify safe chat rooms for your child to use
- Supervise, supervise, supervise
- Sign an Internet safety contract with your children

- Educate your children about safe internet use eg:
 - Never give details of yourself over the Internet
 - Never agree to meet someone on the Internet
 - Never post a picture of yourself on the Internet
 - Tell your parents about any inappropriate material you find
- Talk to your children about their experiences in chat rooms
- Read the Internet Safety Kit
- Educate yourself about the Internet
- Talk to your child's friends and their parents about Internet safety
- Learn the indicators that suggest a child may have been sexually abused
- Set time limits on children's Internet use

Reducing the risk of offending on-line

- Educate your children about safe Internet use
- Educate yourself and your children about the laws in relation to downloading, possessing, or exchanging objectionable material

Reducing the risk of problems developing in children as a result of online activity

- Be alert to some danger signs eg:
 - Child collects large amounts of pornography
 - Any of the above is of a bizarre, violent, degrading nature or involves children
 - Child is obsessive in relation to pornography, sex, or Internet use
 - Child exhibits sexually aggressive behaviour of any sort
 - Child has repetitive Internet pornography use despite attempts at preventing access
 - Child distributes pornography to others
 - Child is socially isolated, has few peer friends, or friends are much younger
 - Child or family minimise the potential risk
- Set time limits on children's Internet use
- Don't collect pornography as a parent – your kids will find it!

Conclusion

While the Internet presents children with, perhaps, the most exciting educational and communications resource they will have ever had, like all new technologies, it also poses risks. Children, by their very nature, are inquisitive and naïve about risk. They are possibly even more so in the anonymous, disinhibited on-line environment. As with other areas of risk to children, parents and others in child-caring roles must, therefore, take responsibility and seek to both educate children, and to manage, minimise and, if possible, eliminate that risk. Successfully educating ourselves about the Internet, its uses and potential abuse, is not only a challenge in today's world; it is also essential if children are to remain safe in their homes.

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