When it comes to sexual grooming of children on the internet, understanding predators’ characteristics and motivations is key writes Juliane Kloess

CyberSafe Ireland, a not-for-profit organisation established in 2015 which works to empower children, parents and teachers to navigate the online world in a safe and responsible manner, published their annual report on September 13 2017. Only into their second year, the organisation has had a significant impact in reaching out to nearly 5,000 young people between the ages of eight and 13 years in various counties across Ireland. According to the annual report, 22% of the 4,893 children CyberSafeIreland spoke to directly, were in contact with a person online whom they didn’t know in the physical world, with 14% of these taking place once a week and 6% every day. Based on CyberSafeIreland’s experiences in Irish schools, the annual report considers the sexual exploitation and abuse of children via Internet technologies as one of five key risks.

With this in mind, the use of Internet technologies by individuals who seek to initiate contact with children for sexual purposes is of significant concern and requires attention. While some may argue that this type of offending behaviour constitutes a very small proportion in comparison to sexual offences overall, risks thereof affect one in five children. Specifically, there has been a substantial increase in the number of reports of negative experiences by young people in relation to sexual approaches and grooming over recent years, including receiving sexual invitations and messages, as well as being incited to engage in online sexual activity via Internet communication platforms. This has led to a number of Internet safety education initiatives Europe-wide, which seek to enhance young people’s knowledge about opportunities, risks and safety by empowering and equipping them with the necessary skills to use the Internet safely.

To date, research has predominantly focused on the area of child sexual offending online in terms of how the Internet is used to commit offences related to the production and distribution of indecent images of children (also known as ‘child pornography’ in North America.) Up until 2011, the process of sexual grooming (i.e. a process whereby an offender prepares a child for sexual abuse as an underlying dynamic in online interactions) between offenders and their victims, was practically unexplored.

As a result, researchers at the University of Birmingham set out to investigate such offences in order to gain a better understanding of the characteristics, modus operandi (i.e. methods of operating) and motivations of individuals who engage in offending behaviour that involves sexual grooming as part of sexually exploitative interactions with children via Internet technologies. At the time, there was a lack of research studying this phenomenon using real-world data (i.e., naturally-occurring, actual typed conversations between adult individuals and children).

An in-depth analysis of transcripts of chat logs of sexually exploitative interactions between offenders and their victims revealed that they were of a highly sexual nature, with offenders using a range of manipulative strategies – offenders either employed a direct or an indirect approach to conversations with children and initiating contact with them. The approach offenders employed was also reflected in the types of strategies they used. That is, offenders who employed more of a direct approach also used more blunt/forceful strategies...
not being listened to or understood, as well as a need to explore sexuality in a way that cannot be fulfilled offline.

Findings from the present research revealed that while young people did engage in some risk-taking behaviours, they were equally aware of personal boundaries and assertively refused to comply with more extreme requests by offenders. This is a very positive observation that highlights protective behaviour by some young people in terms of having the ability and confidence to decide when to remove themselves from a situation that was becoming increasingly uncomfortable and/or risky. Sadly, other cases involved serious offences of sexual abuse, in which victims presented with a number of vulnerability factors, such as experiencing a relationship break-up, personal and psychological problems, as well as sexual abuse.

Academic David Finkelhor proposes that a more generic education about life skills, rather than a specialised Internet safety training, may have the potential to be more effective in terms of prevention. Many programmes currently lack sufficient intensity, are dominated by scare messages, over-emphasise ‘stranger danger’, and rarely evaluate outcomes. A recent evaluation of the effectiveness of Internet child safety material as part of education programmes delivered in the US revealed that critical elements of effective preventative measures were lacking. The report further found that most young people are aware that engaging in certain behaviours online may be risky. Therefore, a more generic education about life skills that focuses on conflict management, empathy promotion, emotional regulation, consequence anticipation, refusal techniques, bystander mobilisation and help-seeking not only equips young people with useful skills to handle, manage and deal with arising problems in the physical world, but also online.

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