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What Practices Can Protect School-Aged Minors from
Online Sexual Predators in the United States?

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Statement of the Problem

With the rapid rise in technology, children encounter sexual predators during everyday life, especially in the online world. Understanding the criminal psychology is important, researchers must detail what practices can protect school-aged minors from online sexual predators, especially those living within the United States. While researchers have often questioned specific strategies for dealing with online predators, educational solutions are often overlooked.

Fleming, Greentree, Cocotti-Muller, Elias, and Morrison in the article “Safety in Cyberspace, Adolescents’ Safety and Exposure online,” states that as of 2005, approximately twenty-one million minors in the United States, between the ages of 12 and 17, used the Internet (2006). According to research conducted by May-Chahal et al. (2014) in the article “Safeguarding Cyborg Childhoods: Incorporating the On/Offline Behavior of Children into Everyday Social Work Practices,” of those using the Internet, 99 percent of victims of Internet-initiated sex crimes were thirteen to seventeen years old.

Dowell, Burgess, and Cavanaugh conducted a study of 1,501 minors between the ages of ten and seventeen in their article, “Clustering of Internet Risk Behaviors in a Middle School Student Population.” The researchers found that one in five minors received unwanted sexual solicitation online and that one in thirty-three minors received aggressive sexual solicitation while online (2006). Research further concluded that 31.1 percent of boys, and 27 percent of girls reported posting personal information on the Internet (Dowell, Burgess, & Cavanaugh, 2009). Furthermore, 20.3 percent of students posted their email addresses online and 7.7 percent stated that they had posted the name of their school (Dowell et al., 2009).

While the behavior of the child is important, research on the perpetrators is also relevant and often explored by many authors. Malesky Jr., (2007), interviewed 31 men who had perpetrated or had attempted to perpetrate a crime via online communication in his article “Predatory Online Behavior: Modus Operandi of Convicted Sex Offenders in Identifying Potential Victims and Contacting Minors Over the Internet.” Malesky found that 80 percent of participants used chat rooms geared towards minors, and that over half of the participants viewed the child’s profile in order to choose their potential victim (2007). These chat rooms could be hosted on a variety of platforms, including those tied to Internet based games and social media sites.

Marcum (2007) in the article “Interpreting the Intentions of Internet Predators: An Examination of Online Predatory Behavior” studied predators by examining transcripts from online chat rooms in order to gain a better understanding of how perpetrators seek out their victims. This study found that perpetrators participated in grooming activities (Marcum, 2007). A grooming activity slowly introduces a child to explicit material or topics; often times the perpetrator would gain the child’s trust so that when they initiated contact the child was not concerned by the inappropriate behavior (Marcum, 2007).

Keeping children safe in an online environment goes well beyond someone’s personal beliefs. As professionals, all people must work towards a safer online environment. Even if one does not have children in his or her life personally, this topic will most likely be something that one will deal with as a social worker. Wells (2006) conducted a study on 264 school social workers in her article “Internet-Related Problems Coming to the Attention of School Social Workers.” The social workers were sent questionnaires about the work that they had done in regards to Internet-related problems amongst minors (Wells, 2006). This study found that 46

percent of the social workers had worked with a student that had been sexually exploited or approached while online (Wells, 2006). This study also found that adults would sexually approach children in online chat rooms while pretending to be a similar age (Wells, 2006). The social workers also reported seven incidences in which children responded to the sexual solicitation and met an adult in person (Wells, 2006).

This topic is relevant to me because I have a nephew and a niece that are beginning to use the Internet on a daily basis. I worry constantly about what they are exposed to when they are simply looking up videos. With so many children being affected because they do not take the necessary precautions, I believe the world needs to be better educated in order to keep every child out of the clutches of sexual predators.

Problem Exploration

Within the research, multiple interventions that have attempted to fix this horrible epidemic. With such a sweeping issue, there are many different viewpoints represented within each article. This literature review will highlight three practices; Internet service provider blocks, parental control, and educational programs.

The first safety practice that literature states has been used to protect children from online sexual predators is Internet Service Providers (ISP) filtering. In the article, "Internet Service Provider (ISP) Filtering of Child-Abusive Material: A Critical Reflection of its Effectiveness," Enemen defined an ISP as the "organizational use of Internet filtering of harmful and illegal material" (2010). While in theory ISP filtering sounds like the ideal solution, researchers have found that its use is severely flawed.

There are three different types of ISP filtering. The first type is inclusion filtering, which is having a list of pre-approved websites that one can visit while online (Eneman, 2010). The

next type of filtering is exclusion, this is having list of websites that one is not allowed to access at all; this can also be called “blacklisting” (Eneman, 2010). The last type of filtering is content analysis, which is when there are no lists but when a website is requested the content is scanned for inappropriate topics so that one does not have to block an entire website (Eneman, 2010).

Dowell et al., (2009), questioned 1,501 minors between the ages of ten and fifteen on their online behaviors. This study found that 60.2 percent of girls and 49.2 percent of boys reported having a block on their computer (Dowell et al., 2009). What was more troubling is that 32.6 percent of boys and 15.7 percent of girls stated that they knew how to manipulate the blocks (Dowell et al., 2009).

Eneman (2010) conducted a survey of fifteen male offenders between the ages of nineteen and fifty-five regarding ISP effectiveness, and had some interesting results (Eneman, 2010). One participant in the study stated, “this type of filtering is completely pointless” (Eneman, 2010). This study also quotes someone as saying that “it is very easy to bypass” and many participants believed that the filtering was nothing more than a simple annoyance (Eneman, 2010). With the data demonstrating the failures of Internet filtering, other safety protocols need to be investigated and utilized for child safety.

The next practice that has been used to protect children in an online environment is parental controls. Cohen-Almagor (2013) states in the article “Online child Sex Offenders: Challenges and Counter-Measures,” that often times, children who are victims of child predation are less receptive to the advice of their parents. This article goes on to say that many victims have been estranged from their families or have experienced familial abuse (Cohen-Almagor, 2013). It was also found that predators were likely to use information gathered from simple

conversations within a chat room to determine the level of parental involvement in a child's home (Malesky, 2007).

Hopper-Losenicky assesses the relationships between mothers and their children in relation to Internet usage in her article "Risk Communication in the Internet Age: Parental Challenges in Monitoring the Internet use of Adolescents" (2010). The study that Hopper-Losenicky conducted consisted of ten parent-child pairs, specifically chosen based on the mothers' likelihood to monitor the child's media use (2010). It was concluded that if children who are more involved in activities outside of school tend to spend less time online, therefore making them less likely to become victims of child predation (Hopper-Losenicky, 2010).

Hopper-Losenicky's study also found that many children did not know if their parents had safety settings on their computers (2010). Along with this, they found that many parents over trusted blocking software and safety settings (Hopper-Losenicky, 2010). One example of this is that parents set up their child's Facebook account with the maximum safety settings, but the child changes it later without the parent's consent or knowledge (Hopper-Losenicky, 2010). Hopper-Losenicky also found that four out of five parents underestimated the time that their children actually spent on the Internet (2010).

The last method for maintaining a safe online environment for children is education. While children have a healthy curiosity about sex, adults need to be candid in their conversations (Cohen-Almagor, 2013). The article "Assessing Middle School Students' Knowledge of Conduct and Consequences and Their Behaviors Regarding the Use of Social Networking Sites," written by Kite, Gable, and Filippelli (2010), conducted a study on 558 students in seventh and eighth grade. Their study found that educating students on the risk associated with social media is of key importance (Kite, Gable, & Filippelli, 2010).

The researchers go on to state that 71 percent of students did not believe that a predator would contact them simply because of their online posts, and only 40 percent of the student participants indicated that they would inform an adult if they were contacted by a stranger online (Kite et al., 2010). Parents should instruct their children not to use chat rooms, as predators use these to contact children (Marcum, 2007). Cohen-Almagor informs his readers of an educational program in the United Kingdom that educates not only children but also parents and professionals in the area about the dangers of online activity (2013).

Theoretical Perspective

One theoretical perspective in which to view the practices of preventing predation of children is the ecological perspective. Zastrow and Kirst-Ashman analyze the ecological perspective stating that it provides a specific vantage point through which the social worker can view the world (2015). The emphasis is placed on the individual and their family within their environment (Zastrow, C., & Kirst-Ashman, K.K., 2015).

This is applicable to the literature stated above because it focuses on the individual. The articles involved in this literature review focus on how an individual's relationship with their school environment as well as their parents can keep them safe when they are online. One term associated with this theory is social environment (Zastrow, C., & Kirst-Ashman, K.K., 2015). A social environment is defined as "the actual physical setting that the society or culture provides" (Zastrow, C., & Kirst-Ashman, K.K., 2015).

Another term that is used in this perspective is transactions (Zastrow, C., & Kirst-Ashman, K.K., 2015). This refers to how a person interacts with other people (Zastrow, C., & Kirst-Ashman, K.K., 2015). The text states that these interactions can be either positive or negative (Zastrow, C., & Kirst-Ashman, K.K., 2015). If social workers and other professionals

could understand and use positive online interaction or transactions, the outcomes of child involvement online could be improved. This theory allows one to view the child within their different environments, such as their school, home, or online lives in order to understand their safety.

Gaps in the Literature

While the research on education is important, it is one that is rarely discussed in the literature. Many of the articles found in relation to this topic were regarding perpetrator behavior. One example of this would be the articles written by Marcum, in which the research examined how perpetrators chose their victims (2007).

Rather than focusing on criminal behavior and blocking systems placed by parents, the social communities surrounding the child should work cohesively to educate and prepare the individual for online activity. Education is a huge part of the lives of minors, and if they have access to any chat rooms or social media sites, they must first be educated on how to properly behave in their online environment. Children need to learn to inform parents when they feel they have been solicited in any way while online (Malesky, 2007). If a child is educated on proper online decorum, and have a good relationship with any educator or guardian, then they will be better prepared for their own safety in today's online society.

Another area of research that should be explored is parental education. Fleming et al., found that many parents are not well equipped enough to prepare their children for online safety (2006). Children experience education not only at school but at home with their parents, and with a lack of education of online safety, comes greater danger when the child uses the Internet.

Conclusion

Our digital age has progressed at an alarming rate. There have been many attempts at preventing child predation. Internet service provider blocks have proven to be easy to break by not only criminals (Eneman, 2010), but also children (Dowell et al., 2009). In regards to how parental controls have been helpful when protecting children, it has been found that many parents do not have enough knowledge to fully protect their children (Fleming et al., 2006). There has been very little done when it comes to educating children on safe online habits. Children have stated that they post personal information on their social media (Dowell et al., 2009); it has also been found that the chat rooms that are geared towards minors have also attracted the attention of predators (Malesky Jr., 2007). There is an educational program in the UK that educates not only the children but also professional in the area (Cohen-Almagor, 2013).

There is no tension between my personal believes and what the literature has found. I believe that it is important for children to be educated, have good relationships with their parents, and have appropriate ISP filtering, if necessary. Based on this evidence, I believe that it is imperative that adults be candid with children about the topic of sex. In my experience, the only time many students discuss sex with an adult, is the single conversation that takes place at school, or possibly with a parent. I knew many people who had questions about sex, yet were afraid to ask an adult for fear they would get in trouble. Instead, they chose look up the topic online. These seemingly casual Internet searches can lead to dangerous conversations with potential predators.

This type of unhealthy exploration has led to children becoming victims of crimes. The technology itself cannot be blamed for putting children at risk; rather it is the behavior of the child (Hopper-Losenicky, 2010). I believe that the responsibility to educate minors should be placed not only on social workers, but also on educators and parents. When educators work with

the parents, children are further protected from sexual predators, inappropriate chat room activities, and cyber bullying (Kite et al., 2010). I say this because if a child has adults in their life that are willing to be completely honest and open with them and answer all of their questions, then they are less likely to go searching for answers in dangerous places.

Social workers are in the helping profession. I believe that in order to keep children safe, we must partner with our communities and teach local professionals about how to keep these children safe. The literature stated that children participated in risky online behavior such as posting their email and the name of their school (Dowell et al., 2009). Many of these students did not believe that a predator would view their social media profiles (Kite et al., 2010). It was also found that many social workers have to work with children who have experienced sexual solicitation through the Internet (Wells, 2006). Because of these facts, I believe that social workers must be educators for families, educators, and local professionals.

In accordance with the micro level of social work, an effective prevention would be for social workers to counsel parents and their children in order to help foster healthy and trusting relationships. It was found that if parents set out clear rules and follow through with punishments there was a lack of resistance among minors (Hopper-Losenicky, 2010). The research goes on to suggest that by having parents set their standards, children are likely to be more honest and practice safely while online (Hopper-Losenicky, 2010).

In the meso approach, social works can promote educational programs within schools and communities in order to foster a safe online environment for minors. Literature found that children have a healthy curiosity when it comes to sex, and with curiosity comes a need to for adults to be upright and honest (Cohen-Almagor, 2013). Educational programs have been the least researched among the articles reviewed, but it has been stated that with the vast

technological age, there is a need to educate children on safety practices while online (Kite et al., 2010).

In application with macro social work, it is imperative that social workers know and understand any legislation regarding online practices. Social workers must advocate for the protection of children within their online environments. If a social worker knows and understands government legislation, he or she will be better prepared to ensure the safety of minors within the United States.

Furthermore, the technological advances of this day and age have provided children with the opportunity to learn more than ever before. This age of progression has also brought along new threats. Keeping minors safe should be of utmost importance to not only parents, but also professionals. Social workers must be willing to counsel students and their families, promote and enhance educational programs, and be aware of legislation in place so that they can better the lives of those around them.

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