

UK Council for Child Internet Safety Evidence Group  
Expert Seminar Series  
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CEOP

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## Identifying Children's Risk-Taking Behaviour Online: Implications for Research Informed Safeguarding Policy and Practice

### Key findings from UKCCIS Online risk-taking Research Seminar

The event aimed to present some of the latest research in the child online safety area and to consider how research might effectively inform practice. This paper provides a short summary of key presentations and emergent issues. The event was organised and chaired by Professor Julia Davidson from the Centre for Abuse & Trauma Studies at Middlesex University and Tink Palmer from the Marie Collins Foundation.

#### Keynote Summaries

##### “What do young people do online?”

##### *Professor Sonia Livingstone, London School of Economics*

Professor Livingstone presented recent findings from a multi-national research project examining European children’s internet and Information and Communications Technology use and associations to online risk and behaviours in 2010 and 2014 (with many other research endeavours in the spanning years).

The presentation included new quantitative and qualitative findings from EU Kids Online. The quantitative findings showed a clear shift over recent years towards more personalised and mobile access to the internet. This might explain why the findings also showed that the incidence of exposure to most risks, along with reported harm, have also risen slightly. The main increase in risk is in the area of user-generated content (e.g. hate messages, pro-anorexia and self-harm content). This is explained by the qualitative work, which reveals children and young people’s fascination with the ‘grey area’ between risks and opportunities where they are trying to explore the limits and possibilities of self-expression and social relationships. At the same time, the quantitative findings show some increase in

digital skills and the qualitative work shows efforts to navigate, interpret and evaluate the social media landscape more wisely.

For further research findings on Professor Livingstone's work, please visit the EU Kids Online homepage (<http://www.lse.ac.uk/media@lse/research/EUKidsOnline/Home.aspx>) or follow them on twitter @EUKIDSONLINE.

## **"Young people and self-taken images"**

### ***Dr. Ethel Quayle, University of Edinburgh***

Dr. Quayle discussed recent work done on her SPIRTO project, investigating in part the risk related to the capacity to generate sexual content online. In summary, research in the area of online sexual images and content is difficult, with diverse definitions across cultural and legal boundaries, inconsistencies in research methodologies and the 'illicit' content of texts/messages, and difficulties in teasing apart contextualisation of relationships in sharing messages/images.

For example, approximately 20% of online images collected through the databases were self-generated by the young people themselves, with the majority of these not being garnered through coercive techniques. This questions the criminal aspect of distribution, property and the rights of individuals both on- and off-line.

In combatting crimes against children, it would also seem that the 'stranger' myth discussed in basic criminology is present, with nearly one-third of indecent images accessed through the databases online by Dr. Quayle's team identified as being inter-familial generated. This means the photos are being taken and distributed within the family circle.

There were also clear differences in the type of content being access, distributed and used. For example, webcams and sites such as CHATROULETTE could often be used for self-exposure, or a medium in which information is shared. This is fundamentally different than a written text message sent, or photographs exchanged expanding beyond a relationship.

Debate surrounds the punitive discourse in this area—that is many professionals and practitioners alike are quick to consider the negative and socially undesirable aspects of sexting and image sharing, with little conversation on the 'pleasure' principles of sexually consenting individuals. This included aspects of the online rights of children and teenagers and the definitional characteristics of consensual romantic relationships.

For further details of Dr. Quayle's work, please contact [spirto@ed.ac.uk](mailto:spirto@ed.ac.uk).

## **“Impact of adult pornography on young people”**

***Dr. Miranda Horvath, Middlesex University***

Dr. Horvath presented interesting findings on a recent exploration into the effects of adult pornography on children and adolescents.

Evident from the beginning was the recurrence of issues surrounding definition, such as precisely what pornography entailed. Although definitions were diverse, the project focused on a holistic

The literature supports the theory that early exposure to pornography can have influences on youths’ risky behaviour, such as promiscuity, substance use and increased ‘sexting’. There is also an inverse effect on self-perceptions of risk by the youth themselves, with most not seeing the negative consequences or influences regarding their exposure.

Of particular interest was the gendered perspective taken by the material viewed by Dr. Horvath and her team. There were clear gender differences between young male and young females, with the young males seeing the pornography in a more arousing, positive perspective, and the women

Dr. Horvath recommends further research in the area, with particular emphasis on the mechanisms at play between exposure and displaying risky behaviour. In particular, other factors that could moderate or mediate the directionality and explains how exposure can be embodied as risk.

Recommendations include better education and information available for teachers and parents alike in assisting their young people in navigating the increasingly large amount of material and knowledge in cyberspace.

## **Research informed policy**

***Dr. Graham Ritchie, Office of the Children’s Commissioner***

Dr. Graham Ritchie, chief policy analyst at the Office of the Children’s Commissioner, discussed the importance of a rights based approach to ethics in dealing with navigating the safeguarding and protection of children in England and Wales. This included the recommendation that more emphasis be placed on linking up our educators and education system in taking a front line stance in educating sexual risk and abuse to today’s children.

Dr. Ritchie also recently provided us with a suggested framework for a national approach in safeguarding children, which can be found in our ‘Findings and Reports’ section.

## **Research informed practice**

### ***Dr. Richard Graham, Tavistock Institute***

The presentation on the importance of practitioners understanding the varied online risks vulnerable young people are exposed to. The Tavistock Institute has engaged in a process that should increase the digital literacy of all health workers in the service, and has added a digital risk assessment to risk protocols. It was suggested that as a product of increased understanding, there is then the possibility of understanding how the development of young people is now shaped by use of mobile connected devices, and how we might understand some of their behaviours in relation to risks. The presentation described a particular interest in the impact of visual images and videos, in relation to eating disorders and self-harm/suicide, as well as sexual development, and an interest in the way in which small smart devices are incorporated into our sense of self, or even the mind, such that use of a device takes over from mental activities such as daydreaming. This would have particular relevance when attempting to understand intent when assessing risk to others, such as contact offences.

### ***Rethinking practice and policy in relation to child abuse images – looking in the right places and asking the right questions***

#### ***Tink Palmer, CEO, Marie Collins Foundation -***

Tink Palmer highlighted what we know to date regarding child abuse images – who produces them and where they do this, who views them, who is depicted in the images and the numbers of images that we believe to be on the web – and related this knowledge to developing informed evidenced based practice approach to better protecting children. She highlighted the fact that there is a serious capacity problem regarding the policing of those who make, distribute and download child abuse images and a dearth of professionals' confidence in their ability to assess potential risk to children and to protect them.

From the research to date, a majority of CAIs represent a domestic setting and in the NCMEC study 60+% of the children who were traced stated that their abuser and person responsible for taking the images was related to them, a family friend or part of their social circle. Bearing this in mind Tink suggested that

- CAF models of assessment need to be updated and contain an internet dimension
- Practice guidance needs to be developed to assist professionals in making decisions about the welfare of children living in a household where a family member has been arrested for downloading child abuse images

- A UK-wide disruption and diversion strategy needs to be developed to help some people desist from downloading child abuse images and to seek help
- Including given to all families where police and children's services intervention is required due to harm or potential risk to children through the online activity of others
- Professionals need training in how to address issues posed by potential harm online with young people.
- Peer support and mentor programs need to be developed for YP and their efficacy needs to be assessed
- All professionals, including those working within all areas of the criminal justice system need to better understand how young people communicate and behave online and the significance of such behaviours.

### ***Stop it Now! UK and Ireland – Innovative prevention measures***

#### ***Deborah Denis, Media Communications Manager, The Lucy Faithfull Foundation (TLFF)***

Deborah gave an outline of the work carried out by the Stop it now! Helpline which included a description of its target groups and the growth in numbers of calls to the Helpline since its inception in 2002. Following a marked increase in the number of calls from those people concerned about their own or someone else's behavior online, in 2005 the LFF developed two programmes – Inform Plus (for people arrested for downloading abusive images of children) and Inform (for the partners of those arrested). They also carried out research with the IWF to discover how people initially starting images, what maintained their illegal behavior and what strategies may help them desist.

Deborah described the "Splash pages" and "Google Adverts" initiative. She commented that it is difficult to assess the efficacy of splash pages because the internet industry has no method for counting how many times "splash show". However, since August 2013, 27 people have contacted the Helpline – 16 via the phone-line and 11 e mailers. The age of callers ranged from under 27 years to 60 years. One of the callers was female. They reported a number of issues ranging from "heavy pornography use to having viewed indecent images of children for some time"

## **An overview of the work undertaken by the CPAI National Police Lead**

### ***Detective Inspector Alice Scott, Staff Officer to Chief Constable Simon Bailey***

- Alice provided an overview of the work undertaken by the CPAI National Police Lead Chief Constable Simon Bailey since taking over the post at the beginning of 2014. She talked about the challenges facing policing and the prioritisation of the vulnerability agenda for all forces.
- Social media and information technology plays an increasing role in offences being committed. The police are constantly looking at new ways to keep pace with this and at legislation which needs updating to be relevant to the changing digital savvy generations.
- Focus was given to production, sharing and distribution of IIOC and the challenges of managing this through means other than just arrest including warnings and other agency referrals.
- The victim agenda and requirement for better support to victims, their families and children specifically is an issue being championed by the CPAI team. There is a strong recognition that timely support services need to be more freely available for both the children who are victims of abuse and their families rather than a short term focus around the criminal justice system.

### **Some Key Issues- Professor Julia Davidson**

#### ***Opportunities & Challenges***

##### **Opportunities**

- Social media – is a powerful tool enabling communication, dissemination, and shines a global spotlight on policy/practice at national level.
- Challenges silo thinking – global issues cross national boundaries. E.g. legislation addressing online child abuse requires international solutions; the lack of consensus regarding the age of consent to sexual relations – the legal definition of child - presents one of the biggest obstacles in the policing and prosecution of online CSA.
- Ensuring that policy and practice is evidence led and based on good evidence is key in demonstrating effectiveness and impact.

##### **Challenges – some difficult issues**

- Blurring between the private and the public. Misuse of personal information
- Criminalising of ‘offensive’ communication, when does a communication become offensive? Particularly focusing on peer-to-peer interaction e.g. self-generated images and sexting

- Loss of control of information about ourselves and our lives
- Prevention - implications of the digital footprint how to educate – relationships, employment, protecting our children’s online reputation.

### Challenges for Practice

- Understanding digital lives- offenders, child victims, young people/relationships/ online sexuality. Understanding the technology. Particularly young people’s relationship to the device.
- Considering the digital life routinely- in assessment and throughout practice
- Establishing when digital behaviour is problematic or harmful
- Ensuring that alarmist media messages do not inform practice
- Addressing gender differences – pressure to conform
- Identifying the children most at risk – prevention

### Questions and issues raised at the Seminar

1. How to own your own image and consent to its use
  - Posting photos of your kids
2. Is the different age of consent and age of criminal responsibility in different countries recognised in research?
  - Credibility of research methods
3. Is technology “over use” myth or reality?
  - Will there be a backlash?
4. How do we get young people to realise the risks they are putting themselves at?
  - They believe “it won’t happen to me”
5. Childnet are running a pilot project on peer to peer education
6. Voice of the child
  - Reflecting societal trends?



7. Impact of adult pornography on very young children (3,4,5 years old) on their developmental trajectory
8. Lack of services and expertise in local areas to manage harm online
9. Poor attachment and children's risk taking behaviour online
  - Is there a link?
10. How might we open the dialogue with families and children about online behaviour?
  - How might we encourage parents?
  - What words/phraseology should we use?
  - For professionals, how might they cope with what is disclosed to them by children about harm online?
  - What are the ways to start appropriate conversations?
  - When talking with YP about their online activity, start positive, don't start with risk, show an interest in all parts of their digital lives
  - Childnet has new guidance for foster parents and adoptive parents
11. The need for professional training and CPD is essential across all professional bodies working with children.
  - BT and Marie Collins Foundation will launch a new training initiative for all members of the Children's Workforce on the 10<sup>th</sup> November, 2014
12. There are concerning examples of ways in which the CJS lacks an understanding of how young people communicate online
  - CPS, Barristers, Judges and police can misconstrue young people's behaviour and wrongly label them and their behaviour
13. There is a serious need to promote healthy sexual relationships amongst children and young people
  - Good lives model?