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### **Protecting children from sex offenders online: when strangers become 'virtual friends'**

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**'Policing The Internet And Protecting Children From Sex Offenders Online:  
When Strangers Become 'Virtual Friends'.**

Dr Julia Davidson  
Elena Martellozzo

**Abstract**

This article describes findings from research funded by the Metropolitan Police and Crimestoppers which aimed to explore children's online experiences. A non-random, stratified sample of 200 London school children aged 10- 13 participated in focus groups. Preliminary findings are also presented from unpublished ongoing PhD research, which seeks to explore sex offender behaviour online and the policing of the internet (Martellozzo, 2005 ongoing). The findings are discussed in the context of sex offender's use of the internet. This research indicates that children do have some basic knowledge about 'stranger danger' but are not necessarily applying these lessons to cyberspace. The children in this study had sufficient awareness to not give personal details to strangers on the internet, and would not arrange to meet them. However, they made a distinction between 'strangers' and 'virtual friends' and this is an important point. Preliminary findings also highlight the difficulty of policing the internet and serve to illustrate the manner in which the Sexual Offences Act 2003 is applied to internet sexual offending in practice.

## **Introduction: Child Sexual Abuse In Cyberspace**

The sexual abuse of children is not a new phenomenon; on the contrary, it is a topic that has been researched, policed, defined and redefined throughout history. However, there is no doubt that new information and communication technologies present opportunities that are both 'magical' (Jewkes, 2003) and disturbing. In other words, the development of new technologies (the Internet in particular) may have had a profound effect upon the manner in which child sexual abuse is perpetrated, by creating new and easier opportunities for perpetrators to anonymously target a larger number of victims.

When defining crimes committed in cyberspace, it is important to bear in mind that the definitions adopted cannot be completely divorced from 'real world' definitions of crime. It can be argued that in cyberspace, as in the real world, crime and deviance are socially constructed concepts; defined and labeled within the legislative and social context of a given society. That is to say, the meanings and the motivations behind these crimes can be perceived to be the same as those committed in cyberspace. Since its relatively recent invention, the Internet has assured anonymity and provided new opportunity for sexual abuse. Its unique qualities may have motivated child sexual abusers to search for new victims and for indecent images of abused children in new ways (Vulpiani, 2001). However, it is necessary to exercise some caution, it would be naïve to blame the Internet for the creation of sex offenders or 'cyber monsters', as the media has depicted them.

Nonetheless, we need to recognize the fact that the internet has provided new offence pathways, which have led -and still lead- to the perpetration of child sexual abuse.

### **Sex Offenders Use Of The Internet: The Nature And Scale Of The Problem**

The pathways created by internet sex offenders can include the construction of sites to be used as an exchange of information, experiences and pornographic images; organised criminal activities that use children for prostitution purposes and that produce indecent images of children at a professional level and organised criminal activities that promote sexual tourism. Indecent images of children are frequently shared by sex offenders using the internet and the industry in such images is becoming increasingly large and lucrative (Wyre, 2003).

It is clear that sex offenders use the internet both to access child pornography and to select victims for abuse. Gilan (2003) has suggested that the demand for child pornography through, for example, the use of file-sharing technology, has grown so rapidly that law enforcement agencies are now employed in an increasingly difficult global race to track down the child victims and the perpetrators involved. The police have suggested that some of the children used in indecent images are being abused on a daily basis to provide a constant supply of new computerised material (Gilan, Guardian Newspaper, 4<sup>th</sup> of November, 2003).

The Metropolitan Police Child Protection Hi-Technology Crime Unit has already built extensive lists of suspects involved in file swapping illegal images in the UK alone.

While most are involved only in sharing or downloading the images, a significant proportion of active abusers produce the material themselves, often using children with whom a relationship of trust has been established. Indeed, the anonymous nature of cyberspace, with its vague boundaries, has made the policing of child pornography a complicated task. For example, according to the Home Office Task Force On Child Protection On The Internet (2003), there are approximately 1 million images of child abuse in circulation on the Internet and this number is expanding rapidly at a rate of 200 a day. In addition, research conducted by UNICEF suggests that 80% of paedophile-related investigations involve more than one country, meaning that the producer, distributor, possessor and location of indecent images of children are frequently not all in the same country. Robbins and Darlington (2003) suggest that 90% of all paedophile-related activities involve the Internet ,although this estimate seems rather high.

Research literature demonstrates that sex offenders will often socialize and groom children over long periods of time in preparation for sexual abuse (Finkelhor, 1984; Davidson, 2004). Grooming behaviour in sex offenders has also been well documented in sex offender treatment programmes (Finkelhor et al 1986; Beech, 1996; Beckett et al 2004) and is an area addressed in cognitive behavioural treatment approaches. This involves a process of socialisation during which an offender seeks to interact with the victim (and sometimes the victims family), to share their hobbies and interests and to become a part of their life, in order to prepare them for abuse. The Home Office defines grooming as *‘a course of conduct enacted by a suspected paedophile, which would give a reasonable person cause for concern that any meeting with a child arising from the*

*conduct would be for unlawful purposes'* (Home Office, 2002), this definition formed the basis of the grooming clause in the Sexual Offences Act 2003. The grooming of a child is often a slow process and certainly a deliberate process, it is much easier to abuse a child when trust is established. There is no reason to believe that sex offenders behave differently online. Medaris and Girouard (2002) argue that sex offenders can now easily and anonymously target their potential victims on the internet from their own homes. Research evidence suggests that as part of the online grooming process sex offenders will adopt children's computer language and learn about their hobbies and interests (O'Connell, 2002. Chase and Statham, 2005). Parents are frequently less computer literate than their children and feel unable to supervise their online activities, this contention is supported by this research and Livingstone's recent work (2005). An additional problem has been identified by the Home Office Task force on child Protection on the Internet (2003), it is suggested that many parents and carers are unaware of the risks their children can encounter when online by allowing them unlimited and unsupervised access to the Internet. Sex offenders no longer need to lurk in parks or shopping centers risking visibility. They can easily and anonymously target their potential victims, who are often vulnerable and insecure and unsupervised online (Medaris & Girouard 2002: Redfern, 2004: Davidson & Martellozzo 2004).

### **Children's Perceptions And Experiences Online**

Research conducted by O'Connell (2002) suggests that 91% of the children surveyed were aware of the dangers of providing personal information online to strangers, while only 40% of children who chatted online regularly were aware that they should always

take a trusted adult when meeting a virtual friend. This would seem to be something of a contradiction in that children have some awareness of the dangers but are not fully informed. The children in this study had sufficient awareness to not give personal details to strangers on the internet, and claimed they would not arrange to meet them. This is hardly surprising given that children have been made aware of potential 'stranger danger' both at home and at school. However children in this study made a distinction between 'strangers' and 'virtual friends' and this is an important point. Children may not have met 'virtual friends' although they may have been communicating with them over a long period of time and may therefore feel as if they know them. This research indicates that children do have some basic knowledge about 'stranger danger' but are not necessarily applying these lessons to cyberspace.

During focus groups in this study children were questioned about their interactions in chat rooms and 25 (13%) reported occasions where they believed themselves, or a friend/relative had been talking to an adult posing as a child. On several occasions this was clear as the persons profile revealed their real age. A small number of the children (10, 5%) had been approached in a chat room regarding sex and had told their parents; they reported feeling uncomfortable, and uncertain about to whom they were talking. The children's comments illustrate their experiences: 'I met a pervert in a chat room and told my mum' (FG3) 'I met someone who wasn't what they said they were' Q. What did they say? 'They pretended to be a kid, I didn't think they were' (FG4) 'Someone asked me if I did sex, I exited and told my mum' (FG6) 'There was a 40 year old man I was talking to on a 11-14 year old site' Q. How did you know his age?' 'I checked his profile on AOL

and it said 40' Q. what did you do? I left the chat room and told my mum' (FG23) 'One girl was talking about sex I think she was older than 14. Q. What did she say?' 'My dad is out do you want to have sex online?''(FG20)

The children were asked if they felt they would be able to tell if they were talking to an adult or a child online. This question was added after several focus groups where children claimed that they are able to identify other children on line. The majority of children (140, 70%) claimed that they would always know if they were talking to a child as children use a unique text language online that adults would not be able to understand: . 'Children use words that aren't formal, like slang. So you'd be able to tell if someone was lying' (FG4), 'Teenagers always talk a certain way, I'd be able to tell if it's an adult' (FG13) , 'They (children) use texting words, they shorten them because it's easier' (FG14) 'I would be able to tell unless they said something odd' (FG24). It is of some concern that the children interviewed were so confident that they would be able to recognize an adult posing as a child, given concerns over the online grooming of children and manner in which sex offenders act to conceal their true age and identity (O'Connell, 2002).

This knowledge is, however, very limited and when questioned further it was clear that they would be willing to provide personal information and on some occasions meet with an online acquaintance: 'I would trust people after speaking online with them for a while, perhaps after 2 weeks, then I'd know they were ok and would meet them' (FG24)

'It would be alright if you met them out where there were lots of other people around' (FG20) 'If they tell you to meet in a busy place then they are friends, if they ask you to meet at the back somewhere then that's scary and you shouldn't go'(FG23).

The children in this study had sufficient awareness to not give personal details to strangers on the internet, and would not arrange to meet them. However, they made a distinction between 'strangers' and 'virtual friends' and this is an important point. Children may not have met 'Virtual friends' and they may have been communicating with them over a long period of time and would therefore be more trusting and less likely to view them as strangers, and would be more likely to meet (Davidson and Martellozzo, 2004).

### **Legislation And Police Practice**

Legislation recently introduced in England and Wales has created a new offence; clause 15 of the Sexual Offences Act 2003 makes the 'grooming' of a child for the purposes of sexual abuse an offence. This applies to the internet and other technologies such as mobile phones. A dedicated unit at New Scotland Yard currently investigates the online grooming of children and several successful cases have been brought under the Sexual Offences Act 2003.

### **Policing The Internet: Case Study<sup>1</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup> The authors wish to thank the High-Tech Crime Unit at new Scotland Yard for providing this information and for their support in allowing access to police records and for their help in the conduct of the research.

The difficulty of policing the internet is clear and there is little information about police practice in this area. Case study information is provided to illustrate some of the issues raised in this article regarding grooming behaviour online and in order to explore the manner in which the 'grooming' clause (Sexual Offences Act 2003) is applied in practice. The data was gathered by the co-author as part of a PhD (Martellozzo, 2005 ongoing) and is presented with the permission of the Metropolitan Police.

In 2004, the Metropolitan Police received international intelligence regarding an underage female who was receiving sexually explicit emails from a male whom she met in a chat room. The male was prepared to travel to have sex with the female and also to pay her. This behaviour was categorized as 'grooming' under the new legislation (Sexual Offences Act 2003) and acted as a starting point for police investigations. The girl had been chatting on line for a six month period before the offender started to send her money for the purchase of phone cards so they could communicate also via text messages. Cobley (2005) suggests that applying the 'grooming' clause in practice is highly problematic given the difficulty of demonstrating 'sexual intent' towards a child, however the following case illustrates the extent to which some sex offenders are prepared to go to secure a child for sexual activity and the overt manner in which 'grooming' occurred. The offender was prepared to travel in order to meet the child; he was willing to pay a substantial amount of money to have sex with the child; he was willing to pay more money if she brought her even younger friend; he persuaded the child to post her underwear. In addition, he admitted to the child that he had previously abused children and that he was currently on trial for sex abuse charges. However, this did not

prevent the child from communicating with the suspect. As previous research suggests (Davidson & Martellozzo 2004) and as this case demonstrates, children are often unaware of the dangers posed by the internet. On the contrary, they feel at ease and more secure behind the computer screen than they would in the real world, and sex offenders are well aware of this. The typicality of this case may be questioned and sex offender behaviour may become more guarded as awareness grows about policing methods.

The child's mother contacted the local police and the Metropolitan Police began to investigate the claims made. The investigation revealed that the offender had other previous criminal convictions ('kerb-crawling', soliciting a prostitute and for possession of Cocaine). It was also discovered that the suspect had met and sexually abused another child he had groomed on line.

During the investigation, the suspect's computer was seized and analysed. A large number of images of children under the age of 16 were found, some of which were believed to be of an indecent nature. The total number of images stored on the computer, which appeared to be of children under the age of 16, was in the region of 6000. Of these, 4500 images depicted children dressed in underwear, swimwear or were otherwise immodestly dressed, and 1117 could be categorised as indecent images of children. Upon examining the stored web pages it was noted that a great number of those were related to forums discussing paedophilia. An analysis of the number of web pages showed that the user had been logged onto a number of different child love forums.

Although at this preliminary stage of the research it is unclear how typical this illustration is likely to be of cases brought under the new sexual offences legislation, the case study does illustrate many of the issues raised in this article. It is clear that the Internet is more than just a medium of communication it constitutes a new virtual reality, or a cyberworld

with its own rules and its own language. It provides a supportive context in which the child abuser is no longer a lonely figure but part of a larger community that share the same interests, the internet gives a whole new meaning to the term 'paedophile ring', as the potential for offenders to organize to abuse children is great. Gilan (2003) supports this contention in claiming that Peer-to-Peer facilitates the most extreme, aggressive and reprehensible types of behaviour that the Internet will allow. Research with children has also demonstrated both the extent of their computer literacy (Livingstone 2005) and their vulnerability online (O'Connell, 2002: Davidson and Martellozzo, 2004). It is in reality extremely difficult to police cyberspace and a minority of successful cases will be brought under the new sexual offences legislation, it is important for teachers and the police to raise awareness amongst children and their parents about the potential dangers of cyberspace.

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