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Pedophilia on the Internet*

ABSTRACT: The Internet provides adults and children with a medium for professional and personal communication throughout the world. As widespread communication in cyberspace grows exponentially, the potential for Internet-related crimes, such as cyberstalking, has accelerated. Children are particularly vulnerable to sexual predators, such as pedophiles, on the Internet. This article reports cases of pedophiles who used the information superhighway to exploit child victims. Two models of pedophilia on the Internet are discussed: a trust-based seductive model and a direct sexual model. This article explores the role that mental health professionals may play in the assessment of Internet pedophilia. For example, mental health professionals may provide psychiatric treatment to victims of Internet pedophiles. Psychiatrists may be involved in the evaluation of perpetrators of Internet crimes in a clinical or forensic setting. Governmental agencies, the criminal justice system, school, or the media may request consultations by mental health professionals as part of a multi-disciplinary approach to prevention. Methods of government intervention are discussed.

KEYWORDS: forensic science, Internet, pedophilia, psychiatry

In the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, fourth edition, a pedophile is described as a person who experiences, over a period of at least six months, recurrent, intense sexually arousing fantasies, or sexual urges or behaviors involving sexual activity with a prepubescent child or generally children age 13 years or younger (1). The fantasies, urges, or behaviors cause clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning (1). A pedophile must be at least 16-years-old and at least five years older than a child victim (1).

Online communication can take place in a variety of forms: electronic mail (e-mail), chat rooms, newsgroups, mail exploders, and the World Wide Web (2). The Internet serves as a medium for pedophiles, who are typically males, to target vulnerable children with their sexual predatory behavior. Although not all pedophiles can be classified as stalkers, those whose behavior constitutes stalking are typically predatory stalkers who take pleasure in the sense of power produced by stalking and preparation for a sexual attack (3). Pedophilic predatory stalkers who use the Internet as the medium for their pursuit are classified as cyberstalkers. One study has estimated that more than 45 million children in the United States will be online by the year 2002 (4).

This article reports two models of pedophilia in cyberspace: a trust-based seductive model and a direct sexual model and provides examples of each. The reason for the distinction between the two models is that Internet pedophiles appear to fall into one or the other category. The role of mental health professionals in the forensic and clinical assessment of Internet pedophiles and their victims is discussed. This article also explores recent methods of governmental intervention.

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Results

Trust-Based Seductive Model (5)

In this model of pedophilic behavior on the Internet, a pedophile seeks to gain the attention of a child he has targeted. The goal is gradually to obtain a child's trust and then to seduce a child into engaging in sexual acts (5). The perpetrator gains a child's trust in many ways. Pedophiles are aware that children, especially those in the teenage years, are subject to peer pressure. Consequently, sexual predators can claim to be of the same sex as an intended victim in order to gain trust. Similarly, by pretending to be in the same age group, an unsuspecting child can consider an incognito pedophile as a peer. As conversations between a pedophile and his victim develop, a pedophile informs a child that he shares similar interests and common experiences. For example, a pedophile who has targeted a teenage boy may seduce the adolescent with computer games and entice him with his own collection. A vulnerable child finds comfort that someone on the other end of a conversation understands his concerns and shares his interests. Occasionally, when a pedophile shares secrets with a child, a child feels important and develops a high self-esteem.

Case 1—A 48-year-old California man was charged with molesting four boys. When police raided his home in a mobile home park, they confiscated five computers, five videocassette recorders, nearly 300 video cassettes and hundreds of computer disks which contained sexual chats with boys around the country who used code names. He targeted boys who are runaways, or who had problems at home and were looking for a male figure in their lives. He befriended the boys, invited them to his trailer to play computerized video games, and then introduced a game called "Strip Poker." He then allegedly progressed to taking their pictures and then engaging in sexual acts. A 17-year-old boy approached police who then pursued the investigation and recognized the picture of a 12-year-old boy who then led them to the two other victims (6).

Case 2—A 15-year-old boy in New Jersey was charged with sexually assaulting and strangling an 11-year-old boy in his neighborhood. The older boy himself was sexually abused by a 43-year-old convicted pedophile whom he met in an online chat room and who then lured him to his home in Long Island and to several motel rooms. When the 15-year-old boy's parents discovered the relationship, they took him to a therapist who then informed the police. The police enlisted the boy's help, which led to the pedophile's arrest. The 15-year-old was so disturbed by the events that his parents requested their son to be committed. Instead, a judge remitted him to his parents' custody. Three days later, when the 11-year-old neighbor rang the 15-year-old neighbor's doorbell while selling wrapping paper and candy door-to-door, the 11-year-old was sexually assaulted, strangled, and his body was stuffed in a suitcase (7).

Case 3—A 31-year-old Virginia man was charged with committing sodomy and aggravated sexual battery of a 12-year-old California boy. Authorities initially believed that the boy had met the suspect in an online chat room but later discovered they met through a 900 phone number known as "Hollywood Hell Hole." The 12-year-old boy who was known to frequent Internet chat rooms and who had in the past met a registered sex offender online, communicated with the perpetrator by phone and the Internet. When the boy indicated that he was having difficulties at home, the pedophile sent him a bus ticket to Virginia. Using telephone calling card records as a road map to track the boy's whereabouts, the police went to the pedophile's home. The pedophile told them he had put the boy back on a bus that day; however, when the FBI later investigated the home, they found the boy concealed in a space beneath the stairwell (8).

Case 4—A 51-year-old Seattle man tricked a 14-year-old Westchester County girl through an online chat room by posing as a teenage girl. After winning her trust and forging an intense relationship, he confessed to her that he was a man and began making sexual overtures. Eventually, he wrote that it was time for them to meet and flew to New York where he rented a motel room. By chance, the girl's mother saw them together at a local shopping mall and notified police (9).

Direct Sexual Model (5)

In this model of pedophilic behavior on the Internet, a pedophile takes a direct approach rather than a gradual one to build trust. This approach generally takes a shorter amount of time to achieve a perpetrator's goals. The communication between a pedophile and his victim is sexually explicit in nature from the beginning. A trade of images may take place which involves child or adult pornography. Pedophiles use Internet bulletin boards to trade child pornography or to obtain lists of children who have had a prior association with pedophiles. As in the trust-based model, the ultimate goal is usually to arrange a meeting in person. However, there are some pedophiles who only trade pornographic material and engage in sexual conversation without taking a relationship further. Children are sexually curious and may seek freedom to explore their sexuality on the Internet. Adolescents, in particular, have an interest in sexuality and curiosity about sexually explicit material (5). As they gain autonomy from their parents, they may venture into potentially dangerous areas of cyberspace and be manipulated by clever sexual predators.

Case 1—A convicted murderer on parole after 30 years in prison allegedly solicited investigators on the Internet who were posing as

a mother to let him molest her two pre-teenage daughters. Agents of the multi-agency Sexual Assault Federal Enforcement (S.A.F.E.) task force initially contacted him through the mail and then corresponded with him for eight months via the United States Postal Service and chat rooms on the Internet. He allegedly sent child pornography to the fictitious mother believing that the mother would give it to the children to see what was in store for them. He had even warned the "mother" that police routinely conduct stings using the Internet but that he was less wary about using the postal service. When apprehended, he stated that it "was a very good sting (10)."

Case 2—A 38-year-old man from Sterling, Maryland using the screen names "MrFreeEasy" and "Funguy" admitted to engaging in sex acts with two 16-year-old girls he met in online chat rooms and to arranging meetings with even younger children he had met online. He had traveled to Michigan to meet a 13-year-old girl but did not have sex with her after she asked to go home. He was arrested in New York after setting up a meeting with a local police department investigator who was posing online as a 12-year-old girl. A search of his home computer turned up a "a buddy list" that led police to minors he had met through the Internet (11).

Discussion

The Role of Mental Health Professionals in the Assessment of Child Victims

Mental health professionals may play a pivotal role in the assessment of Internet pedophiles and their victims. If parents suspect changes in their child's behavior, they may be motivated to seek the assistance of a child psychologist or psychiatrist. A mental health professional who is aware of sexual predatory behavior on the Internet may identify the Internet as a source of the child's emotional problems. However, the need for clinicians to become aware of pedophilia on the Internet extends beyond professionals who specialize in the treatment of children. Often, family members of a child victim, such as parents or siblings, report suspicions of a change in a child's behavior to family practitioners or pediatricians who then seek the advice of a general psychiatrist. A child may be embarrassed to discuss sexually explicit activities with mental health professionals. However, a mental health professional who is educated about Internet exploitation of children may detect victimization from subtle clues. Frequently, teachers are the first to discover children who use the Internet for sexually-oriented communication. As a result, teachers may refer a child to a school psychologist or to a private therapist for further evaluation.

The Clinical Assessment of Internet Pedophiles

Mental health professionals may encounter pedophiles in their professional practice. Patients may confess pedophilic behavior which includes online communication and sexual exploitation of children. Clinicians are required by law to report suspected child abuse to the appropriate child protective services agency. Forensic mental health professionals may evaluate or treat pedophiles in a correctional setting to decrease the likelihood of recidivism. Forensic psychiatrists and psychologists who practice in court psychiatric clinics often evaluate pedophiles in the process of criminal adjudication and make treatment recommendations. Frequently, a forensic psychiatrist is asked to perform a risk assessment of violence or to evaluate a perpetrator's likelihood of recidivism. An awareness of the phenomenon of cyberstalking and pedophilia on

the Internet can facilitate the task of performing a thorough evaluation.

Mental Health Professionals' Role in the Prevention of Internet Pedophilia

As the Internet becomes a part of everyday life, great efforts are being made to control its use and to prevent the exploitation of children. Mental health professionals can be part of multi-disciplinary efforts to prevent the propagation of pedophilic activity on the Internet. Forensic mental health professionals should become familiar with Internet crimes, such as cyberstalking and pedophilia. The public, in turn, should be aware of such experts. Government agencies often assemble task forces and integrate the expertise of mental health professionals in their preventative efforts. Clinicians who act as consultants to schools can educate children, parents, educators, and administrators about Internet pedophilia and its warning signs. Similarly, the criminal justice system may assign special units to handle crimes involving the Internet; consequently, mental health professionals may be recruited to assist with the process. In addition, as the media promotes public awareness of Internet crimes, such as pedophilia, psychiatrists and psychologists may be asked to participate in interviews for their forensic expertise.

Methods of Government Intervention

Many organizations have made intervention against online sexual predators a priority. The Federal Trade Commission is currently seeking legislation requiring Internet companies to get parental consent before permitting children under the age of 13 to enter World Wide Web sites that solicit addresses, phone numbers, and personal information (12). The Federal Bureau of Investigation (F.B.I.) is investing a great deal of effort in training state and local law enforcement officials by setting up cyber police squads to patrol the Information Superhighway (5). Task forces in police departments are formed to trap child molesters and child pornography distributors in sting operations. Since many pedophiles store lists of children's names and sexually explicit material in their computers, police may be limited if they do not have access to a perpetrator's User ID or password. The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children has established a "cyber-tipline" for the public to report any suspicious or illicit activity involving children on the Internet.

Conclusions

The last decade of the twentieth century has paved the way for the Internet era of the new millennium. The Internet has a profound impact on millions of children throughout the world. As pedophiles are using the Internet to conduct sexual predatory behavior, Internet safety becomes paramount. Children are at increased risk of victimization by pedophiles. Pedophiles may use a gradual, trust-based approach or a direct sexual approach to target vulnerable children. Mental health professionals can play a critical role in assessing child victims and evaluating perpetrators. In addition, mental health professionals with an understanding of stalking and pedophilic behavior on the Internet can serve as liaisons to law enforcement and to the public. A multi-disciplinary approach to public awareness should involve mental health professionals, government agencies, the media, and the public.

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