Understanding the Process of Online Grooming: The Behavior of Men who Target Young People Online in Norway

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to present some topics relevant to our understanding of the online grooming process that pedophile men apply to target young people online for future sexual abuse. The legislative context of Norway is explored in this article, and Norwegian Supreme Court decisions are described. Some approaches to educational awareness and Internet safety are presented, as well as educational awareness campaigns. Furthermore, characteristics of the Internet for online grooming are discussed.

Grooming, Internet, Online Services, Pedophile, Supreme Court

INTRODUCTION

“On The Road to A Safer Norway” is one of the slogans used by the Minister of Justice (Justisdepartementet, 2007). While 22 percent of all Norwegian children between the age of 9 and 16 years (about 70,000 children) have met someone on the Internet, almost all meetings occurred between children of about the same age without any problems. However, cases of online grooming leading to sexual abuse of children by men do occur. A recent example was a 33 year-old school assistant who wrote on a webpage on the Internet “I am Stian 15”. He had contact with several girls who undressed in front of their web cameras. He met two of the girls in a hotel room for sexual intercourse. The man was sentenced to four years imprisonment (Oftedal, 2008).

In cases where a child has met an adult after contact on the Internet in Norway, less than 10 percent of the children report that the meeting was unpleasant in terms of words or physical assault. Girls at the age of 15 to 16 years experience most frequently unpleasant behavior when meeting an adult after Internet contact. Most of those experiencing physical or psychological offence at such meetings, say that they are dissatisfied with friends, school and/or own family. Most of them have parents that were born in another European country (Justisdepartementet, 2007).
A number of studies concerned with online victimization of children have recently been completed in Norway. In these studies all of them tend to focus solely on the child as a victim. Save the Children Norway has published two studies (Hegg, 2008; Nicolaisen, 2008), while the Ministry of Justice has published one study (Faremo, 2007). There were no studies yet on the process of online grooming in terms of understanding the behaviors of men who target young people online.

Men who target young people online for sex are pedophiles (Kierkegaard, 2008; Wolak et al., 2008). According to Dunaigre (2001), the pedophile is an emblematic figure, made into a caricature and imbued with all the fears, anxieties and apprehensions rocking our society today. Pedophile acts are - according to the World Health Organization (WHO) - sexual behavior that an adult major (16 years or over), overwhelmingly of the male sex, acts out towards prepubescent children (13 years or under). According to the WHO, there must normally be a five-year age difference between the two, except in the case of pedophilic practices at the end of adolescence where what counts is more the difference in sexual maturity. However, the definition of criminal behavior varies among countries. As will become evident from reading this article, pedophile acts in Norway are sexual behavior that a person acts out towards children of 16 years or under. There is no minimum age definition for the grooming person in Norwegian criminal law, but age difference and difference in sexual maturity is included as criteria for criminal liability.

According to Davidson and Martellozzo (2008: 277), Internet sex offender behavior can include: “the construction of sites to be used for the exchange of information, experiences, and indecent images of children; the organization of criminal activities that seek to use children for prostitution purposes and that produce indecent images of children at a professional level; the organization of criminal activities that promote sexual tourism”.

LEGISLATIVE CONTEXT OF WORK WITH INTERNET SEX OFFENDERS

Relevant sections in the General Civil Penal Code (“straffeloven”) concerned with sexual offenders in Norway are the following (Nicolaisen, 2008):

- Section 195. Any person who engages in sexual activity with a child who is under 14 years of age shall be liable to imprisonment for a term not exceeding 10 years. If the said activity was sexual intercourse the penalty shall be imprisonment for not less than 2 years.
  - Imprisonment for a term not exceeding 21 years may be imposed if
    - a. The act is committed by two or more persons jointly,
    - b. The act is committed in a particularly painful or offensive manner,
    - c. The act is committed against a child under 10 years of age and there have been repeated assaults,
    - d. The offender has previously been convicted and sentenced pursuant to this provision or section 192, or
    - e. As a result of the act the aggrieved person dies or sustains serious injury to body or health. Sexually transmitted diseases and generally infectious diseases, cf. section 1-3, No. 3, cf. No. 1, of the Act relating to control of communicable diseases, shall always be deemed to be considerable injury to body or health pursuant to this section.
  - Criminal liability shall not be excluded by any mistake made as regards age.
  - A penalty pursuant to this provision may be remitted or imposed below the minimum prescribed in
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