

Chapter 8

Online Child Predators: Does Internet Society Make Predation Easy?

ABSTRACT

There has been significant media interest in the possible dangers of child predation on the internet, but it is not necessarily a new type of offence (Wolak, Finkelhor, Mitchell & Ybarra, 2008). Indeed, in many cases it seems to bear more resemblance to statutory rape than paedophilia. Nevertheless, the Internet does seem to provide an easier route for child predators to encounter and engage with children and teenagers, and the question as to if it enables child predators in their acts should be considered. This chapter will attempt to address this question. Initially paedophilia will be defined, and problems with its diagnosis will be considered. An attempt will be made to quantify the problem of online child predation, and the techniques used by online child predators will be described. The psychology of child predators will be considered, including an overview of some of the main theories of paedophilic behaviour. The psychology of victims will also be considered, with an overview of the risk factors of online predation, along with the psychological effects on victims. Potential solutions will then be reviewed, including rehabilitation efforts and prevention methods. Finally, future trends in online predation will be considered.

BACKGROUND

Sophie is fifteen years old, and has recently started using social networking websites. She received a friend request from Jim, a boy who she does not know. His profile says that he is sixteen years old,

and lives in the next town. Jim is actually a twenty-seven year old man from a different country. Sophie notices that he is listed as a friend of some of her schoolmates, so she accepts his friend request as she does not want to seem rude. Jim starts to send her private messages, and as he looks quite cute in his profile, Sophie feels flattered. The messages

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start to turn sexual in nature, and Jim asks her to send him photographs of her in her underwear. Sophie has never had a boyfriend, and she is not sure what to do, but Jim persuades her that it is normal to swap sexy photos. She takes the photo and sends it to him, and he replies that she is very beautiful, but that it would be even better if she was naked. After a little more persuasion she sends him a photo of herself completely naked. Over time his demands become more and more difficult for Sophie to accept. Eventually Jim asks her to use a webcam, saying that he wants to watch her carry out sexual acts on herself in real time. Sophie feels very uncomfortable at this request and refuses. Jim starts to get very angry, he calls her a tease, and says that if she does not comply to his requests, he will put her naked photo on his profile so that all of her friends will see it. She consults her friends for advice about Jim, and then realises that they do not know him either – they accepted his friend request without knowing who he was. Although she is very embarrassed, Sophie tells her parents the whole story. Her parents then report the issue to the police.

George is a twenty-two year old man with paedophilic tendencies. He spends a lot of time on the internet searching for suitable teenage girls to approach. He finds a profile of Judy on a social networking website. Judy is fourteen years old and lives locally. She seems a little shy, and does not have many friends on the website. George makes contact with her, and he does not hide the fact that he is much older than her. Soon they are in contact several times a day, and as the relationship progresses, George starts to discuss various sexual activities and fantasies with her. She seems receptive to his ideas, so George eventually feels confident enough to suggest meeting up in real life. Judy agrees, and they set a date for the next day at her house, as she says her parents will be out at work. She tells him to bring the sex toys that he has mentioned in his messages. When George arrives at the house, he is arrested. Judy was actually a thirty-four year old undercover

police officer. The sex toys that he brought with him were used as evidence that he intended to engage in sexual activity with an underage girl.

The scenarios mentioned above are both entirely fictional, but are based on mostly typical events that can occur during online child predatory events. As will be outlined later in the chapter, most victims are adolescents rather than younger children, and most are female. Many involve discussion of sexual activities in advance of physical meetings, and a gradual ‘grooming’ of the youth to prepare them for a sexual encounter. The reporting of the events to the police in the first scenario is unusual however, as it is likely that most cases of online child predation never come to the attention of the authorities. The terms used to describe the events and individuals involved in these attacks are sometimes confusing, however, and so it is important that these are appropriately defined.

Definitions of Paedophilia

While the media image of paedophilia frequently involves violent, predatory and sensational crimes (Brown, 2005), in practice few sexual offences against children involve severe brutality, sexual mutilation or significant physical injury (West, 1996). The definition of a paedophile is quite specific in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (Fourth edition, text revised – DSM-IV-TR) of the American Psychiatric Association (2000). The DSM-IV-TR indicates that in order to receive a clinical diagnosis of paedophilia, the individual must have experienced intense and recurrent sexually arousing fantasies over a minimum of six months, or urges or behaviours that involve sexual activities with a prepubescent child or children. In addition to this, the individual will experience significant distress, or impairment in social, occupational or other functioning, due to the presence of these fantasies, urges or behaviours. Finally, the individual must be at least sixteen years of age, and at least five years older than their victims.

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