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Ways To Protect Students From Online Predators

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Abstract

This study explored teacher and counselors' perceptions of how to prevent adolescents from internet sexual predators. Twenty-five teachers and counselors were interviewed, and lack of parental support and access to social networking websites were the primary circumstances leading to teenage internet sexual assault. Teen needs and gratification fostered their encounters with predators on the internet. Participants viewed greater parental supervision as necessary during internet use to limit possible contact with potential predators. Practical suggestions are provided for those working with students.

Introduction

The internet has become very important in society; it is present in the majority of households in America, but it is also becoming a new venue particularly for child sexual predators (Livingston, Haddon, & Görzig, 2012; Wolak, Finkelhor, Mitchell, & Ybarra, 2010). According to van Manen (2010), sharing personal information online can be unexpectedly risky, in part because sexual predators and pedophiles prey on unsuspecting social network users. Social networking websites such as Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, and instant messaging can open the door for teen exploitation on the internet. Thus, efforts continue to make the internet a safer place for children (Federal Trade Commission, 2012).

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of school teachers and counselors with knowledge of adolescent experiences of sexual assault occurring via the internet to better understand how such experiences may be avoided. After parents, teachers are the most used source of internet safety advice (Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig, & Ólafsson, 2011). Therefore, because youth may approach teachers or other school professionals such as counselors for help,

it is important to understand the educator and counselor perspective. Findings may provide practical insight into strategies that might reduce teenage risk for online sexual assault.

Wolak and Finkelhor (2013) suggest that crimes by online predators should be treated no differently from crimes by sex offenders known to the youth. Therefore, parents, teachers, mental health professionals, and law enforcement need additional data to better understand this form of assault against teenagers. Teen internet sexual assault is an increasing problem for society, one that requires understanding of the type of gratification that teens gain from using the internet, and how to prevent such gratification leading to sexual assault.

The role of teachers and counselors is important to reducing the teen internet sexual assault phenomenon because they engage daily with teenagers, some of which have experienced internet sexual assault (Noll, Shenk, Barnes, & Haralson, 2013). According to Hansford and Adlington (2009), when learning with wikis and blogs, for example, teachers need to think about the social purpose of each of these media, matching appropriate texts with learning experiences. Furthermore, because they have knowledge of the types of social networking websites and chat rooms that teens visit, they can incorporate educational curricular into the classroom which can help protect students against internet predators.

Background

Chat rooms and social networking websites are places where internet predators often go to solicit teens for sex. According to Bower (2008), most online sex offenders are adults who contact vulnerable 13 to 17 year-olds and seduce them into sexual relationships. Teenagers are often seeking gratification via the internet, and adults may take advantage. User-generated media (UGM) like Facebook, MySpace and Twitter have become tremendously popular over the last few years (Shao, 2009), and serve as teen social gathering places to share photos and exchange gossip. According to Peter, Valkenburg, Schouten and Alexander (2005), the internet is seen as a new social environment in which universal adolescent issues such as identity, sexuality, and a sense of self-worth are played out in a virtual world. An influential tradition in media research, UGM presents media use in terms of the gratification or psychological needs of the individual (Shao, 2009).

This new social environment is growing both in the United States and worldwide and has become woven into the everyday activity of most teens. For example, OfCom (2013) report that 68% of children between the ages of 12 and 15 are social networkers, and 93% of 5 to 15 year-olds use the internet. The probability that they are likely to meet a predator becomes increasingly common as children enter their teenage years (Shannon, 2008), and the internet is increasingly becoming the method which predators use to meet teen victims (Nissley, 2008). For example, about five percent of offenders pretended to be teens while developing relationships with adolescents online and often enter chat rooms to meet them. Further, 11% children aged between 9 and 16 had observed sexual images on the internet during the previous year (National Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Children, 2013).

Educational strategies that target 13 to 17 year olds directly and acknowledge normal adolescent interests in romance and sex are needed (Wolak et al., 2010). The rising popularity of the internet and the ever increasing amount of time adolescents spend online pose challenges to parents who

want to protect their teenage children from excessive internet use (van den Eijnden et al., 2010). Social networking sites offer anonymity for both the teenager and the predator, which may decrease inhibition for both the teenager and a potential predator. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to further the literature in this area by interviewing teachers and school counselors who have worked with teen victims of sexual assault from someone whom they met on the internet.

Method

The sample comprised of 25 teachers and counselors (9 male, 16 female) in a suburban school district in the Midwest and consisted of members from White ($n = 19$), Black ($n = 2$), Hispanic ($n = 2$), Pacific Islander ($n = 1$) and Mixed ($n = 1$) ethnic groups during 2012. To participate in this study, they were required to have had experience working with teenagers who have had one or more sexual experiences with someone they met on the internet. Participants' responses provided a source of opinion on the teen internet assault phenomenon.

Instruments

Participants were interviewed using a semi-structured guide that included open-ended questions concerning the perceived causes of teen internet sexual assault among 13 to 17 year-olds. There were five interview questions which centered on two themes: (a) which type of student the participant believed would most likely be a rape victims following initial contact on the internet, and (b) what were potential solutions to the teen internet sexual assault problem.

Procedures

Following IRB approval, a pilot study of five teachers was conducted to clarify questions and identify format. Then, 25 additional participants who met the criteria individually participated in a 15 minute recorded, open-ended, semi-structured interview about their perspective on teen internet sexual assault. The qualitative open-ended question design does not measure teen internet assault variables, but instead explores potential causes of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2008). Data reliability and validity procedures were carefully followed (Cho & Trent, 2006; Pearson, Parkin, & Coomber, 2011)

Results

Following data transcription and analysis, five themes emerged: (1) lack of parental supervision, (2) social networking websites and chat rooms, (3) need for a relationship, (4) instant gratification, and (5) improved education.

Theme 1 - Lack of Parental Supervision. Participant responses cited lack of parental supervision (12/40 or 30%) as the primary circumstance most likely lead to teenage sexual encounters with someone whom they meet on the internet. Some participants stated that a dysfunctional family, lack of parental supervision and caring can facilitate a teen gravitating to the Internet to meet a potential predator. Participant D stated that, "dysfunctional families and lack of caring environment in the home can lead to teens meeting predators on the internet". According to Participant H, "loneliness and a wish to connect, low self-esteem and no parental guidance" are circumstances which lead to teens meeting predators on the internet.

Theme 2 - Social Networking Websites and Chat Rooms. Nearly a third of the participants (37%) reported Facebook as the tool used by predators to lead teenagers into meetings via the internet. Participant A mentioned that youth used, “Facebook, Yahoo chat rooms, Teenchat, MSN Messenger, and Xat chat”. Myspace was also one of the most common websites cited by participants (14/39) as a means for teenage encounters with Internet predators. Participant O believes that, teenagers meet internet predators on “MySpace and Facebook, or social networks that anyone has access to”. Eleven percent (11%) of the sample felt that internet predators used chat rooms to try to meet teens for sex. According to Participant G, teenagers meet predators in “chat rooms; anyone can use them and on Facebook where you have to accept friendships”.

Theme 3 - Need for a Relationship. Nearly one-third (12) of the respondents cited “a need for relationship” as the greatest teenage need leading them to meet someone on the internet. Participant K mentioned that some teenagers are “looking for relationships online [and are] more susceptible to what others say online”. Some teachers and counselors felt that teenagers often fall victim to internet predators while going online to fulfill their need for a relationship. The participants stated that teens frequent websites seeking relationships. Participant K further explains that “teens go online seeking communication and someone to have a relationship with”.

Theme 4 - Instant Gratification. Nearly 12% (3) of the respondents stated that teenagers seek internet relationship as a form of instant gratification. Participant C stated that teenagers needed “immediate gratification and that they try to have the adult relationship that they see on TV”. According to some of the teachers and counselors, teenagers often go online seeking immediate gratification and pleasure from relationships on social websites and in chat rooms. These relationships often lead to sexual assault. Participant T states that “kids go to Chat Rooms because they get bored and need someone to talk to/reach out to”.

Theme 5 - Improved Parental Support. Over half of the respondents (19/36, 53%) cited better parental support as their main source of support needed to prevent teenage internet sexual assault. Participant K mentioned that, “parental support and connections in school - parents need to know.” Some of the participants believe that additional parental support and supervision would help reduce the likelihood that a teen will meet an internet predator. Participant H stated that “additional parental supervision was needed - kids will do what they want on the internet.” One mother attended a parenting class with her toddler, while another participated in a free weekend martial arts program with her daughters. A number of the teachers (4/16%) mentioned that education would help prevent teen internet sexual assault. Participant E mentioned that, “more community education and awareness and parental supervision were needed.” Participant A stated that, “we have cut off internet access for our daughter for now. One parent is home at all times, but most of her interactions with the man took place after we went to bed”. Finally, 3 teachers or 9% stated that improved law enforcement was needed to help stem teen internet sexual assault. According to Participant A, “as soon as we found out we notified law enforcement, but they have been unable to trace the internet protocol (IP) addresses and he closed all accounts that he was using to interact with our daughter.”

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of school teachers and counselors with knowledge of adolescent experiences of sexual assault occurring via the internet. According

to participants, a perceived lack of parental supervision is a key circumstance which leads to teen internet sexual assault. The findings also show that some teens visit these websites to try to fulfill their need for a relationship and to gain instant gratification. Finally, the majority of participants stated that improved parental support is the main factor that is necessary to help prevent teenage internet sexual assault.

Although the internet has many positive aspects, one of the most pernicious is its potential use for online sexual predation (Wolak, & Finkelhor, 2013). Notably, 53% of respondents stated that parental support was a major source of support and assistance for teenagers. A need for a relationship drives some teenagers to seek companionship on the internet, sometimes resulting in a predatory relationship. One teacher reported that her daughter was very defiant in the home, but with the predator she was willing to do anything for him to make him happy because she was afraid of rejection.

This study's findings should be considered in light of its limitations. First, only teachers and counselors who were willing to volunteer their opinion on teen internet sexual assault causes were interviewed. Thus, there may have been potential participants with key material who were reticent about participation. Furthermore, it should be recognized that although participants had worked with the teenagers being discussed on a daily basis, they could not provide a first-hand account. Future research should attempt to gain this richer source of data.

Conclusion and Application

The outcomes from this study provide some recommendations for teachers to utilize in the protection of their students. Protection of children and efforts to decrease the prevalence of internet sexual offenses could come in the form of education (Wurtele & Kenny, 2010; Noll et al., 2013). Thus, future research should consider the impact that teachers could have. Although teachers in the present study placed the burden on parents, teachers also have an opportunity to educate students on the dangers of internet and social media use. The impact that teachers could have is significant given that students view them as an important source of internet safety advice (Livingstone et al., 2011). For example, education could occur in specific classes such as information technology or even health classes, where internet security and personal health could be discussed. Further, administrators need to consider whether training could assist teachers in better recognizing any warning signs and provide assistance in avoiding any deleterious outcomes.

In summary, the participants of this study stated that the lack of parental supervision gives teens the opportunity to develop relationships on the internet. Teens seeking relationships on social networking websites and in chat rooms to satisfy their need for relationships often fall victim to internet predators, according to the participants. Improved parental supervision of their teenager's internet activities would be the main support needed to help prevent teen internet sexual assault, but teachers need to be better educated and more cognizant that they may be the best able to recognize any potential dangers.

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