



Internet-related child sexual abuse: What children tell us in their testimonies

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ABSTRACT

Communication technologies are an essential part of our daily social life; however, they also result in a rapid increase in the phenomenon of child sexual abuse through the Internet. Studies that were conducted on this issue mainly focused on the offenders' profile and prevention strategies.

The aim of the current paper is to characterize the narratives of alleged victims of child sexual abuse using the testimonies of twenty children who were referred to investigative interviews following suspected sexual abuse through the Internet. Of these twenty children, eight children were reluctant to provide allegations even though external evidence indicated a high possibility that abuse had occurred. Twelve other children provided narratives in response to open-ended invitations.

Intensive thematic analysis revealed five key categories: the suspect's grooming process, the offline meeting, "he can do anything", the secret, and the dynamic between the children and the interviewers. The conclusions of the study indicated the emotional state of the children, the dynamic with the perpetrators and its uniqueness, the clinical and the forensic process and prevention.

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1. Introduction

Communication technologies, such as computers, cell phones, and social-networking sites are an essential part of our daily social life. Some studies have pointed to the rapid creation and dissemination of harassing and pornographic text, pictures, and video to children (Quayle & Taylor, 2002). There are several ways in which child sexual offenders can use the Internet, including to traffic child pornography, locate children for the purpose of sexual abuse, engage in inappropriate sexual communication with children and communicate with other pedophiles (Beech, Elliott, Birgden, & Findlater, 2008; Durkin, 1997).

Craven and her colleagues defined grooming as "A process by which a person prepares a child, significant adults and the environment for the abuse of this child. Specific goals include gaining access to the child, gaining the child's compliance and maintaining the child's secrecy to avoid disclosure. This process serves to strengthen the offender's abusive pattern, as it may be used as a means of justifying or denying their actions" (Craven, Brown, & Gilchrist, 2006, p. 297). Focusing on suspect grooming, it is important to stress that accessibility is a key aspect in child sexual abuse and that technology enhances such accessibility (O'Connell, 2003).

A study that was conducted in 2005 by Mitchell, Finkelhor, and Wolak found that 13% of the youth in the study population had received

unwanted sexual solicitations over the Internet. Furthermore, although 4% of the youth had received an online request to send a sexual picture of them, only one individual complied.

The vast majority of studies on this phenomenon focused on the characteristics of Internet sexual offenders (Babchishin, Hanson, & Hermann, 2011; Berlin & Sawyer, 2012; Davidson & Gottschalk, 2011; Endrass et al., 2009; Gallagher, 2007; Glassgow, 2010; Howitt & Sheldon, 2007; Laulik, Allam, & Sheridan, 2007; Lee, Li, Lamade, Schuler, & Prentky, 2012; Malesky, 2007; Marcum, 2007; Middleton, Elliott, Mandeville-Norden, & Beech, 2006; Quayle & Taylor, 2002; Quayle, Vaughan, & Taylor, 2006; Sheldon & Howitt, 2008; Whittle, Hamilton-Giachritsis, Beech, & Collings, 2013; Wolak, Finkelhor, & Mitchell, 2011). Researchers identified two main subtypes of offenders. The contact-driven offender utilizes Internet chat rooms as a medium to connect with minors with the intention to develop a sexual relationship with them. For him, the Internet is another media to locate, communicate, and groom target victims. In comparison with this subtype, the fantasy-driven offenders utilize the Internet as a sexual medium to connect with teens for the purpose of cybersex and masturbation (Beech et al., 2008; Briggs, Simon, & Simonsen, 2010; Seto, Wood, Babchishin, & Flynn, 2012). It is highly important to note that although the vast majority of the studies focused on unknown perpetrators, one study (Mitchell, Finkelhor, & Wolak, 2005) documented that in some cases, family members and other known people use the Internet to victimize minors.

The way online predators use deceptive techniques to gain a young child's trust and manipulate him or her into viewing pornography and agreeing to a personal meeting was described by Berson and Brown

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(2003). However, another study conducted by Wolak and colleagues (Wolak et al., 2011) reported survey results indicating that predators use less deception to befriend their online victims than experts had thought. Their survey found that only 5% of offenders pretended to be teens when they met potential victims online. It was also found that 73% of victims who had face-to-face sexual encounters with offenders did so more than once. This led the researchers to conclude that a large majority of the victims who responded to the survey had willingly met and had sexual encounters with the predators.

Another line of studies attempted to assess whether children who are exposed to Internet-related child sexual abuse have special characteristics. These researchers indicated that youth with histories of sexual or physical abuse may be particularly vulnerable to this phenomenon (Mitchell et al., 2005; Mitchell, Finkelhor, & Wolak, 2007; Noll, Shenk, Barnes, & Putnam, 2009; Wells & Mitchell, 2008).

Adding information related to the victims, other researchers studied the psychological impact that these activities have on young persons and the implications for other criminal activity. For example, Cameron and Salazar (2005), in their study of adolescents aged 14 to 17 who regularly use the Internet, determined that both boys and girls reported that exposure to sexually explicit material had no effect on their personal views of either gender or relationships. Similarly, in a study of college students, Chiara, Wolak, and Finkelhor (2008) found that only a minority reported that viewing online pornography before the age of 18 had strongly affected their attitudes or emotions about sexuality. In contrast, Greenfield (1997), who studied the unintended exposure of young people to pornography through peer-to-peer file-sharing networks, concluded that evidence supports the thesis that pornography and sexualized material can influence the moral values, sexual activity, and sexual attitudes of children and youth, including their attitudes toward sexual violence.

Other researchers approached the phenomenon of Internet-related child sexual abuse from the prevention perspective. Greenfield (1997) found that a warm, communicative parent–child relationship, appropriate sex education, and parental participation in children's Internet activities are critical factors in protecting children from adverse effects of exposure to explicit sexual material. Wolak and colleagues (Wolak, Finkelhor, Mitchell, & Ybarra, 2008) stressed the importance of prevention that focuses on adolescents more than on the parents and discusses autonomy, romance and sex with the adolescents.

As Internet-related child sexual abuse is one form of child maltreatment, it is important to address the role of investigative interviews when contending with this phenomenon. Investigative interviews play a key role in the accurate identification of child maltreatment to protect children and provide children, families, and perpetrators with appropriate services and treatment (Lamb, La Rooy, Malloy, & Katz, 2011; Malloy, Lamb, & Katz, 2011). Early identification of abuse is often complicated because child maltreatment is extremely difficult to investigate. Because corroborative evidence is often absent, suspected victims may be the sole sources of information about their experiences (Lamb et al., 2011). For this reason, investigative interviews are vital in the investigation of child maltreatment. Information from investigative interviews can have a powerful effect on legal and administrative decisions that may profoundly affect the lives of children, families, and suspects. Therefore, it is imperative that children's reports are clear, consistent, detailed and accurate (Lamb et al., 2011).

When interviewing abused children regarding their experiences of trauma, studies have documented various developmental, cognitive and emotional factors that affect the interviews and the children's narratives (La-Rooy, Malloy, & Lamb, 2011). Whereas past research focused on children's impairments as competent interviewees, recent research stresses that children can provide rich, forensically relevant information and clear and reliable testimonies when interviewed following best practice (Lamb et al., 2011).

The current study is an in-depth exploration of twenty investigative interviews with children that were conducted following the best practice (the National Institute Child Health and Development Protocol) to facilitate understanding of the alarming phenomenon of child sexual abuse through the Internet. The purpose of the current study is to provide an in-depth analysis of children's narratives during investigative interviews to assess what children tell us about the phenomenon of child sexual abuse through the Internet and how their narratives can inform the practice in both the clinical and the forensic context.

2. Method

2.1. Sample

The current paper examined twenty investigative interviews with children who were alleged victims of Internet-related child sexual abuse. All of the interviews were obtained from the Unit of Investigative Interviews in Israel, which belongs to the Welfare office. Children were referred to the investigations following a report on suspected sexual abuse through the Internet in the years of 2011–2012 from across Israel. The twenty cases were selected among 35 cases of Internet-related child abuse investigations that were conducted in Israel in these years. The criteria for inclusion in the current study were as follows: inclusion of external evidence supporting the suspected abuse (such as suspect admission to the police, documents from the Internet such as pornographic pictures or written content by both the suspects and the children), Hebrew as the children's mother tongue language and no reported developmental disabilities of the children.

The sample included 19 girls and one boy aged 11 to 14. The children's ages at the time of the interviews and at the time of the offence were the same, as the interviews occurred soon after the reported incidents. All of the suspected perpetrators were unknown to the suspected victims. According to the external evidence, all of the suspects were older than 18 years old; three of them were female and the remaining were male. According to the children's narratives and as will be reported in the results section, the suspects' grooming process with the children covered a few months.

The identifying personal details of the children and all other persons involved in the incidents are concealed in the presentation of the findings.

2.2. The NICHD Protocol

All of the investigative interviews were conducted by 5 well-trained investigative interviewers. These interviewers shared a similar professional background, with a Bachelor's degree in social work and at least 3 years of experience as investigative interviewers. All of the investigative interviewers were familiar with the NICHD Protocol and received systematic training on it.

The NICHD Protocol was designed to translate professional recommendations into operational guidelines and guide interviewers to use prompts and techniques that maximize the amount of information elicited from free-recall memory (Orbach et al., 2000). The NICHD Protocol was found to elicit richer testimonies from children of all ages in response to free-recall invitations (Lamb et al., 2011). The NICHD Protocol was implemented in the USA, Israel, Sweden, the UK, and Canada, and follow-up studies systematically showed a significant improvement in the quality of the investigative interviews (Cyr & Lamb, 2009; Lamb, Orbach, Hershkowitz, Esplin, & Horowitz, 2007; Orbach et al., 2000; Sternberg, Lamb, Orbach, Esplin, & Mitchell, 2001). In addition, the NICHD Protocol showed beneficial effects on credibility assessment (Hershkowitz, Fisher, Lamb, & Horowitz, 2007), the elicitation of investigative leads (Darwish, Hershkowitz, Lamb, & Orbach, 2008), and case disposition and resolution (Pipe, Orbach, & Lamb, 2008).

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