A review of young people's vulnerabilities to online grooming

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ABSTRACT

This review explores risk factors that may make a young person vulnerable to being groomed online. Even though research in this area is extremely limited, adolescents appear to be the age group most vulnerable to online grooming. Other vulnerabilities appear to be consistent with those associated with offline sexual abuse. The review suggests that behaviors specific to online grooming include: engaging in risk taking behavior online, high levels of internet access, and lack of parental involvement in the young person's internet use. Vulnerabilities to carry out these types of behavior and be more exposed to the risk of online grooming, are set within the context of the Ecological Model of child protection, consisting of: individual, family, community, and cultural risk factors. Patterns of vulnerability regarding living environment, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and personality are tentative, but are often interconnected. The more risk taking behaviors the young person carries out, plus greater levels of vulnerability factors, the less resilient they are likely to be towards protecting themselves against online grooming. A protective factor appears to be parental involvement in their child's use of the internet. Therefore, this, in combination with internet safety education at school, is encouraged.

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1. Introduction

In the child protection arena, Hamilton-Giachritsis, Peixoto, and Melo (2011) have suggested that the Ecological Model is the most commonly applied, first outlined by Bronfenbrenner (1979) and later adapted by Belsky (1980) and Cicchetti and Lynch (1993). This Model describes the environment as an interrelated chain of contextual factors, each nested into the next (Bronfenbrenner, 1979); thus, when child abuse occurs, it is affected by forces within the individual, the family, the community, and the culture within which the individual lives (Belsky, 1980) (see Fig. 1). No child exists in isolation; therefore, child abuse is a dynamic process and the likelihood of risk of abuse involves the complex interplay between a child, their relationship with others, their community and culture (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2011).

2. Risk, protection and resilience in young people within the ecological approach

The risk and protective factors influencing young people that determine risk and harm offline have been extensively studied (e.g., Belsky & Stratton, 2002; Cicchetti & Lynch, 1993; Dixon, Browne, & Hamilton-Giachritsis, 2009; Trenado, Pons-Salvador, & Cerezo, 2009). Such studies share the understanding that a risk factor is an attribute or circumstance that increases the probability of a harmful outcome for an individual (Werner & Smith, 1992). Risk factors co-occur (Masten & Powell, 2003) and, in reality, young people will experience multiple and recurring risks rather than a single incident (Sameroff, Gutman, & Peck, 2003); this accumulation of risk is critical (Rolf, 1999). In contrast to risk factors, protective factors act as buffers reducing the impact of risk, helping to minimize its negative impact (Shoon, 2006), which can occur at any ecological level. Extensive research has identified no single risk factor as the principal catalyst for abuse; rather, data suggest that a complex interplay of multiple risk factors and the absence of protective factors decrease a young person's resilience, making them vulnerable to abuse (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998).
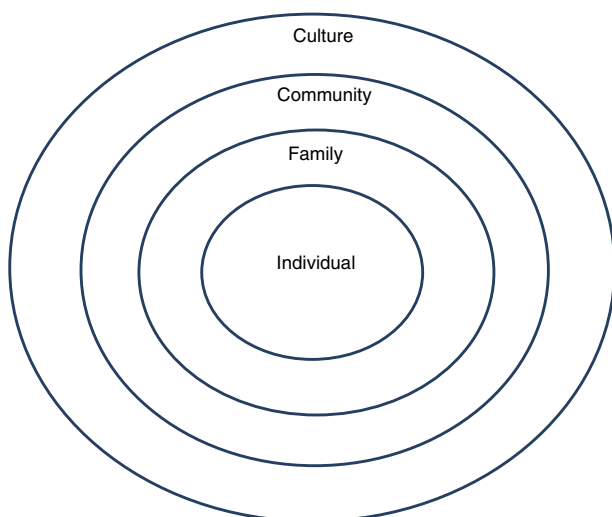

Fig. 1. The Ecological Model (Belsky, 1980).

Resilience refers to resistance of the negative impact of risk factors, and the ability to adapt and cope well with such events (Cohen, 2011; Luster, Bates, & Johnson, 2006; Rutter, 2001; Sameroff et al., 2003). Recent research has broadened the term to account for the context dependence of resilience, as the young person will require resilient surroundings (e.g., families and communities) to achieve well-being (Ungar, 2008). This further emphasizes the relevance of the Ecological Model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). However, it should not be expected that a person whom is resilient in one situation is resilient in all, or resilient 24 h a day (Banyard & Williams, 2007; Jaffee & Gallop, 2007; Marriott, Hamilton-Giachritsis, & Harrop, in press; Masten & Powell, 2003). A young person's resilience is a key indicator of how vulnerable they are likely to be toward abuse.

Research has begun to explore the vulnerabilities of young people, as viewed by their abusers and how these vulnerabilities contribute to victim selection. In Sullivan's (2009) interviews with child sex offenders, offenders identified vulnerability as the most important aspect of victim selection. However, offenders disagreed on what vulnerability might encapsulate. For some it was neediness, while for others it was those who were confused about their sexual orientation and for others it was ethnic minority status (Sullivan, 2009). This demonstrates the heterogeneity among offender's selection, as many also stated attractiveness and availability as influencing factors. With regard to online abuse, recent research has noted that the vast majority of young people are resilient online (European Online Grooming Project et al., 2012), and are unlikely to respond to approaches from online groomers or unlikely to respond in a risky manner (Brå (The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention), 2007; Mitchell, Finkelhor, & Wolak, 2007a, 2007b). Despite this, a small proportion of young people online are vulnerable (European Online Grooming Project et al., 2012); however the features that make this group vulnerable are not yet understood and thus an exploration of these vulnerabilities is necessary. As with much research in this area, the European Online Grooming Project et al. (2012) used qualitative methodology and samples are therefore relatively small. Application of results to wider populations should be cautious as interviews with online groomers only took place in three countries, as did the focus groups with young people. This research among others, acknowledges that young people live in a converged environment (CEOP, 2010) where there is little distinction between online and offline actions. For the purpose of clarity and comparison within this paper, distinctions will be made between the two contexts. It is argued that the risk and protective factors attributed to both online and offline environments experienced by a young person will be heavily influenced by ecological factors and are likely to indicate levels of resilience. The factors that relate to vulnerability will now be examined and are summarized in Table 1.

3. Individual vulnerabilities

3.1. Gender

Regarding the sexual abuse of children offline, research suggests that girls are more likely to be victimized than boys (Finkelhor, Ormrod, Turner, & Hamby, 2005; Finkelhor, Turner, Ormrod, & Hamby, 2009; Kenny & McEachern, 2000; McGee, Garavan, Barra, Byrne, & Conroy, 2002; Pereda, Guilera, Forns, & Gomez-Benito, 2009). Similarly, online studies have found girls are at greater risk of being targeted than boys (Baumgartner, Valkenburg, & Peter, 2010; Brå, 2007; Helweg-Larsen, Schütt, & Larsen, 2011; Mitchell et al., 2007b; Suseg, Skevik Grødem,