Young people's response to online sexual solicitation: Findings from the European Online Grooming project

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Risktaking Online Behaviour - Young People, Harm and Resilience
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Presentation overview

- The European Online Grooming Project
- Research context
- Features of online grooming
- Young people online- victim selection
- Key implications
- Discussion
European Consortium

- **UK**
  - Stephen Webster, NatCen Social Research, London
  - Professor Julia Davidson, Kingston University, London
  - Professor Antonia Bifulco, Kingston University, London

- **Belgium**
  - Professor Thierry Pham, University de Mons, Belgium

- **Italy**
  - Professor Vincenzo Caretti, Università degli Studi di Palermo

- **Norway**
  - Professor Petter Gottschalk Norwegian School of Management, Oslo

The European Online Grooming Project

- **Largest study of online grooming to date.**

- **Aims:**
  - understand the different ways sexual offenders approach, communicate and ‘groom’ young people online.
  - empower policy makers, front line professionals, teachers, carers and young people to effectively manage online risks.

Context: Online Child Sexual Abuse

- Construction of virtual communities for exchange of information, experiences, and indecent images
- Criminal activities that seek to use children for prostitution and to produce indecent images
- Grooming of children for the purposes of sexual abuse
- CEOP (2010): 6291 reports via ‘panic button’, 66% related to online grooming.
- Police HTCU - Increase in self-taken images of young people in offender collections.

EU Directive

- Four member states have grooming legislation (UK, Netherlands, Norway & Sweden)

- EU directive (November 2011)
  - member states must introduce grooming and child indecent image legislation within two years
  - minimum sentences: three years in prison for producers of child indecent images, one year for consumers, ten years for forcing children into sexual acts

EU Directive: Challenges

- Legal definition of child determined by legal age of consent, varies widely across Europe - as low as 13 in some EU countries

- Precautionary nature - requires compelling (and difficult to obtain) evidence regarding the ‘intention’ to commit offence (Kool, 2011)

- Reluctance to enforce law at national level

Research Findings
Research Design

- Four interlinked research phases (6/2009- 6/2012):
  1. Semi –structured scoping interviews stakeholders (police officers, treatment providers, industry specialists), content analysis police case-files; literature review; analysis of offender/victim chat-logs;
  2. In-depth interviews with convicted online groomers in the UK, Norway, Italy & Belgium;
  3. Focus groups with children (UK, Belgium & Italy)
  4. Dissemination workshops with parents and teachers (UK, Italy, Norway & Belgium)

Budget : €470,000
Data analysed using Framework, case and theme based approach to analysis.

Offenders: Findings

Like contact sexual offenders – not a homogeneous group. Where they do seem to differ:
- Relatively few with any criminal convictions (previous offending?)
- High IQ but not a particularly high level of educational attainment
- IT competence seems to be primarily self taught, via workplace, observing family and online research
- Mean offender age 35, mean victim age 13 & predominantly female
Offenders: Findings

- Use of multiple identities and child’s language
- Use of webcams in grooming process
- Using full range of ICT interaction facilities, chatrooms, file-sharing sites and game platforms to contact young people
- Grooming can be prolonged or immediate
- Internet disinhibits behaviour

Young People Online
Context

- Research focused on interviewing online groomers only - there was no direct contact with victims.
- Themes included in the offender interview regarding age and choice of victims and type of grooming approach.
- As noted earlier, victims tended to be female aged 13-15.
- Groomers were clear that the majority of young people online appear resilient, but were able to identify characteristics that made them targets as vulnerable or risk-taking.

Vulnerable Victims

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<tr>
<th>Vulnerability Feature</th>
<th>Distinguishing Themes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High need for attention and affection</td>
<td>• Loneliness</td>
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<td>Difficult relationships with parents and difficult home lives</td>
<td>• Low self-esteem</td>
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<td>• Psychological disorder(s)</td>
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<td>• Concurrent sexual abuse</td>
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<td>Seeking ‘love’ on the internet. Believe they have a true relationship with groomer.</td>
<td>• Offender as ‘mentor’</td>
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<td>• Self-disclosure and joint problem solving</td>
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<td>Resist disclosure because they want to continue the relationship.</td>
<td>• Loyalty</td>
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Loneliness
- ‘The girls were definitely insecure and lonely.’
- ‘Many of the girls lacked adult contact…they felt safe with me. I made time…’

Psychological disorder
- ‘She was really quiet when met, even after a few meetings she never really said anything’ – offender noted signs of scarring (self-harm)

Self-esteem
- Young people feeling concerned about their body image and the groomer can exploit this – mirroring compliments

Family difficulties
- ‘She wanted attention in her life, she said she had lost her mum and her step-dad abused her’.
- ‘They had no hang ups- these were girls already being abused’

Self-disclosure & intimacy
- ‘When a girl said she was in love with me, it was much easier to handle’

<table>
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<th>Risk-taking victims</th>
<th>Distinguishing themes</th>
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</thead>
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<td>Young people disinhibited, seeking adventure</td>
<td>• Outgoing</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Confident</td>
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<td>Young people (and offender) feel they have control</td>
<td>• Complicit and consenting to sexual contact</td>
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<td>Less known about family risks, but less confident on meeting than appear on line.</td>
<td>• Offender re-assessment on meeting</td>
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<td>• Introverted or immature YP at meeting</td>
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<td>Open to blackmail not to disclose because of apparent ‘complicity’ – own behaviour used as evidence of cooperation.</td>
<td>• Non disclosure of abuse, threats and computer intrusions</td>
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Risk-taking Profile

- Disinhibition, used sexual screen names; sexual chat; populated adult chat rooms; sent explicit images of self:
  - one girl said, "would you like to see me naked?"
  - Some girls sent me images without me asking; she said ‘Hi I’m 16 and fancy chatting to a fifty-year old’.

- Both YP and offender feel they are in control

- These young people open to blackmail and feelings of guilt because of apparent complicit sexual behaviour

- However, online confidence did not always mirror offline reality:
  - she presented as mature but when we met I knew it was a mask

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Working With Young People

**Resilient Children** (majority)
- Least likely to interact with groomer
- Low risk of meeting groomer
- Safety needs met through standard awareness programmes

**Risk-takers**
- Willing to interact, send provocative images or text, ‘game playing’.
- Unlikely to meet, but may be blackmailed
- Safety needs met through standard programmes—some emphasis on appropriate use of SNS

**Vulnerable** (minority)
- Willing to interact, seeking relationships/friendship
- Targeted & high risk of meeting, easier to manipulate
- Vulnerable offline- safeguarding services? 
- Needs exceed standard programme, practitioners screening YP for Internet related abuse?
Public Health Model

Prevention

Degree of Harm to YP

Contact / exposure
Contact
harmful materials

Awareness for parents & educators

Secure online environments

Managing Online Grooming: A Collaborative Approach

Policy Makers, Education, Criminal Justice, Psychological Services, Social Workers, NGOs, Charities

Tailored treatment for victims

Offender assessment & intervention programmes

Treatment

Physical

Working with Young People: 1

- Further investigation of vulnerable children/young people and match of offender to victim

- Understanding impact of even low level internet contact by strangers will help improve preventative work

- More understanding of child resilience needed, psychological, social, familial factors
Working with Young People: 2

- More awareness for professionals working with vulnerable children (e.g. those in care) to identify and reduce online risk
- Targeted prevention messages / campaigns for different types of vulnerability (boys, girls, looked after children and so on)
- Campaigns with young people, parents and educators across Europe to raise awareness about the characteristics and style of online groomers

Further Information

- [www.european-online-grooming-project.com](http://www.european-online-grooming-project.com)

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