

Chapter 68

Unwanted Online Sexual Solicitation and Online Sexual Risk Behavior

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, there have been growing concerns about online sexual solicitations and online sexual risk behaviors. Recent studies suggest that only a minority of adolescents is confronted with online sexual solicitations or engages in online sexual risk behavior. Whereas more girls encounter incidences of online sexual solicitations, gender differences in online sexual risk behavior are relatively small. Older adolescents are more at risk of receiving online sexual solicitations and are also more likely to engage in online sexual risk behavior. Adolescents do not engage in online sexual risk behavior more frequently than adults, and they seem to be quite aware of the potential negative consequences of this behavior. Adolescents who encounter online sexual solicitations or engage in online sexual risk behavior typically also encounter problems in their offline lives.

INTRODUCTION AND DEFINITION

In recent years, there have been growing concerns about the risks that the internet poses to its users (Livingstone & Haddon, 2008). Among these risks, sexual risks are considered especially alarming.

The concerns about sexual risks on the internet primarily address two different issues: (1) being a victim of online sexual solicitation and (2) actively engaging in online sexual risk behavior. Whereas online sexual risk behavior involves the voluntary decision to act sexually online, online sexual solicitation is an unwanted request to do so.

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Anecdotal evidence and media reports have initially fuelled the public discussion about these online phenomena (Ponte, Bauwens, & Mascheroni, 2009). These media reports typically give the impression that both phenomena happen frequently and that they lead to serious negative consequences. Only recently, scientific research has started investigating these phenomena systematically. These studies provide a more differentiated account of the nature and prevalence of the two phenomena.

Online sexual solicitation can be defined as receiving unwanted requests to talk about sex or to do something sexual (Mitchell, Finkelhor, & Wolak, 2001). Online sexual risk behavior can be defined as the active engagement in online sexual activities that may have negative consequences, such as sexual contact with strangers on the internet or the distribution of sexual information to strangers. Behaviors like searching for someone to talk about sex or to have sex, as well as disclosing intimate information, such as implicit or explicit sexual pictures or contact details to strangers online, may be categorized as risky sexual online behavior (Baumgartner, Valkenburg, & Peter, 2010a, 2010b). This definition of online sexual risk behavior focuses on online communication with unknown people because research has shown that communicating with strangers online may have negative consequences, such as an increased likelihood of receiving unwanted sexual solicitation (Mitchell, Finkelhor, & Wolak, 2007b). Moreover, contact with strangers online is one of the main concerns parents have about their children's internet use (Eurobarometer, 2008). The distribution of intimate messages, photos, or films via mobile phone or the internet to offline friends or online strangers has also been called 'sexting' and can be regarded as one type of online sexual risk behavior. Whenever the term online sexual risk behavior is used in this entry, it refers

to sexual online communication with strangers, whereas the term sexting refers to the distribution of nude or semi-nude material to strangers as well as to offline friends.

CENTERS OF KNOWLEDGE

Research on online sexual solicitation and online sexual risk behavior is still in its infancy. Nevertheless, several research institutes in the US and in Europe strive to advance knowledge on both phenomena. In the US, mainly the Crimes against Children Research Center, and the Pew Research Center have conducted large-scale surveys among youth. In Europe, the EU Kids Online project, which is a collaboration between several research institutes across Europe, and CCAM, the Center for Research on Children, Adolescents, and the Media in the Netherlands investigate the positive and negative aspects of the internet for youth.

Online Sexual Solicitation: Prevalence, Age, and Gender Differences

Several large-scale studies have investigated incidences of unwanted online sexual solicitation (Mitchell, Finkelhor, & Wolak, 2007a; Mitchell et al., 2007b; Mitchell, Wolak, & Finkelhor, 2008; Ybarra, Espelage, & Mitchell, 2007). Most of these studies have focused on adolescents because they are considered the target group of such messages. One of the first studies conducted in the US in 2000 indicated that 19% of the adolescents reported incidences of online sexual solicitations in the past year. Five years later, in 2005, a follow-up study revealed that only 13% of adolescents aged 10 to 17 have been sexually solicited online at least once in the past year (Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2006). This decline in online sexual

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