

ADOLESCENT ONLINE SAFETY AND BEHAVIOR REPORT

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Operation250

Operation250 is a non-profit 501(c)3 organization that seeks educate children, parents, and educators about online safety and how they can most effectively protect themselves from encountering online extremist individuals.

More work from this organization can be found at operation250.org

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The Puzzle

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When building a puzzle, each piece has a specific spot, a specific pattern, and a specific purpose in the grand goal of construction. The corners are easy to identify, and the edges are typically easy to find and understand; however, the blue sky pieces do not seem to have a home in this physical enigma, although they are as vital to the finished product as those easy-to-find corners. Far too often are puzzles left unfinished; gaping holes found throughout the blue-sky section of the puzzle are left unattended with the understanding from others that the edges and rest of the picture pieces are what matter – however it is still left unfinished. When designing anything, the complete product is vital, one that has stability, a framework, and all the difficult “blue sky” sections of the entire puzzle. When building something meaningful, a complete, comprehensive picture is important to its growth, and potential success. As you, the reader, maneuver through the Operation250 website, you can find the edge pieces (classroom activities, informative pages about online safety and hate), the corners (the about section; what we offer), and the pretty picture (the video; illustrations); alas, we felt it be important for you to take the time and look through the blue-sky section of our puzzle. Without the research and development of other programs and theories, everything you find on our website and in our classrooms, is incomplete. Below you will find sections that support what we have built, and some research that challenges it as well. We find it important you know where Operation250 comes from and for you to finally see the full puzzle constructed.

Adolescent Specific Risks

Adolescent risk taking has become a pervasive societal concern as it is increasingly evident that much adolescent mortality can be directly associated with risk taking behaviors such as smoking, drug use, reckless driving, and alcoholism (Igra & Irwin, 1996; Reyna and Farley, 2006). Although these behaviors in the physical world pose substantial risk to an adolescent, equal effort should be focused on interventions regarding online behavior. Increasingly, adolescents are spending a considerable amount of time with technology, whether it be phones, tablets, computers, or multiplayer gaming systems; with 92% of teenagers going online daily, and 24% being online 'constantly' (Lenhart, 2015). The consistent usage of the internet is not the only risk factor associated with adolescent online behavior; other adolescent qualities specific to their age set make them uniquely at risk for dangerous online encounters:

- Level of isolation (Turow, 1999)
- Online disinhibition affects (Suler, 2004)
- Insufficient ability to recognize perceived risks vs perceived benefits (Dhami & Mandel, 2012)

The contradictory nature of the internet has created a sense of hyper connectivity among users, despite the fact that excessive usage of it can be quite isolating (Turow, 1999). Many young people seem to have an increasing propensity to replace offline social interaction with online communication. This social shift is compounded by the fact that many young people spend much time cultivating online identities independent from their offline selves (Ofcom, 2014; Suler, 2004). The use of an online identity can often have a dissociative affect, which relinquishes the child of some responsibility associated with their online actions (Suler, 2004). Although this dissociation can be benign, it often manifests as riskier behaviors which may leave a child more vulnerable than they would be offline per se. This risk compounding is exemplified in a recent study conducted by the Internet Watch Foundation (2018), which evaluated the distribution of captures of live-streamed child sexual abuse which were publicly available. The study highlights evidence that 96% of the photos were captured screen shots of the child while they were in their own bedroom, physically isolated from their abuser (IWF, 2018).

Much literature exists around differences in adolescent decision making and risk perception compared to methods

employed by adults. Neurological development and lower experience levels contribute to the often poor decisions made by adolescents (Reyna & Farley, 2006). But in the specific context of 'risky situations,' it has been found that adolescents are motivated more by the perceived benefits or incentives associated with the situation than by avoiding a threat (risk) that is equally corresponding (Dhami & Mandel, 2012). Simply put, in a decision making situation, adolescents are driven more by impulsivity, thrill seeking, need for attention and validation, than by avoiding a poor outcome (Webster, Davidson, et al. 2012). In the context of online behavior, this seeking of perceived benefits with risky behavior can explain why many children share their own sexually explicit photos (EOGP; Webster et al., 2012; CEOP, 2007); and in some extreme instances, why some children use the internet as a means to sell themselves for prostitution or sex (EOGP; Webster et al., 2012; Palmer & Stacey, 2004). For more reading on adolescent risk perception see (Dhami & Mandel, 2012).

Online Grooming

Even the risk averse child is posed substantial risk on the internet as the methods used by online predators, extremists, and traffickers (groomers) are becoming progressively more sophisticated. Although more simplistic 'upfront' strategies such as bribery and threats can be used by an online offender, many have begun using advanced rapport building techniques to accomplish their goals (Elliott, 2017). These grooming processes closely mirror many other relationship development situations. The intrinsic issue with these similarities, from the perspective of an adolescent, is that it can be very challenging to differentiate maladaptive grooming behavior from typical friendship development (Craven et al., 2007). In an online context, it is even more challenging for a child to evaluate a potential threat as the groomer may remain anonymous or even pose as a child themselves (NCMEC, 2017).

Child Differentiating Vulnerabilities

In an analysis conducted by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) which reviewed victim and offender characteristics from their CyberTipline, 78% of the child victims were identified, and communicated with, on one app. Generally this app was a social media site, and offenders who wanted to further control for their anonymity would move with the child to an encrypted messaging app or live streaming site to acquire sexually explicit photos of the child. Additionally,

CyberTipline analysis revealed that older boys were disproportionately more likely to send sexually explicit photos of themselves; although girls were identified as being the most frequently targeted victims of child online enticement (online grooming) (NCMEC, 2017).

Children who had predisposed vulnerabilities (mental health issues, abuse, talking to adults online, trading sexually explicit content, etc.) were also found to be more likely to send sexually explicit photos of themselves (NCMEC, 2017; Whittle et al., 2012). Additionally, Brå (2007) found that young people who frequently engaged in risky behavior offline (excessive drinking and drug use, socializing with older friends, etc.) were also more likely to receive sexual communication from an adult online. But it should also be noted that Olsen et al. (2007) found that young people who displayed personality traits associated with low self-confidence were also vulnerable to exploitation from online groomers.

Regarding the psychologically abusive aspects of grooming, a study of 83 cases involving children in the Bernardo's Children Charity which works with sexually abused children, found that many showed long term psychiatric disorders including depression, damaged self-esteem, guilt, and suicidal attempts (Palmer, 2005). The exact quantitative impact of online grooming on children has been found to be significant. Dombrowski et al., (2007) note that 25% of children felt extremely upset or distressed by the experience; and younger children (ages 10-13) were cited as being more severely impacted than older children (ages 14-17).

Offender Methods

The victimization of young people to accomplish sexual abuse specifically was a prevalent issue before the internet (Mitchell, Finkelhor, & Wolak, 2005). But, the pervasive and universal use of the internet in recent decades has allowed for the increased access of predators to children and likely an increase in the prevalence rate of the grooming of children to accomplish illicit goals (CEOP, Finkelhor et al., 2000). In a review of literature, Ospina, Harshall, and Dennet (2010) found that among young people, between 13 to 19% of 10 to 17 year olds had received an online sexual solicitation. But, it should be noted that not all of these solicitations came from adults indicating that only a portion can be categorized as grooming. Similarly, Dombrowski et al. (2007) found that 40% of children had engaged in chatroom conversations of

a sexual nature, with 25% soliciting for a face to face encounter. Additionally, in an Australian study, 27% of adolescents disclosed that they believed they had been contacted by a sexual predator while in a chatroom (Stanley, 2001).

Generally, it has been found that sexual offenders engage or are forced to engage in a preparatory relationship development process with their victim in order to achieve their goals (Elliott, 2017; Leclerc et al., 2009). This relationship development process (grooming) used by sexual offenders is very similar to processes used by others who groom online to accomplish illicit goals; such as extremists and terrorists who recruit via the internet (Elliott, 2017; Berger, 2016). The similarities between online grooming methods and typical online relationship development can make it challenging for a child to identify whether they are being exploited (Bruce, 2010). As previously mentioned, offenders can be adaptive in the online space and often tailor their style to the personality and behavior of the child. Offenders who do not immediately state their intentions may engage in a gentle socialization process that includes using complimentary language (flattery), and experience congruence (relating to and contacting children with similar interests and life experiences) to further develop the relationship (EOGP, 2017).

Much variation exists regarding the time spans of communication during the grooming process, and it largely seems to be dependent on the ultimate goals of the offender (Wolak, et al., 2004). Wolak, Finkelhor, and Mitchell (2004) found that 64% of offenders spend more than one month communicating with their victim; in contrast a study by Briggs et al. (2011) found 40% of offenders communicated with their victim for less than a week before arranging to meet. Wolak et al. (2004) also note the importance that offenders place on immersing themselves in the child's life in multiple ways (telephone, text, etc.). Being consistently in contact with the child increases the power of the offender, and the reliance of the child on their groomer (Ospina, et al., 2010).

For more reading on online grooming see (Elliott, 2017).

Other Online Threats

The universal adoption of the internet and social media have provided a means for widespread activism and communication on a global scale, but it has also allowed for the flourishing of hate groups online (Okansen et al.,

2014; Brown, 2009). The council of Europe, in their efforts to combat hate speech online, launched campaigns targeted at young people on the internet and described hate speech as:

covering all forms of communication which spread, incite, promote or justify racial hatred, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, or other forms of hatred based on intolerance (Europe, 2013; also, Okansen et al., 2014).

Similarly, Okansen et al. (2014) define hate speech as “an act of harmful and threatening communication towards individuals or a larger human collective.” They also note that hate speech is not limited to just minorities and can be targeted at a wide array of groups and individuals; depending on the objectives of the in-group.

Social media, websites, email, and video games are some of the most commonly used mediums to communicate hate online (Dowd et al., 2006; Donelan, 2004). And although adults are the largest developers and disseminators of hateful material online, children and adolescents are increasingly becoming involved in the sharing of online hate speech (Gerstenfeld et al., 2003; Dowd et al., 2006). The effects of these narratives and content on adolescents can be damaging for those in both the in-group (disseminators of hateful material) and the out-group (targets of the hateful material). Young people’s exposure to hateful material may have no severe impact on the individual, but it has been found that young people who are the targets of the hateful material they view can experience anger and fear after exposure (Tynes, 2006; Costello et al., 2016). Additionally, repeated exposure to hateful materials online has also been found to be inversely related to general social trust, and reinforce stereotypes against vulnerable groups (Nasi et al., 2016; Cowan & Mettrick, 2002; Costello et al., 2016).

Lee and Leets (2012) reviewed the persuasive storytelling by hate groups online and its effects on adolescents. They found that although older adolescents are better than younger children at distinguishing between unfounded and legitimate content online, adolescents are still vulnerable to the dangers of these online messages’ effects. Additionally, a study on the online behaviors of teenagers found that 25% had visited hate websites, 14% had visited websites on how to build a bomb, and 12% had seen websites that detailed where and why to purchase guns (Okrent, 1999).

Although the topic remains contentious, consensus has generally been that radicalization as a process does not happen entirely on the internet, however it can play a large role in facilitating the process’ development and connecting the susceptible individual to further malevolent resources. Strategies used by terrorist recruiters which are designed to blend sentiments of victimhood, belonging, and motivation to accomplish a goal for the greater good have been found to be effective in motivating individuals to join violent extremist organizations and carry out violence on their behalf (Holt et al., 2015).

While little empirical evidence exists thus far specifically regarding the radicalization of children online, it is becoming increasingly clear that extremist groups such as ISIS, neo-Nazis, white supremacists, and others are capitalizing on the opportunity the internet provides them to reach this young, and often malleable audience. A former skinhead explained that common multiplayer gaming systems were becoming key recruiting locations for certain extreme right-wing groups where they “sought marginalized youth and promised them ‘paradise.’” Extremist recruiters were described as going so far as to target children specifically on the depression and mental health forums (Sassoon Coby, 2018). Additionally, during the strongest years of ISIS, it was not uncommon to hear stories of young American and British children seeking to travel to the caliphate after being contacted, radicalized, and recruited by ISIS affiliates via social media. In one such instance, a 17-year old girl from Chicago was contacted and communicated with ISIS supporters on YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr before finally attempting to travel to the caliphate six months after initial contact in 2014 (Reitman, 2015).

Going towards a ‘Normative Ideal’ in Adolescent Behavior

In developing and implementing interventions that seek to adjust risky adolescent behavior, it is critical to understand what drives adolescent behavior, and more importantly, what approaches have proven empirically effective in changing behavior.

Predisposing Risk Factors

On a biological level, adolescents have far more neurologically developed risk taking processes than risk aversion processes, and this factor can pose great challenge to those involved in any preventative measures

to adjust risky behavior (Reyna & Farley, 2006). The inherent challenge posed to modern day youth of the digital era, is that they are continually presented with opportunity to maximize immediate pleasure. This opportunity can be in the form of advancing in person relationships via digital communication, seeking out relationships with strangers online (both benign and potentially toxic ones), and sharing views for reaction via social networking or chat sites (Suler, 2004). The almost constant presence of this stimulus is exacerbated by the fact that adolescents can have challenge with delaying gratification (Reyna & Farley, 2006); And they are also more likely to seek attention, validation, and acceptance (Dombrowski et al., 2004; Farmer, 2011; Whittle, 2012). The challenge adolescents have with delaying gratification can also explain some preferential behaviors towards developing rapid online relationships instead of cultivating relationships 'in person,' which may take a longer time to reach a similar level of intimacy as there is lesser inhibition (Suler, 2004). Similarly, adolescents who have a tendency towards social anxiety have been found to prefer online social interaction in lieu of developing in person relationships (Desjarlais & Willoughby, 2010). All the previously listed factors acting independently, or combined within individuals, make adolescents more at risk to online grooming and other forms of dangerous online social interaction and behavior (Whittle, et al., 2012).

Finding the Ideal Behavior through Interventions

Based off literature surrounding adolescent decision making (including, prototype willingness model; bias towards perceived benefits vs. perceived risk) it can be deduced that interventions seeking to alter adolescent risk perception and ergo, adolescent risky behavior, should work to emphasize the true risk associated with behavior, and mitigate any potentially congruent benefits (Floyd, et al., 2000; Dhimi & Mandel, 2012). It should additionally be noted that attempts to educate adolescents on effectual contemplation between tradeoffs of risks and benefits in a situation may be a futile approach, as risks will generally be perceived more favorably (Farley, 2001). Instead, fostering risk avoidant values should have a more cogent and enduring effect (Reyna & Farley, 2006).

As discussed earlier in this section, adolescents are already predisposed towards displaying riskier behavior, coupled with the fact that the internet has proven to alter behavior and have general disinhibition effects (Suler, 2004);

interventions which seek to alter adolescent behavior online must equally account for both mutually interacting variables.

Previous Efforts Seeking to Adjust Behavior in School Settings

As Operation250 is primarily designed to be implemented in an educational setting, it is most appropriate to review those empirical evaluations which measured the effectiveness of other in school interventions; particularly those interventions in which the class' primary educator was incorporated in the delivery of the program (as is the case with the Operation250 model).

What the Prevent duty means for schools and colleges in England: An analysis of educationalists' experiences (Busher et al., 2017)

Busher et al. (2017) is among one of the first studies to empirically evaluate a countering violent extremism intervention in a school setting. The study sought to specifically evaluate the effectiveness of the Prevent initiative in the UK through the school educator and administrative perspective. The Prevent Duty was initiated in 2015 in the UK as a mandated program as a part of the new CONTEST counter terrorism strategy of the Home Office, no such mandated program currently exists in the United States. Specifically, the duty required that educational institutions show 'due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism' (Counter Terrorism and Security Act, 2015).

Focusing on the experiences of school colleges and staff, the evaluation examined the following questions:

1. How has the new Prevent duty been interpreted by staff in schools and colleges in England?
2. How confident do school/college staff feel with regards to implementing the Prevent duty?
3. What impacts, if any, do school/college staff think the Prevent duty has had on their school or college, and on their interactions with students and parents?
4. To what extent, if at all, have school/college staff opposed or questioned the legitimacy of the Prevent duty?

Evaluating the duty through the experiences of school colleges and staff (as done by Busher et al., 2017) allowed for a more holistic and comprehensive view of how the policy was being interpreted and implemented. The duty

stipulates that identifying potentially radicalized youth is a key component of educator's larger safe guarding duties in identifying at risk children (Prevent Duty Guidance, 2015). Two key responsibilities of the educators are to 1) facilitate difficult discussion with students on subjects relating to the duty (i.e. political and cultural topics, critical thinking, extremism, tolerance, and inequality) and 2) identify and refer at risk youth to the anti-radicalization counseling system (Prevent Duty Guidance, 2015; Busher et al., 2017).

Using semi-structured interview data (with educators) the study revealed that many viewed the curriculum dimensions of the duty positively, often citing that the use of a complimentary curriculum could be a 'far more powerful' tool than other components. This interview data also revealed that many educators recognized that the duty was designed to address all forms of extremism, and not simply Islamic extremism, as it is often criticized in the media and by the public. This recognition was often supported with references to duty specific training the educators had received which used case studies of youth being drawn into the extreme right. This theme of tackling all forms of extremism was referenced as being carried over into the classroom in the form of both modern and historical examples (holocaust, refugee camps, etc.) for in class discussions. This data shows the importance of ensuring policy objectives (i.e. tackling all forms of extremism) are equally reflected in trainings with educators; and that a comprehensive set of examples be utilized in these 'teach the teacher' trainings to assure this same approach is used by the educator with the students.

Additional semi-structured interview data also explored confidence levels educators had about the added safe-guarding duties that came with the implementation of the duty. When asked about how confident educators felt regarding their responsibilities associated with the policy 47% stated they were confident, and 29% stated they were very confident. Two factors that were identified as contributing to these overall high confidence levels were training and support mechanisms, as well as narratives of continuity. With the execution of the duty there was a large movement in government to establish a series of trainings for educators on the duty's objectives and the educator's role (The Prevent Duty, 2015). The success of these trainings is confirmed in data which show many educators found trainings to be highly useful; with face to face trainings cited as being the most useful (mean score of 3.95; 5-point scale). The use of 'narratives of continuity' were found to be equally as critical in promoting educator

confidence. Interviews revealed that many educators initially had anxieties about what was required with them in this new policy, but through discussions in trainings, many anxieties were mitigated when it was realized that the duty is simply on the continuum of their safe-guarding responsibilities; and many of the stipulated procedures were already in practice.

The study not only provides a comprehensive view of how safe-guarding policy is being interpreted and implemented by educational institutions, it also bears significant conclusions on effective approaches to 'teach the teacher' programs carried over into the classroom. Specifically, data reviewed in the study distill the importance of reflecting program objectives in the training examples used with the educators, and not relying on these objectives to resonate through other communication means. Additionally, the data confirm previous notions that adding additional safe-guarding duties to the educator's role can be viewed as daunting and overwhelming, affecting its overall implementation if not communicated properly. So, it is critical a narrative of continuity be employed in educator trainings to reduce anxieties and increase confidence levels regarding more challenging areas of safe-guarding.

Evaluation of a Comprehensive Behavior Management Program to Improve School-Wide Positive Behavior Support (Metzler et al., 2001).

Metzler and colleagues (2001) immersed themselves into a school environment in the late 1990s to evaluate practiced school safety initiatives. There have been many different practices and, in turn, studies to understand school safety programs in schools to stop violence and bullying, promote inclusiveness, and foster a more welcoming school climate. Some responses to school safety issues have included the installation of cameras in the classroom as a way of increasing visibility into schools (Addington, 2009); others have been the use of metal detectors in school entrances (Crews & Counts, 1997), and further physical barriers such as locked doors and sign-ins (Snell et al., 2002). Research has found that visible security measures such as these are associated with higher exposure to risky things, such as drugs and fighting (Tanner-Smith, Fisher, Addington, and Gardella, 2017). Additionally, it has been found in some cases that metal detectors make students feel more unsafe (Hankin, Hertz, and Simon, 2011). Overall, the use of 'hard' security measures has generally proven to have a negative effect on the school climate, ultimately affecting the learning environment within the school (Addington, 2009;

Devine, 1995; Fisher, Gardella, and Tanner-Smith, 2016; Noguera, 1995).

Metzler et al. (2001) evaluated a school's safety program that defied traditional 'hard' practices and instead used more preventative measures in two Oregon schools, across the grades of 6-8. The program is known as the Effective Behavioral Support system (EBS), and its goal is to increase appropriate social behavior in schools. The goal of the study was beyond gatekeeping and policing practices, but rather it was an effort to measure changes in the social behavior of students post EBS interventions. The preventative interventions in the schools sought to adjust student behavior using a positive reward system in the context of effective pro-social behavior. The program involved a curriculum-based intervention, in addition to student monitoring. The students were taught the importance of appropriate social behavior, examples of the expected social behavior, and activities were employed to practice this behavior in the classroom. Additionally, the teachers received training on how to implement the system into their classrooms and school environment (Metzler et al., 2001).

The school implemented a "Tiger Ticket" program, which gave "Tiger Tickets" to individuals who exemplified or participated in appropriate social behavior and tickets were taken from those who exercised negative social

behavior. The researchers dispersed surveys to the students and teachers to measure their change in behaviors, as well as used discipline referrals to measure the behavior of the students. Results from the surveys, which measured the frequencies of behavioral change showed that appropriate social behavior increased generally within the student body (Metzler et al., 2001). The EBS program effected the amount of socially aggressive behavior in their student body as well, finding a significantly lower amount of harassment by males, and students reported feeling far safer in the hallways and cafeteria than before the intervention.

Ultimately, the study has taught many lessons about school interventions and program-based ways of altering student behavior. As maintained by Metzler et al. (2001), the findings of the study promote programs that emphasize teaching skills and rightfully teaching the appropriate behavior in a classroom setting. While there were positive results in the study, there were also concerns raised by the researchers about staff support and inconsistent engagement from teachers. School-wide behavioral change is challenging, however with a wide buy-in from teachers, the possibilities of seeing a more comprehensive school wide change is likely to be greater.

Conclusion

Alas, all the puzzle pieces we have are now on the table, constructed together, designed into the Op250 program. However, this leaves one last puzzle piece missing, because we do not have this final piece. The final piece is in the hands of you now, the reader, to not only complete our puzzle, but to begin your own as well. Taking what we have built – the pretty pictures, corners and edges, supported and completed by the blue sky – into your classroom to improve on the decision making, risk assessment, and awareness of the youth around you. While we have taken the time to design this puzzle, it is just one story and angle of the greater issue that is constantly facing ourselves and all of those around us today. We encourage you to read this research, try to understand it, ask questions, and ultimately move our pieces around to design your own puzzle. An effective message is a complete and transparent one; and with this report, we feel our message is becoming both, however we ask you to help by filling in the last piece of our message.

For the complimentary section on how this research specifically fits in your classroom, please read “Classroom Applications” for more information.

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