

Warning follows report into online child sexual abuse risk

January 23 2018

If the public are serious about wanting to protect children from online sexual abuse more investment in skilled professionals is needed now. The stark warning comes from researchers following publication of a new report commissioned by the Independent Inquiry on Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) which coincided with the first day of the public hearing into online child sexual abuse.

Victims of online facilitated [child sexual abuse](#) often remain undetected until images or videos of their [abuse](#) are picked up by criminal investigations.

And warns Professor Corinne May-Chahal, of Lancaster University, who led this piece of research: "These involve a growing number of [children](#) but the resources needed to detect abuse, trace victims and help them get support is very limited." She added that a key question asked by parents and those working with children is what made a [child](#) at risk of online sexual abuse.

[The Lancaster report](#), examines what is known about the characteristics, vulnerabilities and on-and-offline behaviour of victims of online-facilitated child sexual abuse and exploitation.

Whilst any child, even younger children, could be at risk, what is less known is that risk of direct contact is equally likely to come from people the child knows as well as from strangers.

Online-facilitated CSA (OFCSA) is a growing area of concern and includes a wide range of actions and events ranging from feeling upset by viewing sexual content online to live streaming sexual acts at the request of a perpetrator. It also includes the recording of offline CSA.

Sexting is not always abusive but, if images are shared without permission or distributed into peer to peer networks, it can be.

Researchers also found:

- * Most studies suggest girls are at higher risk but this may be because boys are less likely to admit to OFCSA.

- * Vulnerability characteristics included:

- Adverse childhood experiences, such as physical and sexual abuse and exposure to parental conflict, made children more vulnerable to online victimisation. However, any child from any socio-economic background can fall victim to OFCSA

- Disability, particularly disabled boys who may be at equal or greater risk to girls

- Above average internet use increased vulnerability especially when interacting with other characteristics, such as having a disability or low self-esteem (at the time of the research 12-15 year olds spent on average just over 2.5 hrs per day but this is increasing all the time (now according to Ofcom 2017 they spend 21 hours a week online)

- Children exploring gender identities online may be more vulnerable

- * What protects children online:

- In managing unwanted experiences, many children develop important digital skills that contribute to their overall resilience
- The more upset or distressed a child is by online-facilitated CSA the more likely they are to tell others; usually friends or parents
- Children are unlikely to tell others if they are embarrassed or afraid

IICSA launched 13 investigations into a broad range of institutions. One of the investigations focuses on the institutional responses to child sexual abuse and exploitation facilitated by the Internet.

The Lancaster University research, a 'rapid evidence assessment', provides an overview of the current state of evidence on a selected topic and is one of several reports published today.

Provided by Lancaster University

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