



Bridging The Gap

Best Practices and Policies to Address the Online
High-Risk Activities of Youth in BC

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NOVEMBER2007

Prepared for:

The Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General of British Columbia

"Bridging the Gap" outlines strategies to address online risks for youth in British Columbia, emphasizing a coordinated approach among industry, government, NGOs, and the public, with a strong focus on education, awareness, research, and training. It notes that while other provinces have strategies, British Columbia lacks a tailored approach. The document recommends phased implementation of awareness campaigns, educational resources, and public-private partnerships to protect youth online. It also stresses the need for ongoing updates to adapt to evolving technological challenges.





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1. Executive Summary

Overview

Purpose

The effects of technology on British Columbian children and youth can be characterized on a continuum from extremely positive and beneficial, to harmful and negative. Provincial Ministries are increasingly under pressure to build strategies emphasizing the growth and development of children that both highlight the potential of the Internet for education and communication while simultaneously providing assistance to mitigate the possible negative impacts of this technology. These include: sexual exploitation online, online child luring, posting of harmful material, gang recruitment, access to emotionally, psychologically, physically harmful material, child pornography and cyberbullying. As the reach and depth of the Internet expand, so too do the challenges for public policy.

Summary

This document, prepared for the Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General for the Province of British Columbia, suggests that a provincial strategy to combat online sexual exploitation of youth should be based on a human service approach, favour cooperation and coordination amongst industry, government, NGOs and the public and have a strong focus on education, awareness, research and training.

Current Status and Considerations.

In Canada, provincial strategies exist in only three provinces: Ontario, Manitoba and Alberta. While addressed to some degree by Federal initiatives, British Columbia does not have a specifically tailored strategy to protect the children of British Columbia when they are online.

In designing and implementing a Provincial strategy now, British Columbia can take advantage of other approaches taken internationally, regionally, nationally and provincially

in order to form a strategy best suited to British Columbians. Best practices in other jurisdictions suggest that a strategy that can deliver a series of graduated outcomes in the short, medium and longer term are most successful.

This document recognizes that responses need to be delivered in recognition of the specific context and unique problems faced by individual youth; the diverse economical, social and environmental communities youth come from necessitate culturally sensitive awareness, education and outreach programs. An effective strategy must also strive to bridge the knowledge and experiential gap between young people and adults including parents and professionals. Lastly, while this document argues for an immediate upgrade to existing provincial strategies to increase the awareness of the current technological environment, it must be stressed that any updates and upgrades must be iterative, ongoing and built into a long-term strategy to address the constantly evolving technological climate.

Recommendations

The prioritized plan adheres to the focus advocated for in the document for each stakeholder group and operates in three sequential phases.

Phase One:

1. Take immediate steps to increase awareness of youth, parents and professionals by implementing public service announcements, and advertising campaigns;
2. Increase access to funding for, and delivery of existing educational presentations to youth, parent and professional target groups including dissemination of educational resources;
3. Form public-private partnerships with the technology industry to elicit financial contributions and integrate their access and expertise in longer term partnerships;
4. Target rural communities including youth, parents and professionals with education-based presentations.

Recommendations (cont'd)

Phase Two:

1. Continue to deliver Programs started in Phase One
2. Develop curricula and resources relevant to the specific professional area as that engage high-risk youth and deliver regional "Community Expert" training sessions;
3. Contract with a competent agency to create and maintain a web-based portal offering one-stop referral to reputable online resources for British Columbians;
4. Link with existing interdepartmental committees to ensure a coordinated set of responses.

Phase Three:

1. Continue to deliver Programs started in Phase One and Two
2. Implement provincial-wide curriculum;
3. Engage private industry and retailers to distribute educational materials to target audiences through retail outlets, as mail-outs in bill statements, and on corporate websites;
4. Equip those who serve high-risk youth with information and competencies to deal with incidents of online exploitation in their communities.

Assumptions

While this document provides policy suggestions based on a general overview of international, national and provincial responses to the issue of the online sexual exploitation of youth, a key assumption is that law enforcement, while an integral partner in the protection of youth, must always be combined with a human services approach focused on prevention, education and treatment for those affected. Protecting children requires the acknowledgement that numerous contributing factors complicate the issues.

Through more holistic, collaborative and cooperative means children at risk can be better supported, assisted and protected while those who have suffered exploitation can be better served and rehabilitated.

Outline

The document is organized as follows;

- **Part One** provides an overview and executive summary of the findings of the document.
- **In Part Two**, the emergence of online sexual exploitation is explored and examined through a framework of five typologies. A particular focus is on the unique challenges faced in the province of British Columbia.
- **In Part Three**, the policy parameters in British Columbia are explored including theoretical frameworks and definitions of terms, geographic considerations, and existing initiatives.
- **In Part Four**, based on a detailed review with a focus on the Canadian experience, recommendations are advanced specifying the appropriate focuses and stakeholder groups in addition to a delineation of strategic responses. The strategy is based on international, regional, national and provincial best practices and relevant Canadian literature.
- **Part Five** provides a succinct conclusion and suggests that in order to remain current in areas of child protection, British Columbia needs to act swiftly in implementing an educated approach to the high-risk activities of youth online.

2. Understanding Online Sexual Exploitation of Children (OCSE)

Legal Responses

The sexual exploitation of children has been the focus of many legislative responses in the last twenty years. Multiple bodies, including international and national governments are involved in creating and enforcing legislation regarding the sexual use of children for the pleasure or profit of adults.

These efforts were complicated by the introduction of the Internet. OCSE creates an additional complexity in the definitions of sexual exploitation; now instead of sexual exploitation involving individuals generally physically identifiable, these crimes are facilitated and complicated by a variety of electronic elements.

In Canada there are several different jurisdictional considerations when examining these issues; the legal age of majority in Canada is eighteen while the age in British Columbia is nineteen. This can mean that youth in British Columbia can be in the care of the government and considered minors, yet are considered as adults federally. This discrepancy can be illustrated by the hypothetical situation of a British Columbian youth who is aged nineteen and still in the care of the provincial government, but who can also legally be involved in the adult pornography industry in Canada.

Another consideration that adds to the contextual understanding of these issues is the legal age of (heterosexual) sexual consent in Canada. Here, youth aged fourteen can consent to sexual relations with anyone (as long as that person is not in a position of authority nor has any 'consideration' been provided in exchange for the sexual activity). Beyond the obvious concerns that this poses for youth, it is further complicated by the fact that the legal definition of child pornography covers the possession, creation and/or distribution of sexual images of anyone under the age of eighteen, thus images of youth ages 14 to 17 engaged in sexual activity are defined as child pornography and constitute illegal images.

This framework is offered as a way to understand the different groups affected and the dynamics involved in the sexual exploitation of children in online settings.

Profiles of Exploited Groups

Pre-Pubescent Children

Sexual abuse images of pre-pubescent children include sexualized images or recordings of the sexual abuse, and/or assault of young children that are recorded digitally. They are often distributed, advertised or conducted live over the Internet as child pornography. The abuse of this population of children has unique dynamics and it should be recognized that the victims of these crimes have specific therapeutic requirements in addition to those victims of physical sexual abuse. Additionally investigative techniques employed to identify offenders against pre-pubescent children will generally be significantly different from investigations of older youth who are sexually exploited.

While the need to identify the alleged offenders is an obvious priority when sexual abuse images are discovered, the emotional needs of children victimized by abusive images should also be prioritized during all legal investigations. Law enforcement representatives should refer children victimized by sexually abusive images to appropriate child-focused services. These service providers, in turn must be aware of the unique needs of victims traumatized in this way; the enduring nature of the evidence captured digitally online, may affect their willingness to disclose, and the effects of the evidence on the victim may include trauma resulting from the fear that those around them have seen the images. From an investigative perspective, changes in techniques required to apprehend online predators require modifications. Modifications will also need to be made to traditional sexual abuse counselling, victim service provisions, and child protection practices when dealing with pre-pubescent children.

Adolescents Experimenting Online

In some situations, no adult manipulation, seduction, threats and/or coercion are present. Here youth are engaging in (arguably) appropriate experimental adolescent behaviours in digital settings.

These behaviours can include individuation and separation from parents, social experimentation, sexual experimentation and negotiating sexual orientation. While these

Adolescents Experimenting Online (cont'd)

activities are part of normal behaviour in developing a sexual identity, the consequences of normal adolescent experimentation being acted out online introduces many potentially dangerous practices. These include posing for and posting online photos or videos, engaging in cybersex and/or engaging in sexual conversations in adult chatrooms. Youth may also voluntarily engage in online sex acts, for money or the approval of others, not realizing the long-term implications of the content they create. The occurrence of an online 'camgirl' has been reported in one small Okanagan community. A youth accumulated in excess of \$5000 by performing in front of a webcam in her bedroom while her parents were upstairs, believing that she was in her room doing 'homework'.

Sexual Assaults Online

In other situations, sexual exploitation may occur even in the absence of any physical contact between youth and predator. **While the concept of 'virtual rape' remains difficult to understand, instances where sexually explicit images of youth are created or distributed produce unique and disturbing dynamics.**

This can occur when predators seduce youth into posing in front of their webcam or taking sexually explicit images of themselves and providing them to the predator. Predators who initially approach the youth as 'friends' and then escalate the relationship to sexual images can also blackmail youth. There have also been instances of predators threatening to harm youth and/or the families of youth who don't comply with online requests for sexual images.

Reported cases also include predators taking a youth's profile photo and digitally altering it to appear as though s/he has done something illegal or explicit. Predators then threaten to show the image to parents or peers unless the youth complies with specific requests. Also evolving are street level practices of forcing youth already being exploited in the street trade into performing sexually in front of webcams for the profit of others.

Advertising of Child Sexual Services

Online environments can also be used to anonymously distribute information about child sexual exploitation.

Since 2001 incidences of youth using online classified services to advertise themselves for sexual services have begun to emerge. These youth have posted their legal names, pictures of their faces, their 'rates' and contact information. In one instance the youth included a room number with the phone number. With the use of a reverse directory, readily available online, this youth could easily have been located right down to the specific room she was in exposing her to tremendous risk of physical harm.

Other examples of this kind of exploitation include websites that offer suggestions on where to go in specific cities to gain access to under age children. Some sites include 5 reviews of the quality of sexual services available.

Luring Youth Online

Online environments are also use to lure youth directly into street level sexual exploitation.

Strategies employed by groups to attract youth to gatherings where they can be groomed for street level sexual exploitation include the use of social networking sites. Youth workers in Surrey have identified one such incident where youth were approached on a popular social networking site, invited to clubs and provided with transportation, alcohol and drugs. The 'company' hosting the events had connections to various known pimps and recruiters.

Within the Province of BC the luring of youth from isolated communities has been facilitated by online technologies and constitutes another realm of exploitation. Previously isolated rural communities are now accessible to online recruiters who can take advantage of youth who may not have the skills to recognize sexual recruitment.

The youth are also unfamiliar with the harmful realities of the sex trade and may be easily lured due to a misplaced sense of adventure. Isolated youth may also be especially vulnerable to remote luring as they may wish to escape their home communities and experience urban life. For example, just six months after the introduction of broadband access to one aboriginal community in BC, youth counsellors discovered a girl at the local airport trying to pick up a pre-paid ticket for Vancouver. A Vancouver-based recruiter, who had promised a modelling career and financial support, had contacted her and arranged for her transportation. The youth was completely unaware of the likelihood that she was on her way to becoming an exploited youth in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver. This form of exploitation can also include predators who lure youth out for the sole purpose of one-time sexual assault.

"We need to rethink how we approach child victims of abusive images once they have been identified and their whereabouts discovered. ... the key to understanding the trauma to child victims when being informed that the images of them have been discovered lies with the fact that they have no control whatsoever of the disclosure process."

Palmer, T. Behind the screen: ' Children who are the subjects of abusive images.'



3. Frameworks for Online Youth Safety

The areas addressed by this document are diverse and represent many new dynamics for youth, parents and professionals. Therefore, before outlining the specific recommendations on how to respond to the high-risk activities of youth online, some geographic considerations, existing initiatives, theoretical frameworks and definitions of terms will be defined.

British Columbia: Specific Considerations

Current Research

The Government of British Columbia has recognized the need to draft and implement a provincial strategy to address emergent issues related to online technologies and their effects on youth-focused professional practices. By considering valuable insights from the variety of international, regional, national and provincial education and awareness initiatives to date, there exists the potential to correct many of the assumptions upon which earlier strategies have been based.

One theme which has emerged from the exhaustive literature and environmental scan completed through this document, is that a sole focus on a law enforcement approach (enforcement, investigations, and criminal prosecutions) cannot address the multitude of issues for victims of online exploitation. The research suggests that jurisdictions which embrace preventive education, capacity building and service provision coordination delivered through a human services approach are better placed to address the long-term needs of youth. The public is also better served by engaging in long-term solutions based on increasing the resilience and capacity of Internet users rather than focusing on the apprehension of all those who offend against others online. The nature of the Internet and the difficulty governments face in controlling and regulating the content available to their citizens dictate that preventative education is the best long-term investment.

Existing Resources

While the delay in responding provincially to the challenges of online exploitation offers advantages from a research perspective, it also offers advantages from a resource development point of view. Many excellent resources have been developed both nationally and internationally that can be utilized by British Columbia in addressing these issues. Many of these resources are available at no cost. Other resources have been developed by non-profit organizations and may be available, for use in British Columbia, on a cost recovery basis.

B.C.'s Culture and Geography

While much Internet safety information can be applied cross-culturally and in multiple jurisdictions, differences in culture, access, and community risk factors require information distributed in non-urban British Columbian communities to be tailored to suit specific community needs and complexities. In British Columbia this means:

- Addressing the challenge represented by the rapid introduction of broadband access to rural and First Nations youth in British Columbia. Individuals in these settings may have had limited exposure to sexual exploitation recruitment and luring. This increases their vulnerability to online solicitations. They may also be overwhelmed by the possibilities delivered to their communities in a short period of time by the rich broadband experience;
- Adults from a rural lifestyle may be less inclined to engage in online communications, thereby leaving youth in these communities with a limited number of adults to act as role models;
- First Nations communities still dealing with the residual effects of the residential school system and generational sexual abuse need education delivered in a way sensitive to their complex needs and varied community dynamics;

B.C.'s Culture and Geography (cont'd)

- Small communities often lack a diversity of service providers capable of recognizing, addressing and reporting high-risk activities of youth online. Since we are not in a position to increase the number of service providers in small communities, special attention needs to be paid to supplementing the skills and knowledge base of existing professionals.
- Small community culture dictates that information is best accepted and integrated when delivered by service providers/adults familiar to the local youth population. The delivery of standardized service and educational programs from outside experts has little long-lasting effect and relevance.

Current and Future British Columbia Initiatives

Several programs and initiatives have already been established within British Columbia to address various issues related to youth, sexual exploitation and/or issues relating to online communications. It is recommended that representatives involved in these activities be involved in the analysis and implementation of any strategies coming out of the Provincial Working Group.

The SafeOnLine Education

SafeOnLine Education (SafeOnline), has been actively delivering Internet safety, online child protection and youth-2-youth programs in British Columbia since 2002. Specifically SafeOnline delivers in-person presentations to youth, parents, and the public. These presentations are supplemented with resources developed by the Society, an in-depth website containing research, resource links and media coverage, supplemental published resources and with ongoing networking activities including mailing lists and newsletter distribution.

Framework : Community Capacity Building

Supported and sponsored by the British Columbia Assistant Deputy Ministers' Committee to Stop the Sexual Exploitation of Children, many First Nations and community-based groups throughout British Columbia have participated by implementing sexual exploitation awareness, prevention and education projects in their areas over the last ten years. These groups can be included in networking activities regarding these issues.

Projects: Community Capacity Building

In 2005-06, the Assistant Deputy Ministers' Committee on Prostitution and Sexual Exploitation of Children and Youth partnered with the National Crime Prevention Centre, to contribute nearly \$1.3 million toward building and sustaining community capacity in British Columbia over a three-year period. In 2005-06, fifteen organizations developed a multi-year community action plan and fifteen one-year community-based projects addressing prostitution and sexual exploitation of children and youth now receive support through the Assistant Deputy Ministers Community Capacity Building Fund.

Fraser Youth Justice Committee Working Group

This group has only recently begun to discuss the possibilities for child protection, youth justice and youth mental health workers to access the Internet with the intention of communicating with youth in their care. Also on the agenda are questions about how Ministry professionals can supervise, observe or participate in any of the online environments where youth are at risk in order to better inform their practices concerning current youth realities.

McCreary Foundation Youth Health Survey (2008/09)

This survey, scheduled to begin gathering information in 2008, will be asking several questions about online activities of its youth participants.

Vancouver School Board Committee Examining Responses to Online Activities

This committee is currently working on developing policy responses for the Vancouver School Board to respond to issues related to online technologies and their impact in their schools.

Growth Areas in Counselling Practices

As the implications and professional applications of online technologies evolve, professionals in all youth serving sectors will need to receive upgraded training and information about new therapeutic uses of the Internet. These may include online outreach services offered to clients and youth in the care of the government, referrals to online resources/ forums and online support services for young people.

Upgrading and Coordinating Polices and Procedures

The changing nature of technology and the social implications not only require a new strategy but also require support for government ministries, social service organizations, educational institutions and youth service groups to become more familiar with the issue and upgrade their operations in line with the new strategy.

Counselling and risk assessment practices must incorporate questions about the online activities and virtual lives of children to determine whether a specific child has been sexually exploited online or physically abused. Evidence of good practices in providing such services are beginning to emerge. At the present time, however, there is limited training of service providers regarding the specific needs of victims of Internet-facilitated sexual exploitation. Researchers are struggling to identify both the differences and the similarities in terms of service needs between non-Internet and Internet sexual abuse survivor care, and what specific types of support are required.”

Another element related to the therapeutic needs of children abused in images, is widespread distribution of child abuse images and associated effects on children and their recovery: “The national centre for missing and exploited children found that a single graphic sexual image of a five year old girl was posted to over 800 000 separate pages on the Internet in the short span of six months.”

Understanding the Complexity of Adolescence Online

When examining the issues of online exploitation the adolescent development plays an important role in contextualizing the dynamics of what occurs online.

Perceived Risks Versus Actual Risks

Initial responses to the risks of online exploitation focused on the incidences of adult males contacting, deceiving and luring, children and youth into meeting for the purposes of sexual assault by using personal information about the child online and using it to hunt/stalk them. Prevention and educational messaging focused predominantly on instructions such as “don’t give out personal information” and depicted the ‘boogey man’ figure. In many jurisdictions this remains the base assumption from which all programming begins. This characterization of online predators, however, may not be completely accurate, and many educational programs miss the need to address the behaviours of youth online in their curricula and practices.

Youth Online Behaviours Increasing Risk

These behaviours, according to David Finkelhor, Director of the U.S. Crimes Against Children Research Center, may include a pattern of multiple risky activities on the web like going to adult sites and chat rooms, meeting lots of people there, combined with a willingness to talk about sex online with strangers.

In 1999 and 2000 David Finkelhor, PhD; Kimberly J. Mitchell, PhD; and Janis Wolak, JD, at the Crimes against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire conducted the first Youth Internet Safety Survey (YISS-1). An analysis of the second Youth Internet Safety Survey in 2005 (YISS-2) was published as “Online Victimization of Youth: Five Years Later”. Their findings are thought provoking when responding to online exploitation.

"We asked youth whether they engaged in several kinds of risky behaviours that could possibly increase the chances they would experience unwanted sexual solicitations, exposure to sexual material, or harassment. The behaviours were: posting personal information or pictures online or sending personal information or pictures to someone the youth knew only online; engaging in online sexual behaviours such as going to X-rated web sites on purpose, using a screen name with sexual connotations, sending sexual pictures online, or talking to people youth knew only online about sex; saying rude or nasty things online or using the Internet to harass or embarrass others."

Wolak, J., Mitchell, K., & Finkelhor, D. (2006)

Technology Offering Richer Experiences

Experiences offered in online settings have developed with astounding speed. In the year 2000, the average user could expect to view text, via email and websites and to view images -- depending on speed of connection -- with some reliability. Seven years later video chat, website design and the distribution of home videos are well within the capacity of most home computers and within the skill set of most teenagers.

Adolescent Behaviour Complicated by Technology

If the Internet is indeed changing not only youth culture, but how youth explore and experiment as part of adolescence, then messages which fail to present a realistic portrayal of a youth's online experience may be useless. Angela Huebner describes the psychosocial development of teens as establishing identity, autonomy, intimacy, becoming comfortable with one's sexuality, and achievement.¹⁵ These stages of development have changed little over the generations. The difference is that before the Internet, people were unable to hear the conversations, see pictures of the settings or observe all the activities that went on during a teen's night out. Now, these moments are captured digitally and can be viewed by others, reproduced, and posted online.

"The Internet is a complex virtual, social and physical world that children and adolescents participate in and co-construct, rather than something that is merely watched (TV) or merely used (PC). It becomes a complex virtual universe behind a small screen on which developmental issues play out in old and new ways, offering new views into the thoughts, feelings and behaviours of children and adolescents...children, adolescents and the Internet; a new field of inquiry in developmental psychology"

Greenfield, P. & Yan, Z. (2006). "Children, adolescents, and the Internet: A new field of inquiry in developmental psychology".

Part of the process of transitioning into adolescence is the need to have privacy and personal space, moments, and thoughts. When parents overreact to the online activities of their teens and insist on monitoring, filtering or controlling their online communication, the youths' struggle to emancipate from parents escalates. So while some of the behaviours observed may be alarming for caregivers of youth, there is also the need to guard against adults overreacting to what they view.

Effects of Technology on OCSE

In order to construct an informed and effective strategy to respond to the high-risk activities of youth online, youth-focused curricula, policies, education, engagement or interventions must acknowledge and accommodate the effects of technology on youth, culture, and communication. Specifically, best practices in the strategies examined identify the following as effects that require consideration:

- The recent and evolving effects of technology on **youth culture**;
- The traditional **generation gap** now compounded by a technological gap;
- The need to rapidly distribute current, relevant, research-based and empirically validated Internet safety messages (**knowledge distribution**);

Each of these three effects will be examined in detail below.

Effects on Youth Culture

Technology has created diverse impacts on youth communication, interactions, and identity construction. These impacts have and will continue to have, many wide-ranging and powerful changes not just for youth but also for society in general, and their effects will continue for the foreseeable future. Many of these impacts, while perhaps troubling now, have a positive face as well.

- The rise of social networking and posting of personal information has opened opportunities for young people to connect with people outside their geographic area. This has allowed for previously isolated youth to connect with others with similar interests with both positive and negative consequences; healthy life affirming experiences from online support groups and communities, and also the ability of predators to locate youth geographically or lure them to other communities to meet. For example, youth have been recruited into sexual exploitation on Nexopia.com, and gang activity has been reported on Facebook.
- Adolescent development dictates that youth experiment with their identity, peer group relationships and sexuality but the effects of doing this online are different than for previous off-line generations. Information posted online can be taken out of context and is permanently available regardless of whether youth remove it from their personal sites.
- Online communication amplifies some adolescent experimental behaviour with sometimes-unforeseen effects. Individuals online sometimes say and do things they would not otherwise say or do when they assume that they are anonymous (i.e. cyberbullying). They also may not appreciate the potential for sexual images they create to be added to global collections of child pornography. While youth may be unaware of it, the sexual images they create of themselves (photos, videos or audio recordings) are classified as child pornography and the distribution and even possession of these images constitutes a criminal offence. Many collectors of child pornography exist worldwide and disturbingly some recent estimates are that 10 percent of all child pornography images are created by youth themselves.

Effects on Youth Culture (cont'd)

- Adolescents often do not see the long-term implications of their online communications. This information may affect their future professional prospects, scholarship opportunities and political aspirations. Not only do youth often fail to understand the permanence of digital information as well as the public nature of all information posted or sent over the Internet, they also often erroneously assume that information on their social networking profiles won't be seen by anyone but their friends. There also exists the potential for the information they post to be used in ways they did not intend nor imagine; for example the morphing of photos, the use of 'private' photos for malicious purposes and the distribution of online conversations in their schools.
- The ability of individuals online to assume multiple representations of themselves poses challenges to traditional ideas about identity construction, 'truth', and 'knowing someone'. Youth will sometimes seek to investigate what others think of them as they portray various identities. The possibility of assuming a different identity, at a stage when their identity is just forming, creates many challenging circumstances for youth socially. The environment becomes increasingly complex with the recognition that adults who may wish to manipulate youth may also assume multiple identities.
- Accommodating the need of youth who are part of an "Always On Generation" means understanding online activities of youth on the Internet, cell phones and other handheld devices. Youth live in a milieu in which they are always connected and interacting. This makes it more difficult for adults to monitor, mentor and support youth in their day-to-day communications. Conversely, online avenues of communication create the potential for therapeutic responses and interventions by adults who can use online avenues to engage in continuing contact with missing or AWOL youth.

Effects On Generation Gap

In addition to the traditional generation gap experienced by parents and children, technology has introduced a factor that further complicates communication between the two groups.

Effects On Generation Gap (cont'd)

- One by-product of the technology/generation gap is a lack of awareness of most adults over 30 about the primary elements of youth Internet communication, making it nearly impossible for adults to offer youth advice, relevant information, boundaries and expectations. While we can expect this technology/generation gap to be minimized as today's youth become professionals, we need to remain cognizant in the meantime of the needs for adults to be aware of youth activities online during this transitional phase. Specifically, service providers who deal with high-risk youth need to be equipped with the skills to address youth activities online.
- Youth know more about the web than adults. Youth need to be engaged in the teaching process and should be consulted in the development, administration, implementation and evaluation of any Internet-related educational initiatives. Youth are a currently under-accessed and vital resource owing to their indigenous status in cyberspace and their understanding of the evolving implications of online culture at a far deeper level than any late-adopters of the technology.
- One of the major differences for adolescents today is their ability to easily record experimental and intimate experiences. It is not that adolescents are undertaking vastly different activities, but rather that adults have never before had the opportunity to closely examine the recordings of adolescent activity. This also opens up some dilemmas about privacy and appropriate use of monitoring by parents. Parents might be overly protective or paranoid about what youth are doing online, and if they have the skills, may be tempted to cross privacy boundaries with their teens in this newfound environment.

Effects on Knowledge Distribution

The need for rapid introduction of a large body of new knowledge and skill-sets to accommodate the effects of new technologies challenges traditional methods of knowledge distribution. The medium of the web itself requires non-traditional modes of instruction, distribution, publishing and promotion – a new way of communicating altogether.

Effects on Knowledge Distribution (cont'd)

- One of the challenges faced when directing resources to teachers is that they are already required to deliver multiple curricula and are impacted by the same generational/technology gap referred to above. The need for up-to-date information is challenging for already over-burdened educators working in the education system.
- It remains challenging to identify and retain individuals to deliver current curricula and training materials for professionals because of specialization of the material and the time required to be consistently current on the issue. Additionally front-line staff in service agencies experience consistent turnover, further challenging the delivery of relevant information for clients and professionals alike.
- Much work is required to increase the public's awareness of when to report abuse online, where to report incidences of abuse, bullying, gang recruitment, and how to access relevant information and advice about online safety.
- Publishing and distributing curricula for use in the educational and child protection fields is challenged by the fact that information about online exploitation and the high-risk activities of youth online falls out of date relatively quickly. In order to be relevant, curricula needs to reflect the current, constantly changing online environments used by youth. Additionally reality-based information about the prevalence of online luring, methods of recruitment and evolving high-risk behaviours of youth online require that research is constantly upgraded.
- Research documenting youths' reported experiences is largely absent from the available body of research. More prevalent is data gathered from crime statistics that reflect the activities of predators and offenders. In order to inform professional practices, increased efforts should be directed at gathering information about the experiences of youth online, since these are more useful for preventative and therapeutic practice development.

Identifying Youth at Risk

When addressing the issues of online exploitation, it is important to remember that not all youth are equally at risk. David Finkelhor states that youth experiencing exploitation online are often the same youth who are experiencing risk in other environments in their lives; youth from dysfunctional homes, youth engaged in substance abuse, youth disenfranchised from their families and communities, youth who have experienced sexual abuse or are questioning their sexuality. It would make sense, then, that youth-serving professionals in their lives will already have identified these youth.

“It is a little bit concerning to me, however, that (the) people in the mental health fields, and the child protection and social work (fields) do not tend to be particularly computer Internet savvy. So it’s not a place that they automatically go or know about. If they were armed with more information to help them impart information to the kids and ask questions that might allow them to identify someone who’s at risk of getting into trouble online, I think that might help.”¹⁸

Finkelhor, D. (2007, May 3). Just the facts about online youth victimization: Researchers present the facts and debunk myths. Transcripts from The Congressional Internet Caucus Advisory Committee Forum. Washington, DC.

Teen risks also include engaging in online communications regarding dysfunctional behaviours such as suicidal ideations, self-harm (slashing), anorexia (pro-anorexia websites), and drug abuse. Youth are also exposed to, or have access to extreme images such as gore sites that show victims of violent deaths, bestiality and/or pornography.

Thus, the population encountering significant risk online is generally the same population that is encountering significant risk offline. The maximization of training, public awareness, and education dollars will be accomplished by targeting professionals who work with at-risk youth. These professionals do not need to be re-trained, only to have their existing skills supplemented by new tools and knowledge- sets in order to accommodate technological changes and deal with the activities of high-risk youth that are also potential victims of online exploitation. A key element here is delivering services to youth encountering risk online in the medium that they are most comfortable with. By using online environments in their professional practices – “digital street outreach” -- professionals can support youth at risk in the same environment in which they encounter that risk.

Online Settings

When examining online activities it is important to have an understanding of the variety of technologies that youth use to connect technologically. Policies that restrict their definition to apply to only those activities conducted via a computer will be limited in their approach. There exist many other avenues to get online and the newer avenues, (cell phones and game consoles) are projected to become increasingly common within the youth demographic.

High-Risk Activities

While much of the background research for these recommendations is based on the analysis of online activities involving sexual exploitation, this document recommends that a broader definition of high-risk activities to be addressed in a B.C. strategy. The reasons are twofold: it is often redundant to address two similar issues with two different approaches; and there is an over-lap among many exploitive activities such as, for example sexual exploitation and cyber bullying.



4. Outline of the Proposed Responses

The responses proposed in this document are organized by stakeholder group. For each of these groups, a focus for the approach to be taken, the target audience and the specific initiative and activities recommended have been outlined.

Youth

Youth Focus

The focus recommended suggests prioritizing activities which utilize dialogue with youth about their online experiences and that acknowledge the positive elements of online communications, as well, as promoting critical thinking about their online experiences and the role that technology plays in their lives.

Education initiatives also need to be positive, have a skill development approach and not employ “scared straight” tactics. The use of law enforcement resources to implement education programs has proven to be ineffective for several reasons: having law enforcement officers deliver education is not cost effective since the annual cost of employing one police officer is approximately one hundred and twenty thousand dollars; some youth may react dismissively to messages delivered by law enforcement personnel that may tend toward overly emphasizing a simplified version of what risks exist while neglecting to acknowledge the positive aspects of online culture.

In all education programs responsible cyber-citizenry should be promoted and “scared straight” models avoided. Youth should be encouraged to participate in the implementation, design and evaluation of the programs. Youth should also be acknowledged for their often-superior knowledge of online environments and culture.

Youth Target Audiences

In accordance with previously cited research, responses aimed at preventing online exploitation have to pay particular attention to youth who, because of certain risk factors, are more at risk than others.

While Internet safety messages need to be aimed at secondary and elementary school aged children as a means of raising general awareness, youth with particular risk factors must be targeted specifically.

Disenfranchised Youth

Youth who are experiencing disenfranchisement within their communities, their families or their peers may be more likely to engage on the Internet in an attempt to find like-minded individuals; youth in rural settings where homophobia may be present might seek out other gay or lesbian individuals online; youth left unattended in their homes after school or because their parents are emotionally unavailable may seek the attention and approval of an adult online; youth with mental illnesses, developmental challenges, or hearing loss may use the Internet to engage socially in an environment in which their disabilities are invisible to the audience; and youth who have experienced previous sexual abuse or have been sexually intrusive may find adult content and conversations online that they find validating.

Youth Specific Responses

Components of specific responses to educate youth are:

- Initiatives aimed at youth should include advertising campaigns:
- Curricula implementation for all grade levels is essential:

Youth-2-Youth Programs

An under-explored but significant means with which to distribute educational material relies upon a cascading model of information dissemination. Originally applied as “train the trainer” programs and used for teachers, recent programming in British Columbia and elsewhere suggest; youth-to-youth programming may do more to engage young people through the use of role models and by expanding the understanding of adults working with and relying on youth to explain current and relevant online events.

In-school presentations will also be vital in delivering education in partnership with community-based NGOs holding relevant expertise (i.e.: The Safe OnLine Outreach Society). Distribution of resources will supplement all other responses aimed at youth.

Parents and the Public

Parents are an important target audience in the efforts to address online exploitation. They are also the hardest to reach, to motivate to attend educational events and to engage in dialogue about youth culture and youth activities online. Regardless, it is vitally important that they be targeted for educational material and engaged in responses to these issues.

Parent/Public Focus

Parents need first to be motivated to learn about the activities of their children online and then encouraged to embrace educational approaches rather than relying on monitoring or filtering software that do little to enhance or improve the capacity of young people to deal with online issues or address online activities carried outside of the home.

Parent/Public Target Audiences

It is important that responses to the issues outlined include parents in both their capacity as parents and in the capacity of “watchful witnesses” who can be helpful in reporting abuse in their families or communities.

Parents

The term 'parents' is broad and includes biological, adoptive, foster and professional individuals. This also includes Parent Advisory Committees attached to elementary and secondary schools throughout the province, professional parent associations such as foster parents, adoptive parents, Canadian Parents for French, parents of children with developmental delay and challenges, and regional, cultural and ethnic parent groups. Materials should be distributed through parenting magazines, bulletins, e-lists and other publications.

Public

Engaging the public is important in expanding the awareness of individuals about the dynamics of online exploitation, and in reporting incidences, images and content of concern to the general community.

Parent/Public Specific Responses

A combination of approaches will be required to address the educational needs of these groups.

Public In-person Presentations

For audiences already overwhelmed by online technologies, in-person presentations are an effective way to get individuals thinking about online technologies and the dynamics of the activities that occur there.

Distribute Educational Material to Parents

Written material can also be distributed to individuals unwilling, unable or unlikely to show up for in-person presentations. Two of the most easily accessible routes of access include hardcopies of material distributed by schools and by offering a web-based portal, a one-stop referral to reputable online resources. Such portals should include directions on how to report abuse, definitions of high-risk abuse and special topics including: Internet safety, suicide, self-harm, sexual exploitation, mental health resources, sexual health resources, gang recruitment and problem gambling.

Media Releases

The media has a vitally important role to play in helping to raise the awareness of the public regarding these issues. The media would be of assistance in supporting an advertising campaign and targeting specific media outlets more likely to reach targeted audiences.

Multi-Language Resources

In order to include all parent/public audiences, particularly those in the Greater Vancouver area, materials distributed by schools and the community must be produced in a variety of languages in order to reach families led by recent immigrants and those whose first language is not English or French. Suggestions for languages to translate materials into include Mandarin, Cantonese, Punjabi, Hindi, Korean, and Vietnamese (based on regional demographics). This would also allow distribution to reach the multi-cultural media and other multi-cultural services.

Public Service Announcements

These messages could be broadcast with the assistance of industry partners to increase public awareness by reinforcing simple messages about awareness of online risks, how to report abuse, how to find the online portal and the importance of parental involvement in the activities of youth.

Educational Material Distributed in Partnership with Retailers

This component of the recommendations would see retailers distributing educational written material at the point of sale for technology related goods and services.

Professionals

As outlined in Part 3, section 3 “Upgrading Current Policies and Procedures” providing professionals with relevant information is vitally important. These individuals are more likely than the general public to come in contact with youth experimenting with, or affected by, high-risk activities online.

Professional Focus

Human service professionals do not require to be retrained, only provided with information that supplements their existing skill sets.

Upgrading Policies and Procedures

This will include educational institutions, government ministries (especially those mandated to meet the needs of youth), community service organizations, victim services programs, mental health and counselling services, associations and regulating bodies to accommodate the new approaches and activities that professionals will engage in to address the issues.

Upgrading Professional Practices

This will include re-defining abuse, therapeutic interventions and client/professional interaction online.

Education-focused Development

Activities undertaken to strategically address the professional target audience of this strategy will be encouraged at all times to prioritize educational interventions rather than looking to technological innovations that restrict or monitor youth access to the Internet.

Promoting Dialogue and Discussion

In keeping with the previous point, professionals will be encouraged to promote activities that engage all youth impacted by high-risk activities online to engage in dialogue and encourage youth contributions to policy development.

Identifying Youth Most at Risk

As not all youth are equally impacted by exploitation online, priority will be given to developing the knowledge base of front line professionals who are directly involved with youth at risk. These groups of professionals will be equipped to recognize, understand, and respond effectively to incidences of exploitation within their client group.

Engaging Youth Online

The focus of strategies for professionals and government will encourage professional practices to develop ways to engage with their youth client base in online settings. Youth communicate, express themselves and socialize online; therefore responses to issues arising from these activities should take place in the same online environments.

Proactive and Reactive Responses

Strategies will include both educational prevention activities and responses to youth who have been exploited or are exploiting others online.

Acknowledging the Specific Needs of Victims of Online Sexual Exploitation

Educational responses and curricula will include research-based information regarding the unique needs of individuals abused in online settings and support the development of responses that address those needs.

Professionals

The targeted professions include those that meet the needs of youth in some way or another. These include many settings, institutions and government ministries.

Educational Professionals

Teachers, school administrators and school-based youth counsellors are often involved with youth who are engaging online. In the last few years, many school administrators have reported that the vast majority of disciplinary issues in the schools involve some element of online communications, including cyberbullying, the inappropriate use of cell phones in the schools or the use of online social networking sites to slander other students or staff. Educational professionals are a key target audience and include professional educators associations, teachers, school board and school trustees, school counsellors, and educational specialists dealing with special needs students.

Social Service and Community Agencies

Social service and child protection organizations also require upgraded training due to their contact with high-risk populations. Included in this target group are: community service agencies, counsellors, transition house workers, youth workers, mental health professionals, outreach workers, child protection workers and after-school program workers.

Provincial Government Ministries

The various impacts and collisions of online technologies and youth activities are having wide-ranging effects in most Provincial Ministries that are involved in the delivery of services to people. Such ministries include the Ministry of Child and Family Development, Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General, Ministry of Attorney General, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs, Ministry of Community Development, and the Ministry of Education.

Law Enforcement

Training for individuals in the law enforcement fields would be targeted at those services that primarily deal with the victims of online exploitation, child pornography and crimes complicated by online activities, including but not limited to crown prosecutor, victim assistance professionals and police.

Professional Strategic Responses

Recommended steps to improve the responses of professionals to victims of online crimes include the following:

Train "Community Experts"

Decentralizing expertise is going to be an important step in response to online exploitation. In every community in British Columbia, dedicated, skilled and well-connected front-line professionals exist. The recommendation of this document is to include a Program that develops and implements annual two-day trainings for professionals who work with you in geographically diverse areas of the province. These professionals could then become the "community experts", who are equipped to deal with the local manifestations of incidences of online exploitation. These professionals will have the advantage of already being entrenched in the local culture and community and will have existing relationships with other professionals and youth populations. This Program would train the community experts and then provide them with supplemental information and support through electronic upgrades and online contact with the organization that provides the training. This would mean that local experts would be constantly upgraded with new trends and concerns and would consequently be able to share that information with relevant parties in their communities, and respond more effectively to local incidents of online exploitation.

Develop Specific Professional Resources

The needs of victims of online exploitation require that some specific professional practices upgrade their practices and therapeutic responses. For example, professionals who serve victims of sexual assault will have to change some of their approaches when victims have not only been sexually assaulted but had that sexual assault recorded digitally (via pictures, videos or audio recordings), and then distributed online. These changes in response also apply to social workers, police officers, front-line outreach workers, and educational professionals.

Develop Web-based Resources

While many websites exist, it would be helpful to set up a centralized website for British Columbians offering research, references and resources that could inform updates to professional practices. The website would also facilitate the distribution of information about events, emerging research and youth trends to professional populations. The website will include easy access to reporting hotlines and links to articles of interest.

Develop Policies for Professionals to Engage Clients Online

As technological communications become more firmly entrenched, it is foreseeable that professionals will begin to utilize online avenues to communicate with their clients. In some cases, online contact with clients may be preferable to face-to-face contact when clients are unable to come to professionals for physical or mental health reasons (i.e. agoraphobia) or in circumstances in which online contact could facilitate better therapeutic results.

Upgrade Existing Practices and Policies

Many existing tools employed by youth-serving professionals do not as yet acknowledge the occurrences of online exploitation. Risk assessment tools, professional parenting contracts and Plans of Care (used by MCFD personnel) do not have questions, clauses or accommodations for the issues related to online technologies.

Interdepartmental Coordination

The institution of many of these recommendations will benefit from collaboration utilizing interdepartmental committees to ensure a coordinated professional response.

Industry Partners

Internet, technology and retail businesses all have a role to play in ensuring that the use of their products and services are used in safe and productive ways.

Industry Partners Focus

Industry has a role to play, not only as responsible corporate entities, but because they possess many resources that can assist in responding to the issues of the high-risk activities of youth online. Some corporate partners are very interested in contributing to families'

safely integrating online technologies into their daily lives and industry experts have an important role to play. Their technical expertise about the potential of online environments to deliver youth services will facilitate more effective responses if they can be meaningfully included in strategic responses.

Interdepartmental Coordination

The institution of many of these recommendations will benefit from collaboration utilizing interdepartmental committees to ensure a coordinated professional response.

Industry Partners Target Audiences

Internet Service Providers (ISPs) are important players to include, as are government agencies such as Service BC and the tourism sector. For example, since many British Columbian youth have been reported to use Greyhound Bus Services when lured from their home communities by predators, Greyhound could be invited to post information in their depots offering outreach information for youth who are in transit to possibly exploitive situations should they be reconsidering their choice while in the bus depot.

Retail outlets for games, computers and cell phones might also be encouraged to distribute Internet safety information when they sell products or services to consumers. They could also assist in the promotion of a British Columbia based web-portal offering support and information.

Software developers have already contributed to Internet safety initiatives through the "Missing" CD/game that was produced by LiveWires here in British Columbia. Additional resources could be pioneered in partnership with software developers or technical colleges that have students capable of developing products.

Industry Partners Strategic Responses

It is important to include industry partners as proactive members of strategic responses. The inclusion of industry partners could provide a new perspective on responses to issues of online exploitation. Below are some examples of the ways that industry could contribute to strategic responses.

Form Public/Private Partnerships with Technology Industry

Involvement by representatives of the technology sector should be gathered through promotion of corporate responsibility and invitations to targeted representatives to sit on a working group.

Engage Technology Sector in Distribution

The technology sector should also be utilized in order to increase distribution and reach a wider net of people. By distributing information through retail outlets where hardware is purchased, as mail-outs to be included in customer bill statements and by hosting strategic content on corporate websites, the technology industry can be an important asset and partner.

Contributions of Technological Expertise

Through consultations between those who develop policy and technical experts, technical guidance will allow policy development to be more relevant.

Promotion of Strategies through Media Resources of Industry

In addition to collaboration, a further rewarding avenue would be to encourage the technology sector to promote strategy components through their media resources in order to decrease cost and increase access to target audiences.

Support for Web-based Portal

The web-based portal, discussed earlier, can also be improved utilizing support from the technology industry.

Research

The need for current, youth-focused research cannot be over emphasized. Trends in youth online use, exploitation techniques, emerging technologies and the speed at which each of these elements evolve means that research falls out of date rapidly. In order to respond to what is happening now, as opposed to two years ago, research partners need to be included in an ongoing strategy. The McCreary Adolescent Health Survey is going to be conducted in 2008 and based on past surveys relevant and up to date information will likely assist policy developments. Additionally, students at both Simon Fraser University and the University of British Columbia should be encouraged to explore the areas of online exploitation in their Masters and PhD degree dissertations.

5. Conclusion

The three-phase, four-year plan suggested here has the potential to define British Columbia as a leader in the field of Internet safety in Canada and abroad. In order to remain current in areas of child protection, British Columbia needs to act swiftly in implementing an education approach to the high-risk activities of youth online. The recommended responses in this document will immediately improve the response to high-risk online activities of children and youth in British Columbia and move us toward the establishment of a comprehensive, implemented plan by 2011. British Columbia's commitment to a healthy sector of young people will be evident in both the short and long term -- by increasing access to online education and awareness resources and in-person educational presentations in the short-term, and by delivering province-wide curricula for youth and professionals, and establishing partnerships with the technology industry in the long term.

The responses proposed in this document are based on Canadian and international best practices that suggest youth online need to be approached from a human services perspective. By documenting the particular intricacies of this phenomenon in British Columbia, the recommended responses recognize B.C.'s multicultural landscape and take seriously the need to streamline information while remaining aware that youth come from a variety of diverse backgrounds. A strategy based on these recommendations should be implemented in a graduated fashion, building upon immediate action while simultaneously recognizing that the changing nature of the technological environment requires a longer-term approach.

Canadian provinces such as Alberta, Manitoba, and Ontario have been quick to identify the online exploitation of youth. British Columbia also needs to act swiftly in implementing an educated approach to high-risk activities of youth online.

Further Reading

"Bridging the Gap" also contains four Appendices containing a plethora of international initiatives and legislation.

Appendix 1: Global Literature Review

- Introduction:
 - Overview of international efforts to address online sexual exploitation of children.
- United Nations:
 - -Collaborative responses and best practices from the UN and its member states.
 - -Emphasis on education, legislation, and international cooperation.
- European Union:
 - Policy responses and exemplary practices from EU member states.
 - Focus on legislative frameworks and preventative measures.
- United States:
 - Overview of best practices and policies in the US.
 - Emphasis on law enforcement and educational initiatives.
- Australia:
 - Review of Australian strategies and best practices.
 - Focus on national campaigns and community education.
- United Kingdom:
 - UK's best practices in combating online sexual exploitation.
 - Involvement of multiple stakeholders including law enforcement and NGOs.
- Canada:
 - Federal and provincial strategies to combat online sexual exploitation.
 - Examples of best practices from Ontario, Manitoba, and Alberta.

Appendix 2: Excerpts from Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children Against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (2007)

- Preamble:
 - Introduction and context of the convention.
- Chapter II – Preventive Measures:
 - Principles and measures for prevention, education, and awareness.
- Chapter III – Specialized Authorities and Co-ordinating Bodies:
 - National measures for coordination and collaboration among authorities.
- Chapter IV – Protective Measures and Assistance to Victims:
 - Principles and provisions for assisting victims and reporting suspicions of abuse.
- Chapter V – Intervention Programmes or Measures:
 - General principles and guidelines for intervention programmes and measures.

Appendix 3: References

- Comprehensive list of references and sources used in the document.
 - Includes academic papers, government reports, and international guidelines.

Appendix 4: Educational Resources

- A collection of educational websites and resources.
- Organized in an alphabetized table for easy reference.
- Includes resources from various international and national organizations aimed at preventing online exploitation and educating the public.

These appendices provide a thorough overview of the current state of research, policies, and best practices for addressing online sexual exploitation of children, highlighting the importance of international cooperation, education, and comprehensive policy frameworks.



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