New Technologies, Young People and Offending Behaviour

The Internet has broadened many aspects of our lives in untold positive ways. For children it provides incredible opportunities to learn, socialise and play, yet it also brings new risks and dangers into their lives. Professionals working in childcare increasingly have to help children and young people balance risks and opportunities online. It is normal for young people to experiment and explore their own sexual identity, but new technology has made it easier for individuals to make mistakes in relation to sexual behaviour; the realities of sexual offending and online sexually problematic behaviours need to be recognised.

3 broad areas of concern emerge from the literature in relation to problematic adolescent internet use:

- **sexual bullying or harassment of others online**: Children or young people who may experience unwanted / aggressive sexual solicitous material whilst online. One study of online sexual solicitations experienced by young people concluded that 'not all of the sexual solicitors on the internet fit the media stereotype of an older, male predator. Many are young and some are women.' (Finkelhor 2000);

- **downloading, trading and production of child abuse images**: Although relatively unusual, children and young people are also known to have downloaded child abuse images (Moultrie, 2006). An assessment tool (i-AIM) has been developed for assessing cases of this nature;

- **self-victimising behaviour** This involves activities that place the child in a vulnerable situation. This can involve posting sexually explicit pictures of friends or others online.

Any of these three areas can lead to young people being in conflict with the law, with the first two categories clearly constituting sexually harmful behaviour. Practitioners working with young people displaying behaviours in these three areas of concern should always be mindful of child protection issues.

The last category – self-victimising behaviour – has received a lot of media coverage in relation to the phenomenon of "sexting": sexual communications with content that includes both pictures and text messages, sent using mobile phones and other electronic media. When adolescents are involved in such activities, it can be described as 'youth produced sexual imagery'. This phenomenon seems to be relatively common: a recent survey of 535 14-16 year olds in the United Kingdom found that 40% said their friends had engaged in sexting (Phippen, 2009). Nearly a third of young people surveyed said they knew someone who had been adversely affected by sexting and that they require more advice and support on the subject.

Sexting can cover a range of behaviours from consensual activities between peers who are romantically involved through to behaviours that are clearly criminal e.g. an adult coercing a child online to take sexual photographs of him/herself. Some behaviours sit somewhere between these concerns – e.g. a boy showing friends sexual images of an ex-girlfriend that were obtained at the time through consent but which are now being circulated to cause distress. Wolak and Finkelhor (2011) provide a useful typology of 'sexting' involving young people which can help practitioners in scaling the seriousness of 'self-victimising' behaviour involving new technologies, while recent research by the NSPCC helps us understand the dynamics of this behaviour.

The literature on what works with young people where use of new technologies is problematic is not extensive, but restorative and educational approaches should be considered for low tariff behaviour, while more serious behaviour may require assessment and interventions similar to those typically used with young people who display sexually harmful behaviour. Practitioners should also have a broad knowledge of how to help children and young people stay safe and act responsibly online. Resources available at the Child Exploitation & Online Protection Centre may be a useful start, as are recent factsheets on internet safety produced by WithScotland.

Stuart Allardyce