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Online Safety: Why Research is Important

Essay by David Finkelhor, Janis Wolak, Kimberly J. Mitchell, June 11, 2010

(About this Essay)

Why should policy makers and the public care about research on online safety?
The Internet and its associated technologies have provoked a wave of anxiety among the public, parents, and policy makers. This anxiety poses both an opportunity and a peril. The opportunity is that anxiety stimulates action. Policy makers, child advocates, and educators have rushed to address perceived online dangers. The peril is that anxieties can bias how those dangers are framed and trigger misguided responses. Online dangers may be poorly or inaccurately defined, and quickly formulated responses may be ineffective.

Research as a basis for online safety programs is crucial for two reasons. The first is to understand the dynamics and scope of online risks so that successful and relevant prevention programs can be developed. The second is to evaluate the impact of the prevention programs themselves, to assure that they are effective, developmentally appropriate, and able to evolve with the rapidly changing technological environment.

Because of a lack of high quality research, too much of an infrastructure of anxiety may be getting built on untested assumptions about online risks. Many expensive online safety programs are being built on this scaffolding of assumptions, as well. When we get down to evaluating these prevention efforts, there is a strong possibility we will find that we have not identified the real risk behaviors; we may be squandering an enormous amount of time and money. Research can pay big rewards in making sure that programs are truly relevant in their design and effective in the implementation.

Without research, unusual high-profile cases have too much influence on policy.
Understanding the dynamics of dangers associated with youth Internet use is not easy. First, a lot of what happens to children and teens online is hidden from the oversight of adults. Second, the dynamics are often complicated; there are different dangers facing different children. But maybe most importantly, when dealing with children and danger, the most extreme and frightening episodes – the ones that get the most attention from the media and the public – are often the ones that impress themselves on people's consciousness. However, these scenarios are often unusual and unrepresentative, so focusing on them can distract concerned policy makers from the problems that should be the real basis for good policy and education.

In the 1950s, for example, highly publicized cases involving abducting and homicidal strangers led people to see this as the dominant scenario for child molestation. We learned two decades later, in part thanks to research, that most sex crimes against children were committed by persons well known to the child victims, using their authority or their guile, not abduction or violence [1]. For decades we failed to educate children and families about the real dynamics of most abuse, because policy was based only on highly visible cases. The real dynamics and the diversity of situations only emerged when researchers began to collect histories from victims whose cases had never come to official attention.

At the Crimes against Children Research Center, we have conducted research about problems associated with youth Internet use since 1999. One thing we have emphasized in our research

reports is how often iconic cases and their media portrayals can lead to inaccurate conclusions. For example, in 2006 13-year-old Megan Meier committed suicide after she was rejected by her online boyfriend [2]. The nation was shocked to find out that the "boyfriend" was a malicious woman masquerading online as teenage boy. The woman was seeking revenge against the girl for a perceived slight to the woman's daughter. This was a tragic story about online harassment and deception. It led to much discussion and even legislation attempting to criminalize the woman's actions. But should this case and the implications it held about the nature of online harassment be the basis of policy or safety education? Consider the potentially misleading implications that the story might convey. How many of those who use the Internet to harass youth are adults? How much online harassment is based on identity deception? How often is suicide an outcome? Available research states that most online harassment and cyber-bullying happens among peers; harassers identities are generally known or suspected by the victims; and suicide is a tragic, but very rare, result [3, 4].

Another example of a highly publicized case involves 13-year-old Christina Long. In 2002, she was murdered in Connecticut by a 25-year-old, Saul Dos Rios, whom she had met online [5]. This was another tragic story that led many Internet educators to warn young people about the risks of meeting strangers on the Internet. But research shows that the great majority of crimes by "online predators" do not involve violence of any sort [6]. Rather, they involve sex offenders who are open about being adults looking for sexual activity with young teens. Their victims usually go to meet such offenders in person, knowing who they are and looking for love or sexual experience [6, 7]. Further, these offenders usually take time to develop relationships with victims. The young people caught up in these cases do not see the offenders as strangers. Safety messages that warn about violent consequences when teens meet strangers online are not addressing the actual dynamics that exist in the great majority of these crimes.

Without research, too often policy is driven by anxiety rather than knowledge.
Because much of the discourse about youth Internet use has been driven by anxiety, the Internet has come to be characterized as a magnifier of harm. Unfortunately, it has been too easy and commonplace for people to jump beyond the evidence by presuming, inferring or even explicitly stating, not just that online risks exist, but that the Internet is an especially risky place – a risk-promoting environment. The implication is that certain features of the Internet *increase* risk for young people above what they already encounter even though there is not any research that supports this notion.

Take cyber-bullying for instance. There is speculation that the anonymity of the Internet may unleash aggression, or that comments posted online are more harmful than those made in other settings [8]. But these speculations are not grounded in any real research. Alternative hypotheses could be generated that propose the Internet has qualities that mitigate harms. For example, physical intimidation may be a less salient aspect of cyber-bullying, because the bully is not in the physical presence of the victim. To a victim of bullying, harassing comments seen on a home computer may be less troubling – or no more troubling – than those overheard in a school cafeteria, when the kids making the comments are watching for a reaction.

Alternative hypotheses could also be formulated with respect to online sexual victimization. The Internet may have protective rather than endangering qualities. For many adolescents, engaging in sexual explorations on a computer at home or a friend's house could be safer than risky sexual behavior in offline environments, where situations could escalate into sexual assault more quickly and irrevocably. It is not clear whether the Internet has a protective or endangering effect in terms of sexual victimization; it could have both, depending on the circumstances. However, the answer will come from research not from speculation.

A third example of how discourse about the Internet highlights harm magnification is discussions of meeting strangers online. In media reports about youth Internet use and in online safety messages, the word "stranger" is often used as if it were synonymous with "dangerous person."

But children and adolescents meet strangers all the time. Every time they join a traveling soccer league, move to a large high school from a smaller middle school, or go to a block party at a friend's house they meet strangers. There is nothing inherently dangerous about meeting strangers. In fact, widening social circles are a healthy part of development [9, 10] . At the same time, while children are usually encouraged to meet new people and try new things, they are also taught to exercise caution based on specific situations. In fact, research about how children are socialized to distinguish between dangerous and safe situations in the offline environment could inform the development of effective Internet safety guidelines for children and youth.

High quality research can prevent ineffective responses to problems.
When people are alarmed about something, they often feel pressed to act quickly. They may think that the time required for research is an unconscionable delay or that spending money for research is a diversion of scarce resources. In some cases, they move hastily to produce research that is poorly planned and executed and that provides misleading results. High quality research requires careful design and implementation, and poor quality research may lead to time and energy wasted while a problem festers and worsens, also an unconscionable outcome. A lesson can be learned from the field of public health. Even when a crisis is at hand, health authorities know that rushing out medicines before the completion of efficacy and safety trials leads to fatal mistakes.

Solid online safety programs require high quality research that is rigorous, thoughtful, and scientific. This type of research is distinct from advocacy research, which one often sees in the early days of mobilization about a social problem when people are trying to raise awareness about an issue. High quality research takes a dispassionate look at problems and solutions, knowing that this is critical to figuring out what works and how to improve programs. Such research has a number of important hallmarks.

First, high quality research does not overstate findings. In our research at the Crimes against Children Research Center, we ask broad questions because we want to know the full range of experiences that children and adolescents report. But when we ask young people about online sexual incidents or online bullying, for example, while some tell about incidents that are quite serious, a lot of what youth describe is not criminal or even upsetting [3, 4]. Young people are coping well with much of what they encounter. So we need to examine the gradations in online experiences and distinguish the situations that involve criminality or harm from those that do not.

Second, high quality research is careful about how a problem is defined. Cyber-bullying is a good example. We know that bullying is widespread in schools [11, 12]. There is a solid body of research describing the nature and harms of being bullied. But this research does not apply to every situation where a child feels embarrassed or someone is mean. To be bullied is to be repeatedly subjected to acts of aggression, physical or verbal, by another child or teen who is more powerful and intends to cause harm [11]. If we define experiences like cyber-bullying too broadly to encompass situations that most young people handle easily, we may overlook the needs of the relatively small group who are seriously impacted.

"Sexting" is another example of a problem that needs to be carefully defined. There have been media reports about teenagers being prosecuted for taking pictures that constitute child pornography under criminal statutes [13]. But other reports and some initial research include text messaging in definitions of sexting, as well as images that are suggestive, but not explicit [14, 15]. Further, media descriptions of cases suggest that sexting ranges from impulsive actions by youthful romantic partners that are meant to be private to serious crimes that involve extortion and deliberate humiliation [16-19]. If definitions of sexting are too vague or broad, the information gathered about it will not usefully guide efforts to prevent real harm. Episodes where adults use the Internet to induce youth to send sexually explicit images of themselves, or where peers use images to blackmail or humiliate are those that are most likely to cause real harm.

Third, high quality research puts problems in perspective. We need to view the online experiences of youth in perspective to their offline experiences. Bullying and cyber-bullying is one example. Much cyber-bullying is an extension of bullying interactions that occur in the context of face-to-face relationships, especially among school mates [8, 20, 21]. As such, we cannot address cyber-bullying without also addressing offline bullying. But connections such as these may not be apparent until we look for them through research. Other important connections may be awaiting discovery, too, but we have not looked thoroughly enough at what is going on.

Sexual victimization is another area where online and offline situations are related. There has been a great deal of concern about sex offenders using the Internet to find victims. But research has shown that the number of sex offenders doing that is quite low compared to the number who target children and youth face-to-face [22]. Moreover, youth who get victimized online tend to be youth who also get victimized in offline environments also [23-25]. The great majority of sex offenders are people victims know in person – family members; adults they know through their schools, activities, and neighborhoods [1]. Other youth can also be offenders [26-28]. Yes, we want teens to be conscious that some of the people they meet online may have criminal sexual motives, but if we really want to protect youth, we should be teaching them to recognize and avoid sexual victimization in all its aspects. We need to test research models that look at comprehensive approaches to safety in comparison to ones that focus on the Internet alone, because the comprehensive approaches may be more effective.

Another aspect of putting problems in perspective is examining overall statistics and trends. Many people believe, and media have reported, that child sexual abuse is rising because of the impact of the Internet. In fact, rates of child sexual abuse in the US have declined substantially – by about 50% in fact -- since the early 1990s [29-32], at the same time the Internet was starting expand its influence. We see this decline in statistics about cases in state child protective service systems, but also in youth reports to the National Crime Victimization Survey and other similar surveys, and in related indicators [30]. The factors that contribute to increases or decreases in rates of sex crimes are complex, and it is premature to conclude what the influence of the Internet has been. But there has not been any spike in sex crimes that correspond to the spread of the Internet. So we need to be looking at the big picture when we assess the impact of the Internet.

Types of research needed

Two broad sets of research undertakings are needed. One is good epidemiologic research that understands better where dangers lie and who is most vulnerable. The second is good evaluation research that tests which kinds of prevention approach really make a difference.

The epidemiologic studies need to involve large representative samples of youth, examine offline as well as online problems, and put these in the context of the many factors that we already know can create risk for children.

Among other things, these epidemiologic studies need to address whether the Internet increases risk. This cannot be done by looking at online activities alone. We have to look at the totality of harms that children experience, both online and offline. If children who are online more often encounter more online bullying, that does not mean that being online increases bullying exposure. These same youth may experience less offline bullying and less total bullying than other kids. So we need a complete inventory of harms, along with a good assessment of where these episodes are happening, both on- and offline.

Second, in these epidemiologic studies we have to be careful to compare apples to apples. Cyber-bullying is an example. As noted earlier, there is a solid body of research describing the nature and harms of being bullied. And bullying has a very specific definition. Many young people feel embarrassed by or are targets of mean comments that do not meet the criteria of

bullying as described above. These situations are often handled relatively easily by youth, who do not suffer long term bad consequences. We need to be sure that we do not define experiences like cyber-bullying so broadly that they encompass mild difficulties.

In addition, research must also be careful about how concepts are operationalized. Often there is a continuum from mild events to seriously distressing and dangerous events. The more extreme end of the continuum is where the truly toxic events tend to be located. We also need to figure out how to define these extremes: the nature of the acts young people report, whether and often such acts are repeated, a threshold of subjective discomfort – for example, if a youth who reports an incident is afraid to use the Internet, or avoids certain people or places offline.

At the same time, we have to begin to anchor Internet safety research by studying risks that we are confident cause harm. And we can only do this by demonstrating that harm is indeed caused. We do not know whether visiting hate sites spawns violent behavior, or cyber-bullying causes a loss in self-esteem or an increase in depression. We have to link these risk behaviors with solid measures of harm like measures of mental health symptoms, child behavior, criminal acts, and academic performance before we can confidently call them risk behaviors. In the meantime, we need to be careful what we refer to as risky behavior. Is it risky to give out personal information online? Is it risky to meet people in person that you first meet online? These are open questions; the answers have not been established. If we assume these are risky behaviors without evidence, we have implicitly accepted the harm hypothesis.

Further, we need longitudinal research to provide the field with more contextual information about how online behaviors and experiences develop and change for youth over time, and how patterns of online and offline risk influence each other. Longitudinal data have two important advantages over cross-sectional data 1) they help the researcher establish that an exposure temporally precedes an outcome, and 2) they allow the researcher to determine whether the exposure predicts changes in the outcome [33]. Consequently, understanding behavior-risk trajectories with longitudinal data can provide prevention experts with more information about how to interrupt negative or risky patterns of behavior [34, 35]. Such studies are crucial in understanding patterns of behavior and experiences so risk and protective factors can be identified that, in turn, may aid in the development and evaluation of targeted prevention and intervention programs.

We also need research that examines large collections of cases that are representative of everything that is happening online so that the diversity and reality of these episodes can be fully appreciated and incorporated into the design of prevention programs. This includes details about who the offenders are, what youth tend to become victims, where the dangerous locales are online and how they change with advances in technology, and what kinds of activities and actions tend to short-circuit and prevent the dangerous episodes from being completed.

Evaluation studies are needed.
The second broad set of research initiatives we need are studies that evaluate prevention programs themselves. Programs to prevent social problems often capture the excitement of developers and participants. People feel good to be taking some action, banding together to make a difference. Unfortunately, history suggests that many of these efforts end up having little or no effect, in spite of the enthusiasm they generate. This occurs for several reasons. Programs may not reach the individuals whose behavior makes the most difference; effects may be very transient; programs may not really target the behaviors and attitudes that make the most difference. For example, large numbers of programs intended to keep youth away from drugs were developed and widely disseminated and later determined to be of little value [36-39]. A great deal of time and money was wasted.

It is very important that Internet safety education not make these same mistakes. Not only can valuable time and money be wasted, but misinformation can be purveyed and children and

youth serving organizations left feeling cynical about people providing advice about the Internet. The online world is relatively new, and youth attitudes and experiences about that world are still not well appreciated by many adults. So the potential for making mistakes is great. One of the few ways to insure that time and money are well spent is to make sure programs being disseminated are ones that have been shown to be “evidence-based”, that is, have been evaluated and demonstrated to make a difference. Such evaluation studies need to strive for a high level of rigor and relevance.

First, outcomes being measured need to be real indicators of harm and unambiguously problematic behavior. It is not enough to show that youth like a program, or learn the concepts, or say they give out less information or post fewer pictures. The measured outcomes need to show that programs reduce behaviors such the transmission or receipt of hostile communications, or consequences such as sexual victimization or distress.

Second, programs need to be evaluated against alternative programs, since the ultimate choice that policy makers need to make is which program to adopt. It is helpful to know that something is better than nothing, but does not really instruct about what is the preferred approach.

Third, some effort needs to be made to implement true experimental design. This involves assigning programs in true random fashion to make sure that advantages seen are due to the program itself and not other features of the people adopting the program or the youth being exposed to it.

Fourth the evaluations need to be done by independent entities. Too much evaluation is completed exclusively by program developers who have a stake in finding effectiveness.

Fifth, in the evaluations, the prevention information needs to be presented in ways that mirror the reality under which most such information gets transmitted. For example, most schools cannot afford to use class time to educate youth about multiple social problems. Evaluating programs in which Internet safety material is incorporated into other prevention programming or presented alongside it, is most likely to replicate actual teaching circumstances and to provide sound feedback on program implementation.

Conclusion

The field of Internet safety is relatively new and is going through some growing pains. But it is clear that the standard of practice in virtually every domain of education and human service is now becoming “evidence based”. It will be better for the field to integrate this standard into its development at an early age, rather than try to reverse direction and incorporate it later on down the line.

About the Authors

David Finkelhor, Ph.D. is Director of Crimes against Children Research Center, Co-Director of the Family Research Laboratory and Professor of Sociology at the University of New Hampshire. He has been studying the problems of child victimization, child maltreatment and family violence since 1977. He is well known for his conceptual and empirical work on the problem of child sexual abuse, reflected in publications such as Sourcebook on Child Sexual Abuse (Sage, 1986) and Nursery Crimes (Sage, 1988). He has also written about child homicide, missing and abducted children, children exposed to domestic and peer violence and other forms of family violence. In his recent work, he has tried to unify and integrate knowledge about all the diverse forms of child victimization in a field he has termed Developmental Victimology. He is editor and author of 11 books and over 150 journal articles and book chapters. He has received grants from the National Institute of Mental Health, the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect, and the US Department of Justice, and a variety of other sources. In 1994, he was given the Distinguished Child Abuse Professional Award by the American Professional Society on the Abuse

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About this Essay

This essay was written for the Risky Behaviors and Online Safety track of the Youth and Media Policy Working Group Initiative. The Initiative is part of Harvard University’s Berkman Center for Internet and Society. The Initiative is exploring policy issues that fall within three substantive clusters that emerge from youth's information and communications technology (ICT) practices:

- Risky Behaviors and Online Safety
- Privacy, Publicity and Reputation
- Youth Created Content and Information Quality

The Initiative is funded by the MacArthur Foundation and is co-directed by danah boyd, Urs Gasser, and John Palfrey. The goal of the Initiative is to engage practitioners and make policy recommendations that are grounded in and connected to research findings. For more information: http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/research/digitalnatives/policy

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