

A global problem - the web and child abuse



Interpol's child sexual exploitation database currently contains more than half-a-million images of youngsters being abused. Many of these 550,551 images feature prepubescent boys and girls. Every year, thousands of people all around the world seek out this material. Some pay for the photographs and video clips, but a majority engage in trade with like-minded people.

The scale of the problem presents a huge problem for law-enforcement. When police seize personal computers containing this material, they sometimes find thousands of images to be analysed. Images not seen before are forwarded to the international database with a view to identifying and finding the children involved. For example, an image seized in Ireland could contain a vital clue needed to save a child from abuse in Canada. Academic work on the subject is being carried out here by the forensic psychology team in UCC and the criminology institute at UCD.

One of the most influential theories of child sexual abuse was put forward by Prof David Finkelhor of the Crimes against Children Research Centre at the University of New Hampshire's department of sociology. Finkelhor outlined four preconditions he believed must exist before the sexual abuse of a child could take place. The perpetrator must 1) be motivated to sexually abuse a child, 2) overcome internal inhibitions, 3) overcome external inhibitions and, finally, 4) overcome the child's resistance.

Some say Finkelhor's final precondition – overcoming a child's resistance – can be facilitated by the internet when it is used to contact children with a view to grooming them. A potential abuser's chances of "successful" grooming may be enhanced by access to information that children share online. This includes basic information about the type of music or films a child likes.

Interestingly, Finkelhor himself does not readily subscribe to the view that the internet has made the sexual exploitation and abuse of children any easier for potential abusers. "I'm not yet persuaded that the internet is having that kind of negative effect," he said. "We do not think it's clear yet that the internet is facilitating sex crime. There certainly is sex crime on the internet, but overall in the US we have seen a decline in sex crime during the years that the internet has become available."

Tips for parents to protect their children from online predators:

- Install aids such as up-to-date anti-virus software, a firewall and parental control software.
- If possible, put PCs in a common area of the house, so you can see what your child is doing online. Remember that gaming consoles and some mobile phones can now connect to the internet.
- Make yourself and your child aware of the type of material and behaviour that exists. Do not frighten your child into thinking a sex offender is lurking on every virtual corner, but be honest. Empower your children by discussing the issues with them in a calm way.
- Remember that prohibition is rarely a safeguard; instead, communication is key. Speak to your children and listen when they speak to you.

This article appears in the print edition of the Irish Times