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# Real-World Dangers in an Online Reality: A Qualitative Study Examining Online Relationships and Cyber Abuse

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Children and youths use electronic technology such as the Internet more than any other medium through which to communicate and socialize. To understand the phenomenon of cyber abuse from children's and youths' perspectives, the authors examined anonymous posts made by children and youths to a free, 24-hour, national, bilingual phone and Web counseling, referral, and information service. The children and youths were between 11 and 24 years of age (average = 14 years). This analysis of anonymous posts by children and youths provides information about their involvement in online interactions and their experiences with cyber abuse. Findings revealed the regularity and importance of the Internet and communication technology for socialization; the forms, extent, and impact of cyber abuse; and children and youths' fear of disclosing cyber abuse to adults, particularly parents. Implications for parents, social workers, and other practitioners, researchers, and policymakers are discussed.

KEY WORDS: *children; cyber abuse; online interactions; online socialization; youths*

Long before the rise of the Internet generation, media mogul Marshall McLuhan (1964) declared, "the medium is the message." This timeless allocation remains relevant in today's society, in which online technology shapes how humans communicate. Communication technology is growing exponentially with each successive generation as a central fixture within our society. Children and youths use technology such as the Internet more than any other medium through which to communicate and socialize (Kaynay & Yelsma, 2000; Nie & Hillygus, 2002). The rapid increase in use of the Internet and other forms of technology such as instant messaging, e-mail, social networking sites, and Webcams has enabled children and youths to engage in a vast array of experiences beyond the confines of their homes, schools, and local communities. Although most of these online interactions are neutral or positive (Finkelhor, Mitchell, & Wolak, 2000), the accessibility and anonymity of electronic technology may place children and youths at heightened risk for victimization (Ybarra, 2004). Long-standing threats such as abuse have evolved within these new technologies, allowing children and youths to be victimized by people of all ages who are both known and unknown to them and regardless of geographic proximity (Kanani & Regehr, 2003).

The purpose of this article is to increase understanding of children and youths' online interactions and experiences of cyber abuse. We report on an examination of concerns posted by children and youths about online interactions and abuse to Canada's only anonymous national, toll-free, 24-hour, bilingual phone and Web counseling, referral, and information service for children and youths between the ages of 4 and 20 years. There has been a veritable explosion of traffic through the Web site since it was launched in 2004.

The vast majority of time children and youths spend on the Internet is devoted to social communication and interactions, both with their existing networks and with people they meet online (Gross, 2004; Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2003). Gross (2004) surveyed 261 students in grades 7 and 10 and found that, on average, students engaged in 40 minutes of instant messaging per day, which far exceeded the time they spent on any other online activity. Seventy-five percent of a sample comprising youths between 15 and 19 years of age used the Internet to instant message with their friends (Statistics Canada, 2001). Although the majority of youths communicate online with other individuals they already know (Gross, 2004; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007), approximately 14% state that they meet and

develop close relationships with people not previously known to them (Wolak et al., 2003). Evidence suggests that students' use of the Internet to communicate with others whom they already know has an overall positive impact on the quality of their friendships and romantic relationships (Blais, Craig, Pepler, & Connolly, 2008; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007). Little research, however, has examined relationships formed online, including the factors associated with individuals who meet and form these relationships. The sparse evidence suggests that youths who form online relationships with strangers may be vulnerable (Blais et al., 2008; McKenna & Bargh, 1998; Wolak et al., 2003).

"Cyber abuse" is a term that encompasses a wide range of aggressive online activities, including bullying, stalking, sexual solicitation, and pornography. Cyber abuse occurs insidiously via Web-based and other forms of modern technology. Cyber bullying includes the use of e-mail, cell phones, and Internet sites to threaten, harass, embarrass, exclude, or damage reputations and friendships. Cyber stalking, as an extension of physical stalking, involves electronic mediums such as the Internet to pursue, harass, or contact another in an unsolicited fashion. Cyber sexual solicitation is the use of electronic mediums to identify, "groom," and entice individuals to perform sexual acts on or offline. Pornography includes the production and dissemination of graphic sexual content through technology such as the Internet and cell phones. Children and youths can experience cyber abuse anywhere they access the Internet or other modern communication technologies, including home or school—settings believed, rightly or wrongly, to be safe havens.

There is a growing body of research on cyber abuse of children and youths (Beran & Li, 2005; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006; Shariff, 2005). Through use of qualitative methodology to examine the posts of children and youths, we provide here a preliminary sketch of their online relationships and illuminate their experiences of cyber abuse. The posts included questions and reflections of the children and youths. These posts were unsolicited and posted by the children and youths to initiate Web-based communication with counselors. An analysis of these posts fits well with qualitative methods, given that qualitative researchers assume an interconnection between humans and their settings and that an illumination of human experience can occur when

researchers go to the location of the participants (Bogdan & Bilken, 1992).

## **METHOD**

Our research team comprised three members—the authors. In addition, the research team consulted regularly with two key representatives employed in senior positions in the Web-based counseling service that provided the database used in the current analysis.

We used a phenomenological approach (Moran, 2000; Moustakes, 1994) to understand and give meaning to the children and youths' posts. A phenomenological approach allows researchers to increase their understanding of the essence of the lived experience. This method examines individual descriptions of a phenomenon, such as cyber abuse, to derive the meaning of the phenomenon. A phenomenological approach was determined to be most appropriate because of the importance of gaining understanding of the essences of these posts. From March 2004 to September 2005, children and youths posted over 35,000 anonymous messages on the counseling Web site. Posts were stored in an anonymous database. Children and youths posting a message selected a category for their post from predetermined, finite choices that included "bullying," "friendship," "family," "feelings," "violence and abuse," "dating," "school," and "health."

Given the large number of posts contained within the database, it was deemed necessary first to reduce the sample from 35,000 posts to a sample specifically related to cyber relationships and cyber abuse. The research team designed and implemented a systematic process to search the large database for those posts describing experiences involving cyber relationships and cyber abuse. The initial step required an extensive search of all posts made by children and youths to the predefined Web site categories of "violence and abuse" and "bullying." By conducting a full search of these categories, the team discovered posts explicitly related to abuse occurring within cyber-based media. On the basis of children and youths' experiences captured through this strategy, we parceled out key terms related to various forms of cyber abuse. The search terms included full and truncated forms of the following: "chatroom," "bully," "email," "cyber," "MSN," "messaging," "porn," "post," "net," "web," "computer," and "online." The credibility of these search terms was determined through a consultation process with key informants from the Web-based

counseling agency who regularly engage in online dialogues with children and youths. The research team determined that use of computer search functions with these key terms would be the most efficient and precise strategy to search the complete database for additional posts related to cyber abuse and cyber relationships.

In the second phase, computer search functions were used along with key words to identify posts related to cyber relationships and cyber abuse. The team and key agency representatives met regularly to review these posts and determine whether they pertained to our topic areas. To ensure that the phenomena of cyber relationships and cyber abuse were accurately captured, the research team elected to include only those posts that made explicit reference to relationships or abuse occurring within cyber-based media. Through this consultative process, the sample was winnowed from 35,000 to 346 posts.

### **Sample of Posts**

The final sample comprised 346 posts extracted from the 35,000 posts. Through a team consultation process, it was determined that saturation was achieved at 190, because the posts from 190 to 346 were very similar to the first 189 posts. The final sample comprised 269 (77.7%) posts by female participants and 75 (21.7%) by male participants from 6 to 24 years of age ( $M = 14.510$ ,  $SD = 2.292$ ). All but one Canadian province and territory were represented.

### **Data Analysis**

Guided by phenomenological methods of data analysis, we first transferred posts into NVivo 2.0 (Richards, 1999) and applied the methodology of reduction by sifting, sorting, and coding the posts so that themes emerged for all possible meanings (Creswell, 1998). The research team members worked independently while analyzing the data. Thus, each post was read by multiple readers, followed by regular meetings for review and peer debriefing. To ensure that the coded experiences reflected the posts, the researchers “bracketed” their own experiences by setting aside prejudgments (Moustakes, 1994; Ray, 1994). In other words, the researchers made explicit attempts during peer debriefing sessions to consider the essence of the posts without trying to fit the posts into a pre-existing template based on previous research or theoretical frameworks. This consensus-based approach to rigor and credibility ensured that

meanings included only themes that emerged from the posts, and it also provided rich reflections.

## **RESULTS**

Despite apparent awareness of the dangers inherent to the Internet, the children and youths readily developed cyber relationships. Five major categories emerged through analysis of the posts: extent and importance of online interactions and relationships, online dating, awareness of potential online dangers, cyber abuse (bullying, stalking, solicitation, and exposure to online pornography), and not telling parents.

### **Cyber-Real: Extent and Importance of Online Interactions and Relationships**

Overall, the children and youths in this sample selected for anonymously reporting cyber abuse experiences described extensive involvement with online social networks comprising both existing friends and acquaintances and relationships initiated and maintained through the Internet. A prominent finding was that the children and youths strongly considered the relationships developed online to be as real as relationships in their “real” lives. A key finding entailed the children and youths’ strong view of the Internet as a legitimate forum through which to make and maintain both friendships and romantic relationships. They described meeting “all sorts of people on the net” and characterized many of the others in these relationships as “really good friends.” Online friendships were described as “long term,” “trusting,” and as highly meaningful, regardless of the existence of a real-life component. Phrases such as “she is the only person I can trust” and “I haven’t met him irl [in real life] yet but I’ve known him virtually for years” convey the quality of these relationships. A youth revealed the connection typical of the expressed sentiment in stating that her online friends “MEAN SO MUCH TO ME.”

### **Online Dating**

For many of the children and youths, the Internet was an integral component of their romantic and sexual experiences. Many youths as young as 13 years old depicted being involved in intense online sexual and romantic relationships. These encounters ranged from explicit sexual dialogue (referred to as “cybering”) and displaying nudity via Webcams (referred to as “flashing”) to long-term monogamous relationships that either progressed to actual

meetings or remained within a cyber context. The youths expressed their involvement in terms that ranged from a “crush” to “REALLY connecting” to “totally in love.” Many of the children and youths described engaging in “cybering.” Despite often portraying their initial online sexual encounters as “gross,” they described participating in further online sexual encounters, to which they responded with comments such as “w//e [whatever] who cares.” In many instances, the cybersex was reported to be a precursor to real-life sex. One 13-year-old girl wrote, for example, that she “wanted to do online sex first” and declared that she now felt “100% ready 4 sex in the real world.”

Age discrepancies were evident in a minority of these online relationships, with girls as young as 13 describing dating men older than 18. For the most part, the youths involved in online romantic relationships were older than 16 years of age and described dating someone of similar age. It emerged that some preadolescents lied about their age, fearing that revealing their actual age would scare their online sexual partner. One girl said her friends often “lie about there [sic] ages . . . there only 13, they say there 15 or 17 and use fake pics.” When the children and youths revealed their true ages to older men, these men apparently dismissed any concern, “like their young ages do not even matter.” The children and youths who engaged in cybersex with peers typically reported enjoying the “attention.” They depicted the online sexual activities as detached and anonymous, which seemed to embolden them. However, a number of the participants expressed feelings such as being “creeped out” and wondered if this activity was “normal.”

The youths did not consider meeting in real life to be a prerequisite for dating or “getting together.” Nor did they consider distance relevant, as evidenced by the many posts that revealed large geographic distances between people in a relationship, with individuals living in such locales as New York, Malaysia, and New Zealand. Despite the youths acknowledging in many posts that they would “NEVER get a chance to meet” their online boyfriend or girlfriend, many depicted long-term relationships, in some cases lasting upwards of three years. According to the youths, these relationships were sustained through “almost daily” contact through e-mail, Webcam, and in some cases telephone. The youths asserted that the relationships made them feel “special,” and many reported

that the online boyfriend or girlfriend was the “only person that gets” them. Most of the youths described their feelings blossoming “quickly,” “immediately,” or “right away.”

Still, a minority of posts revealed that the youths had strong doubts about the significance and sustainability of these relationships. Some youths questioned issues such as whether “my feelings are real,” whether the relationship is “love or sumfin [sic] else,” and whether this “relationship will ever work.” Doubts about cyber relationships were eloquently expressed by one youth: “he sais [sic] he loves me but I’m not sure, as I said before, it’s only the computer. I’m not sure he tells the truth.” Even with doubts, many youths were reluctant to end the relationships for various reasons, such as fear of being alone. For example, one teenager wrote, “I don’t want 2 let him go because I kinda feel no boy will ever like/love me.”

### **Awareness of Potential Online Dangers**

Determining the authenticity of online partners emerged as integral to “hooking up online.” Most posts revealed that the youths were aware of potential online dangers, such as people creating “fake MSN accounts” and false images, which one youth noted are “as easy as hell to lie about.” Another youth admitted the difficulty trusting online relationships: “I was in love with this guy over the internet for 6 months and we never met . . . i never knew if it was him or not or if he was just fake and physco [sic].” Despite this awareness, most posts revealed the youths’ high levels of trust. For example, a teenager wrote, “it feels like I’ve known him my whole life . . . he’s sumone [sic] special.” Analysis revealed that the trust youths felt for their online romances could be so intense that they quickly shared all of their secrets. This finding contrasts with claims by most of the youths that they were “being safe and haven’t given personal info.”

The youths used a vetting process for online romantic partners that appeared quite narrow in scope. Most vetting involved ensuring that older people did not represent themselves as youths, which was seen as a danger. The youths described older people who misrepresented their ages as “creeps,” “predators,” and “pedophiles.” Most considered Webcam a reliable way of validating someone’s age. One youth stated, “he’s not a fraud i know it for sure cuz I v [sic] talked to him on webcam. He’s not sum [sic] 60 year old pretending to be ‘charming’

lol [laugh out loud].” Other proxy markers used to determine authenticity included online pictures, phone calls, and the individual being known to an existing friend.

### **Cyber Abuse and Its Effects**

The children and youths reported experiencing a great deal of cyber abuse in the following forms: bullying, stalking, sexual solicitation, and exposure to pornography. The detrimental effects of cyber abuse were evident, including feelings of depression, confusion, guilt, and shame as well as self-harm and withdrawal from peers and family. The children and youths described techniques to cope with cyber abuse, such as denying the seriousness of the experience and avoiding the person who abused them. The children and youths rarely mentioned obtaining support from adults such as parents, teachers, and law enforcement personnel.

**Cyber Bullying: Both Real-Life and Online Acquaintances and Friends.** Analysis revealed frequent and common cyber bullying by both real-life acquaintances and friends and those with whom relationships had developed online. For example, one child explained that her friend wrote such insults about her as “stupid, ugly, dorky, and boring.” Another youth described the “hell” he was put through by a group of schoolmates who initiated an e-mail campaign of derogatory chain letters about him.

Cyber bullying among peers often related to sensitive issues such as sexual orientation, physical characteristics, and popularity. Cyber bullying related to sexuality that included such terms as “gay” or “lesbian” was often directed toward boys and girls, whereas insults related to promiscuity, such as “whore” or “slut,” were directed toward girls exclusively. Girls were mostly the targets of insults about weight, which included such terms as “fatass,” “ugly ass pig,” and “whale.” It emerged that both boys and girls were often called “losers.” The children and youths described a common form of rejection that is unique to the Internet, referred to as “blocking.” One post revealed the feelings associated with being blocked: “I get sick of my friends rejecting me. Whenever I’m on msn, I try talking to people and they block me.” In response, the children expressed feeling distraught. For instance, one youth felt “alone, sad, and stressed, with no reason to live.” The affect-laden words of another poster capture the impact of cyber bullying:

i don’t no [sic] if i fully healed from the last incidence [sic]. i can’t take this now. I can’t make it go away. I can’t get the words, the voices out of my head. Those hurtful words keep coming back and killing me every time. I don’t no how much longer i can take it. I’m cracking and i don’t no how many more words will make me shatter into a million pieces. As I’m writing this I’m crying.

**Cyber Stalking.** Children as young as 11 years old, mostly girls, were exposed to cyber stalking. The girls wrote that the “stalkers” would not “stay away” from them online after repeated requests to do so and after repeated attempts to block contact. One girl wrote, “I’ve tried everything to get rid of a guy I know who emails me all the time, but he won’t go . . . HELP!” Analysis revealed that the individuals who stalked the girls could be strangers they met online or could be known to the girls in their real-world settings. Stalking ranged from unwanted, “annoying” e-mails to death threats that were considered credible and terrifying.

Stalking often began through innocuous interactions with people described as seeming “nice” or “friendly” and deteriorated into frightening interactions not necessarily confined to cyberspace. Girls reported that the stalker often “demanded more,” including personal information. Most youths maintained that they “never give out personal information to ANYBODY” and were scared when informed that a stalker had information about them, such as “where i live, my name and what internet service i use” or “that I go to so-and-so school.” Analysis showed that the children and youths inadvertently provided this information through such avenues as user names, personal Web pages, and contributions to social networking sites, which enabled stalkers to acquire desired information. Analysis also indicated that cyber stalkers were adept at siphoning personal information about the children and youths through communications with a child or youth’s online friendship group. For instance, one teenager wrote, “my friend was stupid and gave him my address on msn . . . now I’m scared cause I know about creepy people . . . and this predator knows where I live.”

The stalking was depicted as often culminating with threats of a real-life encounter, although it was unclear whether the stalkers actually possessed personal information. For instance, one youth expressed her terror when recounting the threat

that the stalker was “going to come to my house and kill me,” and another girl wrote that the stalker threatened to “come to my house when my parents are gone.” Fear and vigilance was expressed by a girl who reported being followed “for two days by someone” she feared was her cyber stalker. Others expressed feeling “constantly freaked out” or afraid of being “kidnapped.” Some of the children and youths were so distraught they described engaging in self-harming behaviors.

Few children and youths indicated engaging professional support to deal with the cyber stalking. Most reported that they did not disclose their cyber stalking experiences because of fear of punishment by their parents or fear of reprisal by the stalker. One youth wrote that after she sought help, the stalker threatened, “if you tell on me again I’ll hurt you.” A statement by a 12-year-old girl illustrates the reasons expressed by most of the children and youths for not getting help from their parents:

I was chatting with this friend I met in a christian chat room. He wanted my phone number and address but of corse [sic] I would never give it to him. Well he got MAD and said he traced my ESP number and knows exactly [sic] where I am and I can’t tell anyone because I’m not supposed to be chatting with men on the intrnet [sic].

Posts revealed that the decision to seek parental assistance hinged on whether the child or youth thought the stalker’s threats were credible and “real.” The following question posted by a 17-year-old girl stalked by a 37-year-old man expresses her ambivalence about involving her parents: “should i tell my parents? even tho [sic] I’ll probably get in trouble? Or should i wait and see if he does anything?” It appeared that it was only when they were certain that the threats were serious that the children and youths involved their parents and perhaps authorities such as the police. Even when the children and youths sought help, they were likely to withhold important information when they believed this information might get them into trouble. One youth articulated this dilemma by writing that her mom “knows about the cyber stalker and got very upset . . . i’m scared to tell my mom that he knows where I live.”

**Cyber Solicitation.** It was uncovered that preadolescents and teenagers were solicited to engage in online sexual acts. Female and gay or bisexual male

participants were the most likely targets of older men trying to engage youths in cybering or in flashing. In some cases, the children and youths did not know the men soliciting them. In other instances, they knew the men, some of whom were in positions of power and trust vis-à-vis the child or youth, (teachers, for example). The children and youths said the men used tactics to engage them in online sexual encounters, such as online rewards or even higher grades for failing students. Some were “worn down” by the constant pressure, as evidenced by a girl who wrote, “I had enough of him threatening and asking me so I took my shirt off.”

Several posts revealed incidents of private nudity sent to a boyfriend or girlfriend being reposted without consent and shared throughout social networking sites, which damaged the reputation of the individual who flashed. The youths who did this, typically female, were referred to as “web cam whores.” These girls expressed feeling very remorseful and deeply regretful for having engaged in the activity. Some talked about engaging in self-harm, and others described feeling “unclean” and wrote that they “cried for nights.” They felt “nauseous” knowing that the pictures and words could resurface anytime and be viewed by anyone, thus having an infinite existence. Online predators appeared to readily use prior sexual acts as a means of coercing children and youths to engage in new acts. One girl, for example, expressed regret when describing how, at the age of 13, she sent a topless picture of herself “without thinking” to a guy she met in a chat room. When she later refused to give in to this individual’s threats, he released her picture online to students at her school. This youth described tremendous shame, which made her reluctant to contact the police because she absolutely did not want her “PARENTS TO BE NOTIFIED ABOUT THIS.”

As noted, the online cybersexual encounters between young male or female youths and older men sometimes progressed to actual meetings, at the initiation of the older person. For example, a 14-year-old boy described engaging in sexually explicit dialogue with an older man who, aware of the boy’s age, asked to “hook up” in real life for sex. The children and youths wrote that after the real-life meetings, the older men often used illicit substances such as marijuana or crystal meth to groom the youths for sexual encounters. It seemed that the children and youths who were vulnerable to these situations were those who struggled with

issues such as serious family or school problems, significant emotional problems, or substance use. For instance, one youth reported that she engaged in cybersex because she wanted “someone to listen” to her. A 13-year-old girl, describing her home life as a “hellhole,” indicated that she would meet with an older man for a sexual encounter as a distraction from her troubled home life. Another girl articulated her uneasiness: “chat rooms to emails to meetings to sex . . . OMG [oh my god]!!!!”

The youths who engaged in cybering after being solicited reported feeling confused and ashamed but not “violated.” One child wrote that she did not tell anyone for fear that she would be considered a “slut” or a “whore.” The children and youths were generally afraid to tell their parents, a feeling exemplified in one child’s statement that “my parents will hate me or ground me forever.” Another youth was afraid that “my parents will look at me differently, not in a good way.” The youths’ fear of telling their parents seemed most related to their “shame” and “guilt” and their conviction that their parents would “hate” them. The youths were concerned that if they contacted police or other supports, their parents would be informed. Children and youths were afraid their parents would revoke computer privileges if their cyber abuse experiences were discovered and that they would be isolated and disconnected from peers. To the children and youths, this possible consequence seemed more intolerable than enduring the cyber abuse.

**Exposure to Pornography.** The children and youths portrayed extensive exposure to online pornography. Boys and girls as young as 12 years of age reported regularly accessing online pornography out of curiosity and for sexual gratification. One wrote that it is “sooo easy to access porn,” and several described themselves as “addicted” and “obsessed,” as illustrated by one youth’s proclamation that “AHHHH I CANT STOP LOOKING AT IT.” At times, the children and youths came across child pornography. Some children and youths described being directed, unawares, to a child pornography site, and feeling shocked and “freaked out.”

The children and youths were acutely aware that viewing pornography was illegal and against their parents’ rules. Many feared being caught, yet none indicated having been. The children and youths described a sophisticated ability to “cover” online tracks to prevent parents from discovering evidence of their having accessed pornography. Others were

searching for ways to hide their computer footprints. Many youths questioned the morality of viewing pornography, as illustrated by one youth: “it can be sweet for a moment but it has the potential to fry your conscience.” Another wrote, “I wanna stop masturbating because something inside tells me to stop. I can’t stop looking at porn on the internet.” Another described viewing pornography as “one of the more subtle but dangerous addictions.” Several children and youths described feeling “like a pervert” or a “freak.” Still, some youths seemed to be seeking approval for this activity. Some of the boys seemed confused by what they thought were mixed messages about the propriety of viewing pornography. For instance, one 13-year-old who had been rebuked by his parents for viewing online pornography exclaimed, “To tell the truth, 13 year olds need this to become men, right?????”

The youths were extremely reluctant or unwilling to tell their parents about accessing online pornography, out of “embarrassment” or fear of punishment both by their parents and by the law. Some youths knew of resources that allowed them to remain anonymous, such as [cybertip.ca](http://cybertip.ca). Despite their own feelings of guilt and responsibility, the children and youths expressed the conviction that “innocent” children needed to be protected from exposure to pornography, which they considered to be “abuse.”

### **Not Telling Parents or Other Adults**

Before contacting the anonymous online counseling service, most of the children and youths had not disclosed their experiences of cyber abuse to an adult. Even when they were in deep trouble or frightened, very few reached out to their parents. The youths depicted their parents as giving them Internet safety information and described even “great parents” as becoming “ballistic” upon discovering that their child was involved in online relationships. For example, a youth wrote that her parents “always lectured about internet security and how I should never give out personal information.” She was sure that her parents would “ground me for life if they find out I sent a picture to my online boyfriend.” Parents were unaware of youths’ plans to progress to meeting online boyfriends or girlfriends in real life. By and large, the youths’ posts revealed that they excluded their parents from this process because of their concerns about how their parents would react, specifically that they would block the

contact. Several children and youths characterized their parents as out of touch with contemporary socializing and dating. The children and youths preferred to endure difficulties with online interactions rather than involving parents and risking the loss of Internet access.

## DISCUSSION

This exploration of anonymous posts by children and youths to the Web site of a counseling service provides analysis of their involvement in online interactions and experiences with cyber abuse. Three main findings emerged that capture the essence of the 346 posts to the counseling Web site: (1) the regularity and importance of the Internet and communication technology for socialization; (2) the forms, extent, and impact of cyber abuse; and (3) the fear of disclosing cyber abuse to adults, particularly parents.

Several limitations of this study need to be noted regarding the applicability and transferability of the findings to other children and youths. First, the final sample of 346 posts represents a small percentage of the overall available data (>1%) in the 35,000-post database. The purpose of this study was to capture the essence of the lived experiences of children and youths who made posts about their cyber relationships or experiences of cyber abuse. The findings cannot be generalized and do not indicate prevalence. The final sample represents the experiences of a select group of children and youths who made explicit reference to relationships or abuse occurring in cyberspace. This sample reflects those posts containing key search terms. It is very likely that the list of search terms was not exhaustive. Future studies using the same database may reveal that additional posts exist within the larger database that convey aspects of the phenomena not included in the current study. It is also possible that the children and youths who made these posts, using specific terminology to describe their cyber relationships or experiences of cyber abuse to an anonymous counseling Web site, have had experiences that are quite distinct from those of other children and youths. By drawing our sample from such a large database, however, we have increased confidence that we captured a diverse range of lived experiences, from which we drew understanding of cyber relationships and cyber abuse.

Second, there is no information about how representative the current sample is of children

and youths across Canada who use technology to communicate. Because the children and youths whose posts were analyzed indicated that they rarely involved adults, uncovering the factors that encourage children and youths to reach out in the context of an anonymous counseling Web site would be important. Another limitation is the lack of demographic information, which impedes full understanding of the meaning of the posts. Further research is needed to determine the association of children's cyber relationships and experiences of cyber abuse and seeking help with variables such as age, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and location.

Although this lack of demographic information, because of the anonymous nature of the service, is a limitation, the huge demand for the counseling Web site is supported in the literature. A high percentage of children and youths are increasingly technologically savvy. A survey of students in grades 4 through 11 revealed that 37% own their own computer, and 30% have personal Web sites. Moreover, children and youths with their own computers spend between four and eight hours daily online (Steeves, 2005). According to another study, 80% of U.S. youths use the Internet, half of them on a daily basis (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007). In addition, individuals of all ages, and especially adolescents, are increasingly using the Internet and communication technology for help and advice, a trend that is expected to grow (King, Smith, Reid, & Wegner, 2006; Mallen, Rochlen, & Day, 2005; Wright, 2002). Youths may be more likely to access online help because of the associated accessibility and anonymity (King et al., 2006; Mallen et al., 2005; Nicholas, Oliver, Lee, & O'Brien, 2004).

A prominent finding was that children and youths reported regularly using the Internet for social interactions that were platonic as well as sexual and romantic. The children and youths who posted their concerns and issues were adamant that these relationships were "real." It emerged that the children and youths used communication technology extensively, both to connect with friends and acquaintances from their real lives and to develop new relationships with individuals they met online. Moreover, the findings suggest that the relationships at times moved from online to offline, both with existing friends and with people who had been met online. These findings mirror the literature, which suggests that adolescents form online relationships

with people they meet on the Internet (Wolak et al., 2003) and that they also connect with their existing social networks on the Internet, resulting in an overlap between their online and offline interactions (Blais et al., 2008; Gross, 2004).

The current exploration indicates that younger children and adolescents use the Internet to make contact with individuals they know and to meet strangers who may be their age or considerably older. Inclusion of this younger age group addresses the lack of research on younger children (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007) and is supported in the literature, which points to a rapid rise in the number of younger children socializing through the Internet (Valkenburg, Schouten, & Peter, 2005). The revolution generated by the Internet has created a new world of social communications that enables rapid global contact that transcends traditional boundaries of time and space (Kanani & Regehr, 2003). In this study, the children and youths formed relationships across large distances. Adults must recognize the frequency with which children and youths socialize online and understand the significance and meaning of online relationships.

Female participants submitted significantly more posts. Although boys and girls use online communications approximately equally (Gross, 2004; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007), girls are sexually solicited about twice as often as boys (Finkelhor et al., 2000). Furthermore, girls and young women are generally more likely to seek mental health help than are boys and young men (Rickwood, Deane, Wilson, & Ciarrochi, 2005).

Almost all of the children and youths were aware of online dangers, which had often been relayed to them by their parents. Despite this awareness and their acute fears and doubts about particular online interactions, many of the children and youths gave out information about themselves, often inadvertently, and many engaged in behaviors they themselves considered risky. These findings correspond with the literature. An online survey of 10,800 adolescent girls (Berson, Berson, & Ferron, 2002) found that a high proportion had engaged in risky behavior on the Internet, including filling out online questionnaires, giving out personal information, and sending pictures of themselves to someone they met in cyberspace.

There is a growing emphasis on protecting children and youths from online dangers through education about online risks (Chibnall, Wallace,

Leicht, & Lunghofer, 2006) and strategies to block children's access to unapproved Web sites (Richardson & Resnick, 2002) and filter graphic descriptions and images (Hunter, 2000). Evidence indicates that youths who receive education on Internet safety exhibit more knowledge about safety strategies (Chibnall et al., 2006; Crombie & Trinneer, 2003) and the dangers associated with Internet use (Davidson & Martellozzo, 2005). However, although knowledge has increased as a result of education, there has been little to no change in high-risk online behavior (Chibnall et al., 2006; Crombie & Trinneer, 2003). Consistent with these findings, although many children and youths in the current study were informed of Internet dangers by their parents and were aware of the risks, this knowledge did not appear to translate into altered behavior, and they provided personal information and engaged in risky behaviors. It is important to underscore that the children and youths in this study may represent a distinctive group that may be more prone to engaging in risky behaviors (such as forming intense online relationships) and to experiencing abuse, an issue that should be explored further. Nevertheless, some of the current results are consistent with the literature. For example, the finding that many of the youths did not tell their parents corresponds with evidence in the literature that children and youths often do not report cyber abuse to parents or authorities (Finkelhor et al., 2000; Magid, 1998; O'Connell, Price, & Barrow, 2004).

Findings revealed that the children and youths frequently experienced various forms of cyber abuse, including bullying, stalking, sexual solicitation, and exposure to pornography. The posts graphically described the intense and long-lasting effects of this abuse, which corresponds with the literature. Although there are many benefits that result from electronic-based communication, the Internet also has a dark side. Cyber abuse is growing dramatically, with detrimental short- and long-term effects (Berson et al., 2002; Finkelhor et al., 2000; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006; Shariff, 2005; Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2006). According to a survey conducted by a children's charity in the United Kingdom, about 25% of youths have been bullied via cell phone (National Children's Home and Tesco Mobile, 2002), comparable to the findings of a study conducted by Beran and Li (2005) of grade 7 through 9 students in a Canadian city. Almost 25% of students had been targeted, and 70%

were aware of peers who had been bullied through cell phones. The Youth Internet Safety Survey, a nationally representative telephone survey of 1,500 U.S. youths between 10 and 17 years of age who use the Internet regularly, was first conducted in 2000 and subsequently updated in 2005. Experience of cyber stalking increased, to 9% of youths in 2005 from 6% in 2000. Although fewer youths received unwanted sexual solicitations in 2005 (13%) than in 2000 (19%), the number of youths receiving aggressive sexual solicitations, whereby sexual solicitors made or attempted to make offline contact with youths, remained constant. Thirty-four percent of youths reported being exposed to unwanted online sexual content in 2005, an increase from 25% in 2000 (Finkelhor et al., 2000; Wolak et al., 2006). This increase in exposure to pornography corresponds with the alarming ease and frequency with which children and youths in the current research described accessing online pornography.

Almost all of the children and youths insisted that they could not approach their parents, regardless of the form of cyber abuse (bullying, stalking, sexual solicitation, or exposure to pornography) or its effect. Although the current sample may represent a distinctive and more vulnerable group, this finding corresponds with troubling findings that reports of traditional bullying underestimate the extent of the problem (Hanish & Guerra, 2000) and that cyber abuse is often not reported to parents or other adults (Finkelhor et al., 2000; Magid, 1998; O'Connell et al., 2004). Although some reasons for children and youths' nondisclosure of their cyber abuse parallel those in the traditional bullying literature, such as fear of retaliation and worsening of the abuse or that telling adults will not help (Clarke & Kiselica, 1997; Mishna & Alaggia, 2005), some reasons are unique to the cyber world. The current findings indicate that most of the children and youths expressed fear that their parents would remove their Internet or cell phone privileges. Paradoxically, the persistent message that parents must educate their children about dangers seems to have been successful but may have backfired for these children and youths. The children and youths' knowledge of online risks and dangers appeared to make them more afraid of telling their parents. Many youths wrote that because their parents had informed them of these dangers and of appropriate behavior, they were certain they would be punished. Several youths did

not tell about their abuse because they understood the illegal nature of the behaviors and, despite being victimized, feared they would nonetheless be punished by the law.

## CONCLUSION

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations Children's Fund, 1998) identified adults as responsible for protecting children from all forms of physical and mental violence, injury, or abuse. Clearly, children and youths' regular and intense involvement in the cyber world and the increase of cyber abuse signal an urgent call to action for prevention of abuse and protection of children and youths. Today's young wired generation increasingly relies on the Internet and other forms of communication technology for entertainment, information, personal help and advice, and, most important, social connection. It is critical that adults acknowledge, understand, and accept the Internet and communication technology as a viable and real means of interacting for children and youths. Although most online interactions in which children and youths engage are neutral or positive, the risks must be recognized and addressed. Education and intervention must be targeted to children and adults, in particular parents and teachers. Prevention and intervention programs that inform children of safety and risks are critical but insufficient, because children and youths require help to decrease their risky behaviors. It is essential to develop and evaluate education and prevention or intervention programs to determine their effect in changing children and adolescents' online behaviors. A focus must be on facilitating children and youths' ability to seek help with cyber abuse and express concerns to their parents, teachers, and other authorities. This means, for example, that parents must not automatically respond with such actions as revoking Internet privileges, which to the child or youth may feel like a disconnection from their social world. Rather, parents and other adults must be prepared to listen to the children and youths' accounts of their cyber predicaments and to help them problem solve their situation. Thus, research is needed to identify factors that foster and inhibit disclosure by children and youths to adults of their experiences of cyber abuse. In addition, the factors that make children and youths more vulnerable to experiencing problematic online interactions and abuse must be identified. **SWR**

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