Networking Sites More Benign Than Thought

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Use of social networking Web sites poses no greater risk of sexual solicitation and harassment of children than do other online behaviors, according to the results of an e-mail survey of 1,588 preteens and teens.

"Our findings suggest that online interpersonal victimizations do not seem to occur to any greater degree and, in fact, seem to occur to a lesser degree in social networking sites than other places online where youth communicate with others," wrote Michele L. Ybarra, Ph.D., of Internet Solutions for Kids Inc., Santa Ana, Calif., and Kimberly J. Mitchell, Ph.D., of the Crimes Against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire, Durham (Pediatrics 2008;121:e350-7).

Despite the lack of any objective study on the risk of sexual solicitation or harassment of children or young adolescents on social networking Web sites, legislators have made calls in recent years for laws to restrict minors' access to these sites, according to Dr. Ybarra and Dr. Mitchell.

To determine whether such sites do pose a higher than normal risk for a child's being sexually solicited or harassed, the investigators sent e-mails about the survey to adults with children or adolescents aged 10-15 years who had opted to become members of Harris Poll Online.

A total of 1,588 preteens and teens participated in the online study after an adult finished a brief survey, yielding a response rate of 26%, which is "within the expected range of well-conducted online surveys," the investigators observed.

When the preteens and teens were asked the two activities at which they spent most of their time online, visiting social networking sites was reported as one of the two activities by 17% of the respondents; 47% reported playing games and 23% reported instant messaging as one of the two activities.

In the study, 15% of all subjects reported being targeted by unwanted sexual solicitation within the last year. Having unwanted sexual solicitation was defined as having experienced at least one episode in which someone tried to get them to talk about sex online when they did not want to, asked them to give sexual information about themselves when they did not want to, or asked them to do something sexual when they were online that they did not want to do. But only 4% of all the preteens and teens said they had been targeted in this way on a social networking site specifically.

A total of 34% of the subjects had experienced harassment within the last year in the form of a rude, mean, threatening, or aggressive comment made to them online, or the spreading of false rumors about them online. But again, only 9% of all preteens and teens reported being harassed while on a social networking site specifically.

Some of the online behaviors—such as visiting chat rooms, during which the greatest percentage of respondents reported experiencing either sexual solicitation or harassment—were among the activities in which subjects reported spending the least amount of time online.

Preteens and teens who received unwanted sexual solicitations on social networking sites were significantly more likely to be female than were those who were solicited elsewhere online (80% versus 53%). Victims of harassment on social networking sites were also more likely to be female than were those who had such experiences elsewhere online (66% versus 48%).

The investigators weighted the data (including all percentages) to reflect the U.S. population of adults with children or adolescents in the 10- to 15-year-old age group, and the propensity of the children or teens to be online.

"Time and money spent on proposed legislation and legal action aimed at these sites may have a greater impact if they are focused on other areas of prevention, such as funding for online youth outreach programs, school antibullying programs, and online mental health services," the researchers wrote.

They encouraged physicians to educate parents and children about what behaviors do and do not increase the likehood of interpersonal victimization. In addition, the authors said, physicians should help parents understand that the child's psychosocial profile and general outline behaviors are more likely to influence the likelihood of the child's online victimization than the actual technology. ■