Self-Produced Images – Risk Taking Online (SPIRTO) Project

Aims
The ‘Self-Produced Images – Risk Taking Online’ (SPIRTO) Project aimed to explore the risks associated with adolescent self-produced nude or sexual images (or ‘sexting’). It had two primary objectives:

1. To understand more about the creation of young people’s self-produced sexual images; the context in which the images are uploaded and sent; and any consequences for those involved.
2. To develop training materials for professionals working with young people and parents to provide information; enable further discussion with young people about risk; and examine effective ways of sharing knowledge.

Key Findings

- Analysis of the Child Exploitation Image Database (ICSE-DB) revealed that of the 687 ‘cases’ of UK children identified through Police investigation and submitted to Interpol between 2006 and 2015, there was a year-on-year increase in the number appearing in self-produced sexual images: 44.3% were self-taken, with 34.4% of these generated in the context of a coercive relationship.
- Interviews with 51 young people found that the main motivating factors for producing and sending images were: fun, flirting and meeting new people; exploring sexuality; seeking affirmation; social acceptance; part of a romantic or sexual relationship; and being asked or coerced. Youths commonly described a combination of factors, with images created in a range of contexts.
- Most participants carefully considered whether or not to send a nude image and took steps to mitigate perceived risks (e.g., keeping identifying features hidden or asking a partner to send an image first).
- Experiences were diverse and ranged from online grooming, where children were pressured or coerced to produce images, to the creation and sending of images within the context of a caring relationship.
- Whilst the vast majority of participants reported no consequences of real significance after sending images, most experienced transient feelings of anxiety and embarrassment, along with concerns about whether images would be shared. Longer-term feelings included shame, regret and even despair. Females were more likely to report negative experiences and to feel anxiety and pressure to send images.
- Young people highlighted the need for a calm, non-judgemental reaction from carers and professionals, and a recognition of the wide-ranging contexts and motivations for sexting. They wanted adults to recognise the role and responsibility of recipients, as well as senders, during the sexting process.
- Practitioners and parents/carers taking part in dissemination workshops found that resources developed by the project team had a significant positive impact on their attitudes and knowledge of the subject area.

Policy Context
There is very little documented information regarding how children describe their online experiences in relation to sexual image production. There is nevertheless a need to recognise the complexity of adolescent sexting behaviour in order to distinguish between consensual and non-consensual creation and distribution of sexual images. This will help inform legal, policy and education resources aimed at informing
parents/carers about children’s sexting behaviours and assisting professionals in providing a more consistent, child-focused approach to dealing with the issues.

Methodology

The project involved a mixed method approach over three stages:

(1) Analysis of anonymised archival data relating to identified children of all ages in the Child Exploitation Image Database (ICSE-DB). To quantify the characteristics of those identified; establish changes in patterns of illegal image production; and to examine any changes over time in the numbers of children self-taking images.

(2) Qualitative interviews to explore young people’s experiences of taking and sending images; the contexts in which the images were generated; their decision-making processes; and the consequences that followed. Interviews were conducted with 51 young people aged 12-25 years who, before the age of 18, had sent or posted self-produced nude or nearly nude pictures or films via a mobile or the internet (41 in the UK and 10 in Sweden). The data was qualitatively analysed using Framework Analysis and aided by Dedoose analysis software.

(3) Communication of findings to parents/carers and professionals working with children via the development of four short, animated films, made available in English, Swedish and German. ‘Nude Selfies: What parents and carers need to know’ was based on emergent findings from the interview phase of the project, a literature review and evaluation of existing educational materials. The impact of the films on recipient’s knowledge, skills and attitudes was evaluated during the delivery of 9 workshops across the three participating countries.

Background

Funded by the European Safer Internet Programme as a Knowledge Enhancement Project, SPIRTO involved a partnership with institutions from Sweden, Germany and the UK. Its duration was 30 months (December 2012 – May 2015), and its goal was to build an evidence base about the risks related to the capacity of young people to generate sexual content (or ‘sexting’).

Source

Reports and information about the project is available at: http://www.spirto.health.ed.ac.uk/
For animated films, see: https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLJpo3oC1S14lORIjgchtnyK7GBoW_rVDO

Research Team

Dr Ethel Quayle (PI); Dr Karen Cooper; Ms Katia Hervey (University of Edinburgh, UK).
Prof Carl-Göran Svedin; Dr Linda Jonsson (Linköping University, Sweden).
Ms Julia von Weiler (Innocence in Danger, Germany).
Mr Jonathan Baggaley; Ms Kate Burls (Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP), UK).

Contact information Karen.Cooper@ed.ac.uk

RH#112 has been produced by Karen Cooper for the UKCCIS Evidence Group

www.education.gov.uk/ukccis/