

Prevalence and prevention of unwanted online sexual encounters among youth

Screens, smartphones, and devices are integral to the lives of young people and provide opportunities for positive social connection, learning, and entertainment. However, existing alongside the many rewards of technology are the risks of a new and largely unregulated means of communication. In our meta-analytic study, we assessed two specific online risks: 1) unwanted online exposure to sexually explicit material, and 2) unwanted online sexual solicitations. Online exposure refers to both unwanted and accidental exposure to sexually explicit pictures or videos through pop-up windows, spam e-mails, website links, etc. Solicitation refers to requests for the youth to engage in unwanted sexual activities or sexual talk, or to provide sexual information to a peer or adult.

Compared to adults, youth are less able to foresee online consequences, as they are still developing cognitive and emotional maturity. As such, youth are especially vulnerable to the negative outcomes of online sexual exposures and solicitations. Given the potential for harm, it is important to understand how often sexual exposures and solicitations are occurring among youth. Furthermore, knowing how often young people are encountering these online experiences is necessary to subsequently examining what might put youth at risk, and what the consequences of engaging in unwanted online encounters might be. Thus, the goal of our research was to assess how often online sexual exposure and solicitation occurs among adolescents.

In our study published in *Journal of Adolescent Health*, we conducted several meta-analyses, enabling us to combine the results of different studies to devise overall prevalence rates of unwanted online sexual exposure and solicitation. Specifically, we combined the results of 31 studies (37,649 participants) to assess the prevalence of unwanted online sexual exposure, and combined the results of 9 studies (18,272 participants) to examine the prevalence of unwanted online sexual solicitation. Participants ranged from 12 to 16.5 years old, with an average age of 14 years, and the included studies took place between the years 2004 and 2015. Our results revealed that one in five youth (20%) experience unwanted online exposure to sexual material, and one in nine youth (12%) experience unwanted online solicitation.

Exposure to online sexual material and sexual solicitation are occurring at rates similar to those of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse perpetrated against youth, suggesting that online environments do not necessarily pose greater risk, but are one of a variety of contexts in which youth victimizations may take place. Recommendations to reduce the occurrence of online victimizations require consideration of both the unique context of online interactions, as well as the transferability of skills to other situations where a victimization could happen.

In addition to educating youth about internet safety and the link between unwanted online solicitation and sexual assault, we recommend implementing programs that teach youth about

healthy online and offline relationships. The use of preventive software and monitoring, while helpful, is not always the most effective means of safeguarding youth. Instead, through discussion and communication, parents, educators, and healthcare providers should aim to equip youth with the knowledge and skills to recognize negative online interactions and refuse unwanted solicitations, and to foster supportive environments in which youth feel safe to disclose the occurrence of unwanted online encounters.

Finally, results from our study displayed an encouraging trend; while technology use and internet access has rapidly increased since the early 2000s, we found the prevalence of online sexual exposures and solicitations has decreased over time. Keeping up-to-date on information regarding technology and internet safety, and empowering youth by providing them with accurate and developmentally appropriate information, are steps that can be taken to encourage positive use of technology, and continue to reduce the occurrence of youth victimizations.

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