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Survey Identifies Teen Online Behaviors Associated With Online Interpersonal Victimization

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DURHAM, N.H. -- Teens who talk to strangers online are more likely to become victims of online harassment than those who share their personal information on the Internet, according to researchers at the University of New Hampshire Crimes against Children Research Center. The research is published today in the February issue of *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine*, one of the JAMA/Archives journals.

In addition, engaging in an overall pattern of various online behaviors is more closely linked to online interpersonal victimization than any specific behavior alone.

Online interpersonal victimization is defined as unwanted sexual solicitation or harassment, according to background information in the article. Approximately 9 percent of online youth are targets of harassment and 13 percent are targets of unwanted sexual solicitation each year. These incidents may lead to psychosocial problems such as depression and physical assault by peers.

David Finkelhor, director of the Crimes against Children Research Center, and his UNH colleagues Kimberly Mitchell and Janis Wolak analyzed data from a 2005 telephone survey conducted on 1,497 youth in the United States aged 10 to 17 who had used the Internet at least once a month for the past six months. Participants' average age was 14.2, about half were female and 76.2 percent identified themselves as white. Most came from well-educated households with a high annual income.

The UNH researchers examined the frequency of nine online behaviors believed to increase the odds of online victimization including posting personal information online, sending personal information online, harassing or embarrassing someone, making rude or nasty comments, meeting someone online, having people known only online on their buddy list, talking about sex with someone known only online, purposely visiting an X-rated Web site and downloading images from a file-sharing program.

A total of 1,125 or 75 percent of the respondents engaged in at least one of nine online behaviors. One in four or 28.2 percent of the youth engaged in four or more different types of online behavior in the previous year. Those who engaged in four types of online behaviors were 11 times more likely to report online interpersonal victimization than those reporting none of the online behaviors.

"Most Internet safety advocates suggest discouraging youth from sharing personal information and talking with unknown people online," according to the UNH researchers. However, the study found that talking with people only known online under certain conditions is associated with online interpersonal victimization, but sharing information is not. "Aggressive behavior in

the form of making rude or nasty comments or frequently embarrassing others, meeting people in multiple ways and talking about sex online with unknown people were significantly related to online interpersonal victimization," they said.

"With one in five youth who use the Internet reporting an unwanted interpersonal victimization in one year's time, identifying effective Internet safety messages is an adolescent health issue of great importance," the UNH researchers said. "Pediatricians and other child and adolescent health professionals should help parents assess their children's online behaviors globally in addition to focusing on specific types of behaviors."

The UNH Crimes against Children Research Center (CCRC) works to combat crimes against children by providing high-quality research and statistics to the public, policy makers, law enforcement personnel, and other child welfare practitioners. CCRC is concerned with research about the nature of crimes including child abduction, homicide, rape, assault, and physical and sexual abuse as well as their impact.