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Internet Safety Key to Reducing Online Sexual Solicitation of Youth
Internet Safety Key to Reducing On-line Sexual Solicitation of Youth

UNH researchers author one of the first papers on risk of Internet use for children

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DURHAM, N.H. -- Girls, older teens, troubled youth, frequent Internet users, chat room participants, on-line risk takers and those who communicate on-line with strangers are at greater risk for receiving unwanted sexual solicitation on the Internet, according to an article that appears in the June 20 issue of The Journal of the American Medical Association.

Based on the results of a telephone survey conducted from August 1999 to February 2000 by the Crimes Against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire, the article estimates that 19 percent of youth (ages 10-17) who used the Internet regularly were the targets of unwanted sexual solicitation, but less than 10 percent of the solicitations were reported to the police.

Although youth with these characteristics represent important groups to target for prevention and intervention efforts, the impact of these risk factors should not be overstated. For example, 75 percent of the solicited youth were not troubled, 10 percent did not use chat rooms and 9 percent did not talk to strangers.

"Professionals and parents should be prepared to educate youth about how to respond to on-line sexual solicitation, including encouraging youth to disclose and report such encounters and to talk about them," says Kimberly Mitchell, an assistant research professor in UNH's Crimes Against Children Research Center (CCRC), and co-author of the article. "Internet victimization needs to be added to the list of childhood perils."
The article also reports that while three-quarters of solicited youth were not distressed by the encounter, those who were tended to be younger children or the recipients of more aggressive solicitations involving attempted or actual off-line contact. In addition, distress was higher when the solicitation occurred on a computer at someone else's home.

According to co-author David Finkelhor, "We'd like to see everyone more knowledgeable about how to react to these episodes. The Internet could use its own Neighborhood Watch program, with people reporting offensive behavior as a way to make the Web a less threatening place for everyone."

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