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Cause & effect

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Does possession of child pornography lead to child abuse? And could young people become child sex abusers if they view it themselves, asks Sarah Wellard.

One of the nastiest sides to the revolution in information technology is the massive increase in the availability of hard-core pornography, including child pornography. There are estimated to be one million pornographic images of children on the internet, many of them featuring children from third world countries being abused

by affluent sex tourists from the west.

Aside from the appalling suffering of the children featured, child protection campaigners and experts on sex offending believe that the increased use in child pornography is likely to be associated with a general rise in the prevalence of child sexual abuse. Research from the US points to a very strong link between people using child pornography and active involvement with child abuse.

One study carried out by the US Postal Inspections Service found that in 36 per cent of cases of possession of pornographic material featuring children, the individuals were also involved in actual abuse. Separate figures from the US Customs service reported 80 per cent of people in possession were also abusing.

So is the internet creating a new kind of sex offender, or is it just another medium that paedophiles are using? Ray Wyre, an expert on sex offenders, believes that the figures from the US offer little guidance as to how many of those using child porn accessed through the net are likely to become active abusers. He says: "There's a big debate about how many people who watch it would do it. We have no knowledge of the numbers who use it and go on to abuse children. All we know is that there are three groups." The first is people who see it out of curiosity, are turned off by it and never do it again. Then there are those who use it for fantasy and masturbation and seek more. The third group, says Wyre, consists of people who see it and want to act out their fantasies.

Wyre says the big change in his work is that he is now being asked to assess professionals and carers where pornography has been an issue. Clients include doctors, teachers and foster carers. He says: "People sometimes give the impression that they have accessed material out of curiosity or stupidity. But even to access it is to support and maintain an abuse industry. There's no consistency around the country in responding to it. We haven't even decided whether children should automatically be examined." In one case, Wyre is assessing a trainee priest who is married with children. His wife

spotted pornographic pictures on his computer and reported him to the police, and 3,400 images were found. Among them were four pornographic images of children.

Possession of child pornography is a criminal offence. The only statutory defence for people caught downloading it is if they were using it for training purposes.

Rob Hutchinson, spokesperson on children and families for the Association of Directors of Social Services, is clear that any social worker caught in possession of obscene material would face disciplinary action, and probably dismissal: "Every social services director would take the same view. Anyone using this kind of material for gratification shouldn't be in the job."

A major concern for child protection professionals is the potential for child abusers to use the internet to access children. As any parent of a young teenager knows, spending time on the net chatting and making friends is fast becoming a cool thing to do. So far in the UK there have been just a couple of high-profile cases of young girls being groomed by paedophiles posing as teenage boys in internet chat rooms, and then persuading them to meet. Last year, Patrick Green, a clerk from Buckinghamshire, was jailed for five years for having sex with a 13-year-old girl he contacted via a chat room. But if the experience of the US is reflected here, the problem is likely to grow rapidly.

Caroline Abrahams, director of public policy at children's charity NCH, says: "Quite a lot of young people using chat rooms have had disturbing experiences. One guy was sending a teenage girl pictures of himself masturbating. Is that a criminal offence? We've been taken by surprise. It's happening so fast that our systems and training haven't caught up."

Another disturbing aspect of the increased availability of pornography over the net is the potential harm to young people who access it. A few years ago, the average testosterone-charged 14-year-old may have had his first initiations into adult sexuality by passing around a porn magazine with his friends. But the internet has completely changed that. With a modicum of technological know-how, young people are now able to view all kinds of hard core pornography.

One of the known consequences of using pornography is that it desensitises people. Paedophiles often know this instinctively, which is why they use it for grooming potential victims, as part of their ploy to persuade them that their abusive activities are normal. So one likely impact of the increased availability of pornography is that there will be an increase in sexual abuse, including by young people themselves. And this is already a serious problem in the UK. A major study into the prevalence of child abuse found that one in 10 young adults, mostly female, had been forced or threatened into sex against their will by someone known to them while they were under the age of 16.

Abrahams is worried about the impact of this new dynamic on how young people think and behave. She says: "We know pornography is one of the things young people want to look for. We don't know what the consequences will be, but there is a young abuser issue here."

Child protection and law enforcement agencies are just beginning to get to

grips with the implications of the new technology. One initiative, led by NCH and the NSPCC, together with the ADSS, police and probation, is to establish a training programme for all staff working with children. John Carr, internet adviser to NCH explains. "The first element of the training is about awareness raising. Social workers and the police need to understand the way in which the internet is influencing the pattern of offending. It is very hard for professionals to provide a proper service if they don't understand the technology clients are using."

Hutchinson agrees that it is vital that social workers improve their understanding of how technological advances place children at risk. He says: "We don't know enough about the way in which the internet is being accessed by abusers. It is a new area. We all need to learn more and to understand the clues about what is happening."

Part of the fall-out of the "Wonderland" case (In Focus, 22 February), involving a ring of 180 paedophiles operating across Europe, Australia and North America, and possessing 750,000 pornographic images of children, is that people are demanding better regulation of the internet. Blair and Bush even talked about it at their recent summit in February.

Five years ago internet service providers (ISPs) were threatened with prosecution for hosting illegal material including child pornography. In response the providers set up the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) and established a hot line for people to report illegal material. Roger Darlington, chairperson of IWF explains: "As a general rule, ISPs take the view that the volume of web pages, news groups and chat rooms is such that they can't know what's on them and be responsible for it. But if they are advised by someone like IWF that they are hosting something that is illegal they have a responsibility to remove it or they become legally liable."

Since 1996, ISPs have removed 20,000 pornographic images of children from the internet. But with an estimated 200 more being posted every day, many of them through news groups (online forums for people to discuss shared interests), it is clear that the providers are only touching the tip of the iceberg. At the moment the ISPs are considering whether they should stop hosting groups that have been found to have carried child pornography.

Darlington says: "The majority of the content is legal, however offensive. It's not an easy decision for providers to decide which groups not to host."

But Carr believes that providers could do a great deal more to make the internet safer for users, especially children. One way would be to set up moderated chat rooms, effectively meaning someone would be keeping watch on what was happening. Another proposal is "walled gardens" screening out unsuitable material. He questions the ease with which anyone can fake their identity when using the net, making it harder for people accessing or posting illegal material to be traced. After all, when you open a bank account these days, anti-money laundering legislation requires you to jump through various hoops to prove your ID. Couldn't something similar be done for the internet?

Carr says: "In the US the problem is on an upward curve. There may be as many as 2,000 convictions a year for online offences against children. The British public just wouldn't put up with that level of offending."

1 Cawson et al, *Child Maltreatment in the United Kingdom*, NSPCC, 2000

If you agree or disagree with any of the points Ray Wyre has made please write to him at comcare.expert@rbi.co.uk before 22 March. His responses to your questions will be posted on the site on 26 March