

News Media Framing of Online Child Exploitation: Implications for Educational Prevention Efforts

Problem:

Literature has indicated that news media coverage of online child exploitation (OCE) is a common source of awareness and information for the public. This may influence public perceptions and thereby have consequences for educational prevention efforts.




Aims:

The aims were to understand how Australian media conceptualises and portrays grooming, sextortion, and capping, and to consider the potential implications for educational prevention strategies.




Methodology:

This study thematically analysed 315 news articles from 60 Australian media outlets published between 2009 and 2023 that substantially covered online child grooming, sextortion, and/or capping.

Key Findings:

	OCE was often constructed as an inherent danger of the online world. The online world was one-sidedly portrayed as something negative, without acknowledging potential positives.
	OCE was largely depicted as an issue where the onus falls on parents to protect their child , foregrounding two strategies: open parent-child communication and restrictive regulation of a child's online activity (e.g., intense supervision, privacy controls).
	The idea of 'stranger danger' was more prevalent compared to offenders being known to children . Offenders were either directly referred to as strangers or alluded to as such by highlighting that they were organised criminals or posing as someone else.

Implications & Recommendations:

	The negative portrayal of the online world inadequately captures young people's perspectives and experiences of the Internet as an avenue for social, romantic, and sexual development. Advancing a more balanced illustration of their online experiences and perspectives in OCE prevention education, especially when addressing adolescents, may be beneficial.
	There is a failure to recognise that restrictive parental involvement may be ineffective (as children can bypass such measures), and counter-productive in developing open communication. Education should consider focusing on supervising children's online activity in a way that encourages safe autonomy and supports parent-child communication.
	The stranger danger stereotype fails to reflect the longstanding evidence that child sexual abuse offenders are typically known to the child or that the child may not consider the offender a stranger if they have built rapport. As this can hinder recognising and reporting OCE offences, deconstructing this stereotype and emphasising the identification of manipulative behaviours may be more effective.

