



SCHOOL
OF MEDICINE
DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHIATRY
& BEHAVIORAL SCIENCES

Clicks, Connections, and Caution: Protecting Young People from Online Exploitation and Harm

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About Us



Objectives



Summarize the existing literature on the unique vulnerabilities for individuals with developmental differences to be involved in problematic online behavior.



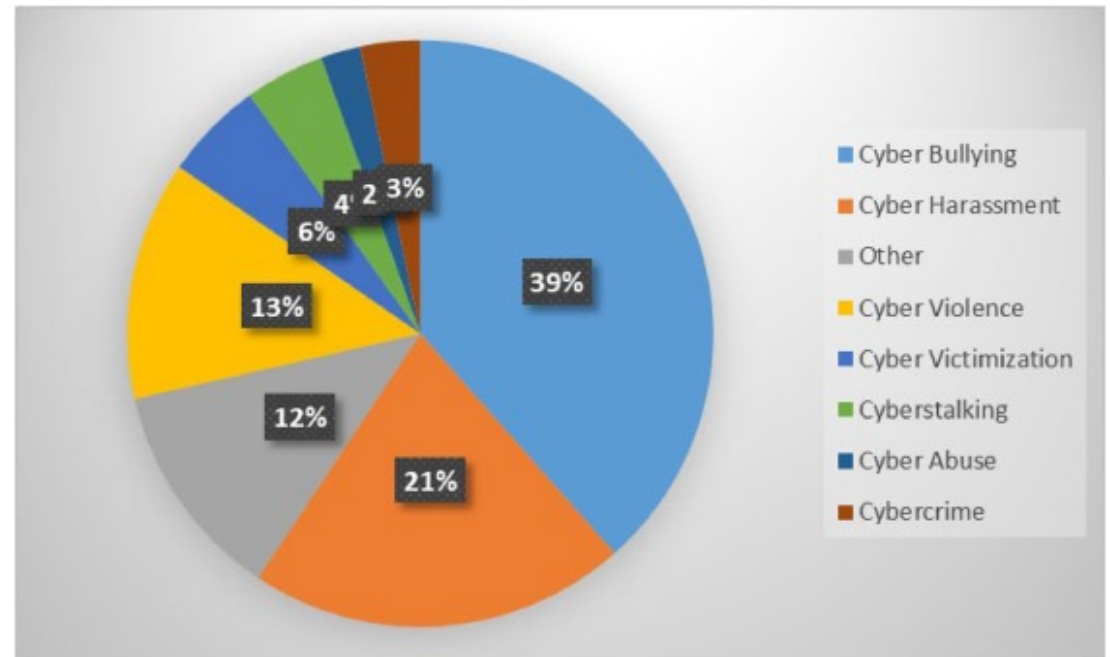
Identify one individual and one global risk factor for engaging in problematic online behavior.



Describe one means of intervention or redirection when individuals engage in problematic online behavior.

Introduction: Cyber-violence

- Cyber-violence refers to the use of technology (particularly the Internet and mobile devices) to harm, threaten, exploit, or harass individuals or groups.
- Cyber-violence posing a new and increasing type of safety risk



Overview

- Individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and developmental disability are at an increased risk for not only being victimized by but also engaging in problematic online behavior
- Neurodevelopmental differences understood as 'contextual'
- ASD and ASD symptoms are not a risk factor but help us contextualize risk and protective factors



Existing Literature


Sparse and fragmented

Spans several bodies of literature (clinical and forensic psych, terrorism, political science, cyber security)

Usually based on case studies and what is on open-source data



Prevalence?



Engagement in problematic online behaviors

Risk Factors



Social and relationship difficulties

Difficulties in social communication and difficulties understanding perspectives

- can increase social anxiety,
- contribute to difficulties forming relationships > can lead to social rejection, adversity, isolations

Struggle with in-person socialization

- may retreat to online means of communication,
- where there may be fewer communication challenges and
- more opportunities to find a sense of belonging and purpose.

Once on internet > more likely to interact with problematic content

Inceldom

- Offenders in this group are characterized by difficulties in forming romantic and sexual relationships and subsequent frustration, blaming women for their lack of romantic success which in some cases results in violence Subgroup that attributes their inceldom to ASD and

In a study of those participating in incel forums, participants indicated that they felt less lonely a sense of belonging, and more understood

Some research suggests that those with ASD who have a low mate value (men who doubt their appeal to women) + ACEs follow a distinct pathway to vulnerability

Not necessarily that these with ASD are more susceptible to engage in incel community, the path to get there may be more distinct

Cognitive Style

Hyper-fixation, obsession,
and circumscribed
interests

- These traits can dictate how they engage with certain material- if introduced to such material, more likely to obsess over it

ASD can heighten the need
for routine, predictability
and make susceptible to
theories that purport to
restore natural order

- Inceldom
- Difficulties associated with autism may increase vulnerability to being drawn into the “rule-based” incel ideology and increase risk of radicalization’

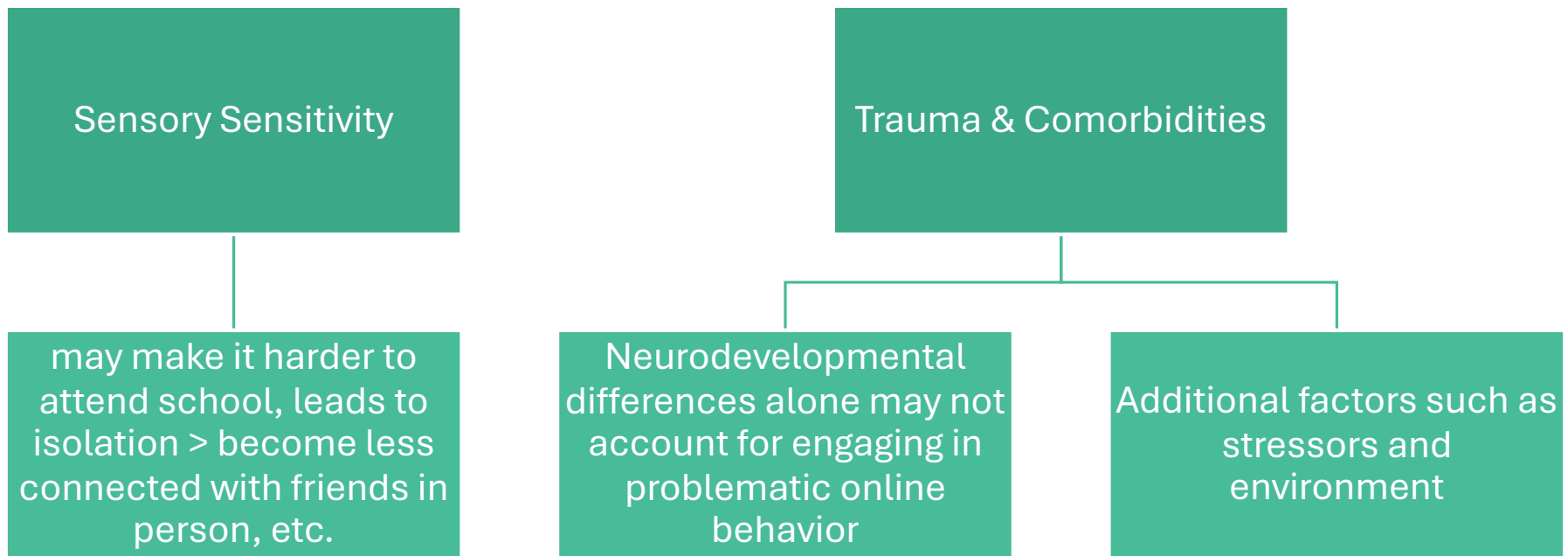


Online spaces can function like accelerants:

identity +
belonging +
script learning +
reinforcement.


It can increase
rigidity and
rehearsal

Indirect Influences



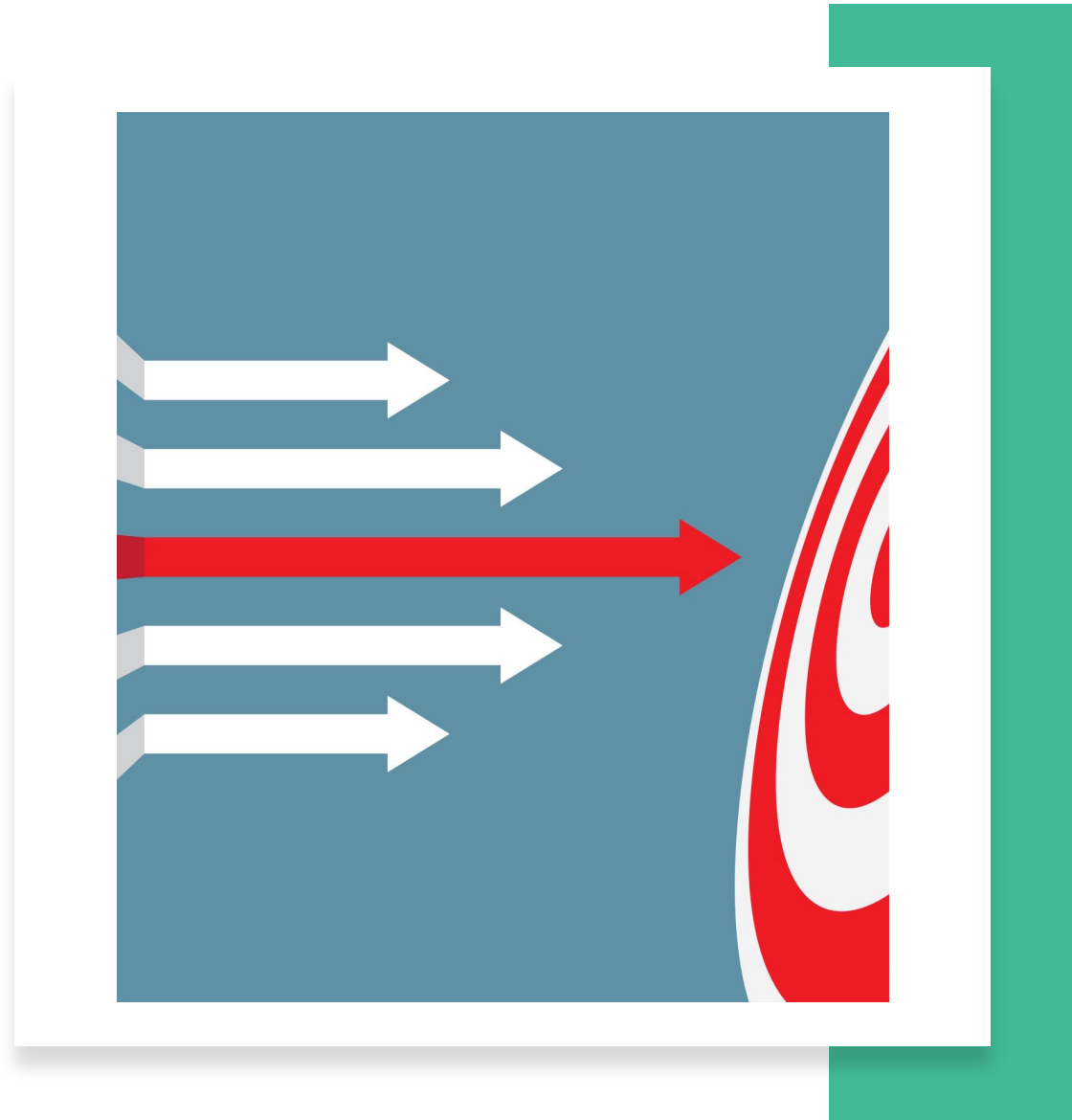


SHAME

- 
- Often pathway to violence hinges on this.
 - Converts distress into meaning. It increases the need for explanation and grievance is powerful explanation



Risk Factors for Being Targeted/ Victimized



Factors

Trust & Social Naivete

more trusting of strangers, less able to pick up on facial expressions that can be used to decipher trustworthiness .

Involvement of Parents

the longer individuals are left unsupervised online, the increased likelihood for contact with problematic communications or individuals

Social Isolation

more likely to seek out connections online, those without close relationships don't have someone to confide in about their experiences or have the buffer of a relationship

- 80 % used social networking sites, with 'forming social connections' as most common reason
- Offenders/bad actors seek out vulnerable/lonely youth

Other Mental health problems

Compound vulnerability. Depression increases loneliness. Anxiety leads to seeks out social interactions in lower stakes social settings

764

loosely connected, transnational set of online groups that engage in sextortion and the glorification of violence.

splinter groups and offshoots, coerces minor victims into producing Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM), acts of animal cruelty, self-harm, or violence.

Specifically seek out individuals suffering from mental health disorders

Collate lists of users on X whose biographies feature hashtags or other descriptors that identify them as suffering from mental disorders.



Indicators of abuse

- Sudden, uncharacteristic changes in behaviour, appearance, or routine
- Sudden changes in sleeping or eating habits
- Sudden abandonment of previous social circles and friend groups
- Receipt of anonymous gifts (physical or digital)
- Sudden shifts in appearance or habits surrounding clothing (i.e. wearing long sleeves in hot weather)
- Scarring on the thighs or forearms, especially if the scars form a pattern
- Unexplained injuries, including cuts, scratches, bruises, or burns
- Scars or carvings which appear to form a word or symbol (cutsigns)
- Family pets or other animals being harmed or dying under suspicious circumstances
- Pets or other animals being uncharacteristically avoidant or fearful of a child

Tips to Keep Youth Safe

1

Monitor your child's online activities, especially with whom they may be communicating and make use of parental controls.

2

Exercise discretion when posting personal information, videos, and photos online, especially content that includes information about your children which could be exploited.

3

Exercise caution when accepting friend requests, engaging in video calls, and sending images to individuals you do not know personally.

4

Talk to your children about the risks of sharing personal information, images, and videos online.

Interventions

Should be individualized and case specific.

Focus on community-based interventions

Foster Caregiver involvement

Not over pathologizing behavior

Diversion to healthy/prosocial behavior online

Consider adding bullying screening tools at school etc

Help to develop stable, predictable lifestyle with structure, rules and Routines

Rehearse prosocial skills that facilitate the management of future risk situations

Treatment Considerations

Reducing influence of external stressors

Therapies to address difficulties around anxiety, emotional difficulties, and low self-esteem, such as CBT and stress and anger management

Leveraging and strengthening those stabilizing factors

Focusing on the individual's sense of self-worth, autonomy, pride, and identity.

Inappropriate treatments that are perceived as judgmental or not tailored to ASD may exacerbate risk of forming a grievance

THANK
YOU!

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