Cyber Bullying, Online Risks and Parental Mediation: A Comparison between Adolescent Reports and Parent Perceptions in South Africa

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Abstract : Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have altered our social environments, and young people in particular have immersed themselves in the digital age. Despite countless benefits, younger ICT users are being exposed to various online risks such as contact with strangers, viewing of risky content, sending or receiving sexually themed images or comments (i.e. 'sexting') as well as cyber bullying. Parents may not be fully aware of the online spaces their children inhabit and often struggle to implement effective mediation strategies. This quantitative study explored (i) three types of online risks (contact risks, content risks and conduct risks), (ii) cyber bullying victimization and perpetration, and (iii) parental mediation among a sample of 689 South African adolescents aged between 12-17 years. Survey data was also collected for 227 of their parents relating to their perceptions of their child's online experiences. A comparison between adolescent behaviors and parental perceptions was examined on the three variables in the study. Findings reveal various online risk taking behaviors. In terms of contact risks, 56% of adolescents reported having contact with at least one online stranger, with many meeting these strangers in person. Content risks included exposure to harmful information such as websites promoting extreme diets or self-harm as well as inappropriate content: 84% of adolescents had seen violent content and 75% had seen sexual content online. Almost 60% of adolescents engaged in conduct risks such as sexting. Eight online victimization behaviors were examined in the study and 79% of adolescents had at least one of these negative experiences, with a third (34%) defining this experience as cyber bullying. A strong connection between victimization and perpetration was found, with 63% of adolescents being both a victim and perpetrator. Very little parental mediation of ICT use was reported. Inferential statistics revealed that parents consistently underestimated their child's online risk taking behaviors as well as their cyber bullying victimization and perpetration. Parents also overestimated mediation strategies in the home. The generational gap in the knowledge and use of ICTs is a barrier to effective parental mediation and online safety, since many negative online experiences by adolescents go undetected and can continue for extended periods of time thereby exacerbating the potential psychological and emotional distress. The study highlights the importance of including parents in online safety efforts.

Keywords : cyber bullying, online risk behaviors, parental mediation, South Africa