Policy Intervention; Online Grooming

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There are an estimated 500,000 child predators active online each day that seek out

children to engage in illegal sexual activities online or in person (Kraut, 2019). Online grooming

is defined as offenders seeking out vulnerable children online to manipulate into having sexual

relationships with them by building trust and a relationship. With online grooming, the trust

building process is much quicker, and these offenders can groom more than one victim at a time.

There is less stress with other adults around the offender becoming suspicious of the closeness

between them and the child victim as well, and it is much harder to catch a predator online than

in person (Kraut, 2019).

Children who experience online grooming may have issues in trusting adults and the

people around them and may engage in dangerous activities such as drug use or early sexual

activity. The result of online grooming on the child's psychological state usually results in

embarrassment, loss of interest in hobbies, anxiety and depression, being unable to stop thinking

about it, and repetitive harmful behavior such as self harm. These children may experience

trauma responses for the rest of their lives, and might develop issues in relationships and love.

While there are groups of people who are more vulnerable to online grooming than others, such

as adolescent girls who experience self-esteem issues, any children with access to the internet are

susceptible to online grooming, and it is important to take all of this into account when deciding

how to approach the issue using policy interventions.

One policy intervention that could be used to help prevention strategies for online

grooming is a Parent-focused Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Program. "Although prevention

efforts targeting adults in the community and school-aged children have been somewhat

successful, there is a clear gap in the current prevention efforts: parents" (Guastaferro, 2017).

Parent-education programs have been shown to effectively reduce the rates of physical abuse and

neglect, but no such programs have yet been developed for targeting risk factors for CSA and

grooming specifically (Guastaferro, 2017). Educating parents on how grooming begins and how

children act when they are being groomed online not only helps parents identify the behavior in

their own children, but also in their child's friends and the children in their community. This

education would include how children act when they are being groomed and how an online

predator begins the trust building process and what exactly to look out for when a child makes a

friend online and which websites the child is accessing. Websites such as chatting rooms and

social media are notoriously used by child predators (Winters, 2016). The parent, with the

knowledge of how, when, and why grooming takes place, can directly prevent further harm to the

child. They can also educate their own children on how to know when something 'bad' is

happening online and when to tell an adult. Adding this into already existing parent-education

programs not only saves money, as no entirely new program needs to be developed, but it also

gives the parents knowledge of the harms and dangers of the internet so that they can help their

child stay safe online and avoid child predators. Since the parent-education programs already

exist, adding a new one would be easy as well, and wouldn't require too much work besides

creating the education program with evidence-based practice. The political feasibility of this

policy is also relatively high, as there are already parental-education programs in place,

expanding the curriculum to CSA and grooming education is not controversial, and is relatively

easy to back without constituents or other politicians opposing this policy.

Another policy intervention for online grooming is the new tool developed to tackle online child grooming. "Engineers from tech firms, including Microsoft, Facebook, Google, Snap and Twitter, worked for 2 days at a "hackathon" in the United States co-hosted by the Home Secretary and Microsoft, which tasked industry experts to come up with tools to identify online child grooming" (Education Journal, 2018). The result of this hackathon was a prototype tool that can be used to automatically flag conversations taking place between child groomers and children by analyzing thousands of conversation patterns used by predators online when grooming children (Education Journal, 2018). This technology is still in the works and is only a prototype, but progress in detecting online predators has been made. Companies are still working on developing and perfecting this technology (Office, 2018). Having this tech implemented onto websites, forums, and social media could, if done correctly, largely help children who are being targeted for online grooming and prevent further harm to these children. According to Home Secretary Sajid Javid, "Once complete, it will be rolled out for free to other tech companies that want to deploy it" (Office, 2018). So not only will this program target many websites for online groomers, but it will be completely free to deploy. However, this technology is not yet finished, and there could be many issues with it in the future. Typically, technology relying on analyzing existing conversations may never be perfect, and may skip over many online grooming conversations since it is impossible to have the program flag every single possible interaction between people. There could also be the issue of incorrect flagging, as well as predators using VPNs, which hides their location and IP address from everyone. There is also a problem with political feasibility, as some politicians may oppose further online security programs in fear that it may restrict free internet usage and may incorrectly flag conversations, which might harm

innocent people. So while it may be the free option, there are many issues with it as of now and it may not work as intended even when the technology is complete.

Implementing the Parent-focused Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Program would be the best option between the two in relevance of values, effectiveness, political feasibility, and ease of implementation. Adding CSA and grooming to already existing parent-education programs would help the parents identify when their child, or any child they know, is experiencing online grooming and possible CSA as a result of online grooming. These programs would educate parents on how a child behaves when grooming is taking place, what websites to look out for as red flags, how to educate their child on when to tell an adult about online experiences, and what steps offenders take when grooming a child such as trust building. Also, educating the parents on the statistics of what population experiences grooming more frequently, which is young girls with self-esteem issues or who experience loneliness, can help the parents look out for their children more closely who fit that description. This curriculum should be created by a team of social workers, therapists, online experts, parents, and child educators to create the best possible education system to implement in parent-education programs. Furthermore, information on what to do when your child is or has experienced online grooming should be added, so the program not only covers prevention but intervention as well.

Seeking support for this policy proposal may be done by contacting legislators who support grooming legislation, CSA and child trauma centers and alreading existing parent-education program workers. This can be done by emailing, calling, or meeting with these people in person to discuss the policy proposal and need for support.

It is also important to contact stakeholders for support as well, which should be done through a presentation. This presentation should include how harmful online grooming is to children, and how often it happens to children in the US as well as all of the facts listed above on how this education program would help prevent child grooming and aid in intervention for these children and parents. The fact that this will save the USA money in the long run should be mentioned, as the prevention of child grooming through parent education results in less children needing services related to CSA and grooming and more healthy, functioning adults of the future generations. The presentation should be done with facts and figures to support anything said and should emphasize the fact that this education program will be added onto existing programs, and not much work needs to be done besides formulating the curriculum with people educated on the subject, such as social workers and child educators.

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