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The “*Glaring Gap*”: practitioner experiences of integrating the digital lives of vulnerable young people into practice in England

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Abstract

As young people rely increasingly on the internet to learn and socialise, the support they require becomes more complex. Some young people are more vulnerable online than others, such as young people in care or with Special Educational Needs. There is evidence that professionals working with vulnerable young people are ill-equipped to enhance children's safety online and support them through recovery if required. This research aims to explore the understanding, experience and processes among a range of senior children's services professionals and external specialists in England; identify the challenges faced in practice; and highlight recommendations for improvement. Twenty-nine participants, seven males and 22 females, were interviewed using semi-structured interviews. Transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis. Findings suggested that participants have limited and fragmented awareness of young people's risk and vulnerability online. Digital Life was not found to be fully integrated into practice. The focus was on identifying risk and less on understanding motivation or supporting recovery. Participants lacked up-to-date and specialised training, as well as assessment tools integrating digital lives, resulting in poor cross-agency working. Recommendations for practice and policy are discussed.

**Key Words: Online/Digital Risk, Online Safety, Vulnerability, Young People,
Children's Services Practitioners/Professionals**

Introduction

As digital media assume an even greater significance in the lives of young people (Livingstone et al., 2017), to fulfil a range of functions, from entertainment and socialising, to education and even remote therapy during COVID-19, professionals face supporting young people with increasingly complex digital lives. The internet can deliver both positive and negative effects to users. They can experience increased social wellbeing (Perrin, 2015) or regard the internet as essential to access services and stay connected after being in care (McGhee & Roesch-Marsh, 2020). However, users may also experience poor emotional and social wellbeing (Keles et al., 2020) or become compulsively dependent (El-Asam et al., 2019).

Europe-wide research into children and young people's behaviour online highlights pertinent online risks including pornography, bullying, sexting, offline meetings with online contacts, harmful user-generated sites and personal data misuse (Livingstone et al., 2011b). Trends identified in 2019 expanded rapidly in 2020 such as seeking or valuing attention, body image pressures, following influencers, in-game loot boxes, gamification and live streaming (OfCom, 2020). Online risks result in children and young people navigating control, permanence, blackmail, victimisation and revictimization, and self-blame (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2017). The harmful aspects of the digital environment do not remain constant, suggesting that professional training should be regularly updated. Annual statistics from OfCom (2019) showed that hateful online content was increasing: around 50% of children (12-15 years) had witnessed online hate around disability, religion, sexuality or gender identity. This was a significant increase from 34% reported in 2016.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, there is evidence that young people are at increased risk of harm online (UNICEF, 2020) and incidents of online child abuse rose markedly (Europol, 2020; Internet Watch Foundation, 2020). However, not all children are affected in the same way. El-Asam and Katz (2018) found that belonging to a vulnerable group (young carers, looked after children, those with communication difficulties, young people with Special Educational Needs (SEN) or mental or emotional difficulties) was associated with increased risk of encountering online risks. Research has shown that harmful online content including pro-anorexia, pro-suicide or self-harm material was increasingly shared in 2019 among already vulnerable 11-17 year olds (Katz & El-Asam, 2020a). This suggests that young people belonging to vulnerable groups are currently not adequately shielded from online harm, which in turn limits their access to the benefits they might derive from technology such as connectedness, being equal online if disabled and the ability to 'escape my issues' (Katz & El-

Asam, 2020b). This is in line with the social compensation theory which assumes that lonely, isolated and introverted children are more likely to turn to the internet to compensate for their lack of personal offline relationships (Sheldon, 2008). The internet (and today, phones and other devices) removes the visual/auditory cues of face-to-face communication and in turn, reduces social anxiety and facilitates confidence in engaging in online communication (Gross, 2002). This article adopts the view that disadvantaged/vulnerable young people (e.g. in care, with special educational needs, physical disability or poor emotional health) are more likely to experience loneliness, and hence use online spaces to compensate for their lack of connectedness. Previous research (e.g. El-Asam & Katz, 2018, Livingstone & Helsper, 2007) clearly showed that vulnerable children and those who are dissatisfied with their offline lives are more likely to encounter higher levels of online victimisation and exposure to harm.

Reduced self-restraint could also be a contributor, according to the “online disinhibition effect” (Suler, 2004). This theory assumes that, behind screens (e.g. computers, smart phones), individuals are more likely to confide personal secrets, wishes, fears or express great acts of kindness and generosity (benign disinhibition). Disinhibition also increases the chances of experiencing or engaging in risky/hostile behaviour online compared to face-to-face interactions (toxic disinhibition). A sense of anonymity and the fact that communications are independent of time; can make it harder to empathise with and understand recipients’ feelings and emotions.

This hints at some of the knowledge required by professionals engaging with vulnerable children if they are to support them effectively. Educators and care-givers faced with providing children with advice about staying safe in digital spaces, should distinguish between the subjective and objective knowledge children have of online safety and risks or harms. For example, Macaulay et al., (2020) explained in their study of children aged 8-11 years that although children felt safe online and had good perceived awareness of online risks (subjective knowledge), they often struggled to articulate such risks or how they could avoid them (objective knowledge). Livingstone et al., (2014) also showed that although there is some online safety knowledge among children, objective, practical knowledge is limited.

These online risks and harms, changing trends and some theories used to explain behaviour, do not commonly feature in professional training. A study of psychiatry trainees found that 67.3% did not feel competent to assess digital risk despite half of those surveyed having worked with patients exposed to digital risk (Aref-Adib et al., 2020). As a matter of increasing concern, a gap in professional expertise is also evident among those working with young people at greatest risk of digital harm. For example, research has suggested that health

professionals may not have the expertise to engage with young people who self-harm in an anonymous online setting (Owens et al., 2015) and social care workers can lack appropriate digital knowledge to support vulnerable children with online risk (Fursland, 2011; Megele & Buzzi, 2020).

Despite the variety of online risks which exist (Livingstone et al., 2011b), professionals' online risk perception for children and young people, as well as assessment tools and staff training, have often been found to primarily consider the threat of child sexual exploitation (CSE; Barnard-Wills, 2012; El-Asam et al., 2021). Many professionals are not equipped to support families and victims of online CSE due to insufficient knowledge and misinformed beliefs about online risks (Pelisoli et al., 2015; Phippen et al., 2018) or to help a victim recover (Bond & Dogaru, 2018). Indeed, professionals often view *online CSE* as *less* risky than offline CSE (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2020), although it has been found to be as harmful (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2017).

Inconsistencies in professionals' management of online risks affect safeguarding procedures for all professionals responsible for children and young people as a direct result of online life and risk being neglected in formal assessment tools (Sharp, 2018). Current practice is informed by professionals' own competencies online rather than e-safety training, assessment criteria, or diagnostic tools, which should be the minimal standard. While safeguarding training is mandatory, training in digital risk is not, leaving it as an add-on or delivering it as basic generic online safety training rather than specialised knowledge tailored for the service concerned (El-Asam et al., 2021).

Staff in children's services may not have the digital skills or knowledge to adequately support service-users and a lack of training may act as a barrier in social care where it is most needed (Dunn, 2014). A lead charity addressing online child abuse found that the children's workforce lacked confidence in dealing with serious online abuse (Palmer, 2015). Reasons included a lack of understanding of the differential impacts of online sexual abuse, insufficient training and models for investigation and intervention, exacerbated by the surge of referrals over recent years. Local children's services have faced multiple challenges such as cuts to resources and staff shortages impacting their ability to adequately train staff to support children and young people (Rocks et al., 2020) and sections of the workforce may have been trained some years ago. Social workers see considerable turnover of staff, with 6000 vacancies reported in England in autumn 2019 (Department for Education, 2020). These diminutions come as the digital demands are increasing sharply and a greater level of knowledge and skill is required across the children's workforce.

While Prensky (2001) explained a so-called new digital divide between adults, described as Digital Immigrants, and children who were born into a digital world, (Digital Natives). This idea was questioned by Helsper and Eynon (2010) who argued that digital literacy is not acquired naturally/automatically and formal education to children is still needed especially in critical skills and online dangers. Additionally, Selwyn (2011) explained how such classifications convey a sense of distinct difference between generations and ‘disconnects’ between the ways that Digital Natives live their lives and the way the world is still controlled largely by older generations. This disconnect can discourage professionals from considering a child’s online experiences because they see themselves as ‘Digital Immigrants’ who do not understand the online world of young people. Helm (2011) states that children’s online lives and lived experiences need to be considered empathically in assessments to avoid profound consequences. The Child Safeguarding Review Panel (2021) also underlines the need to consider the child’s entire lived experience to facilitate better safeguarding work i.e., understanding the child’s experiences on a daily basis and how their experiences shape their development and welfare.

In summary, while research points to increased risk of online harm among vulnerable youth, practitioners/professionals working with children are still somehow lagging in their knowledge and awareness around online risks, vulnerability, and mental health (El-Asam et al., 2021). Concepts such as ‘Digital Natives’ and ‘Digital Immigrants’ still widely heard - could discourage professionals from empathically considering children’s online lives in practice. Hence, this study aims to explore current understanding, experience and processes among a range of senior children’s services professionals and external specialists. It seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What is practitioners’ awareness and understanding of young people’s digital lives and the risks they face online?
2. What challenges do practitioners face in identifying and managing online risk?
3. What are practitioners’ recommendations for improving practice?

Methods

Design

The research used qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews, lasting approximately one hour, with professionals from varying Children’s services and local authority agencies. A qualitative approach was deemed appropriate, allowing for rich in-depth understandings of participant attitudes and emotional data collection through open-ended

questioning and porous structure (Nowell et al., 2017). The interview questions explored how professionals within these agencies are trained to recognise and understand digital risk, how professionals assess and work with vulnerable children and young people who experience online risks, and how these professionals would improve their services.

Sample

Participants were identified using purposive sampling from professional organisations and contacted to partake in the research. In total, 29 participants (7 males and 22 females) were recruited, 14 participated through individual interviews and 15 participants through a focus group. Both individual interviews and focus groups were conducted to provide private spaces for those who wished, but also to accommodate for scheduling difficulties and to maximise recruitment across a range of services. All participants had experience working with vulnerable children and young people. Participants represented a wide range of professions and services, including social care and local authorities, mental health services, foster care, charities and professionals working in e-safety education. See supplementary materials for details on participant roles and prior experience.

Materials

A semi-structured interview of 7 open-ended questions was developed based on qualitative research findings by El-Asam et al. (2021) and via a consultation with experts/practitioners in the fields of online safety, social services and mental health. The questions were designed to investigate participants' professional understandings of online lives and online risks. They also served to examine what training and development is offered to professionals and establish what they recommend in order to improve practice, and to integrate online lives within their services or professional practice. Questions covered participant background, their understanding of young people and digital lives, their experience of practice, the diagnostic tools they rely on, their experience of training, information sharing, and recommendation/s for a future diagnostic tool (practice model).

A small pilot study was conducted with practitioners (n=3) to explore recruitment challenges, engagement level and suitability of interview questions. Questions were deemed appropriate reflecting a good level of engagement. Provisions were put in place to improve participants' recruitment and attend to time related challenges.

The study used a consistent interview protocol with 7 key open-ended questions about: participants' background, their understanding of young people and digital lives, their

experience of practice, the diagnostic tools they rely on, their experience of training, information sharing, and recommendation/s for a future diagnostic tool (practice model).

Data Collection

Ethical approval was granted by an academic institution and researchers adhered to all GDPR ethical standards. Participants were briefed by the main researcher conducting the interview. An email letter setting out research aims, information and consent was provided to potential participants, who were offered an opportunity to ask questions. Participants were asked to consent to interviews being audio recorded for analysis purposes or shorthand notes were taken verbatim during the interview. Confidentiality, anonymity, right to withdraw and the voluntary nature of participation was explained prior to the interview and during the interview process. Interviews were conducted between March and November 2020. Interviews were conducted face-to-face before the COVID-19 pandemic or through video-link whilst restrictions were in place. Data was anonymised upon transcription and transcripts were sent to interviewees for validation for the purpose of this research paper.

Data Analysis

Transcripts were analysed in NVivo 12 using reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2019; 2020) by a co-author (RL), who was largely independent to data collection. RL conducted an interview with one participant. All other interviews were conducted by authors AE-A and AK. Thematic analysis was deemed appropriate given the number of participants and our focus on patterning of meaning across participants. Following a *familiarisation* stage, an initial *coding framework* was generated to highlight particular areas of interest and important concepts within the data. This initial framework was applied to the remaining transcripts, *generating initial themes and subthemes*. The suitability of the framework was *reviewed* and agreed with co-authors through progressive iterations and discussions, which additionally served to *define* the themes and subthemes.

Results

A total of four overarching themes were generated using Thematic Analysis in response to the research questions (Table 1).

Table 1. Primary themes, corresponding subthemes and research questions addressed.

Themes	Subthemes	RQ
1. Internet as a medium	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Increased opportunities 2. Social connectedness 3. Image and identity 	1
2. Understanding of vulnerability and online risk	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Vulnerability online as an extension of offline vulnerability 2. <i>“Vulnerability can be a state of mind”</i> 3. Everyone can make mistakes 4. Fragmented awareness of online risk 	1, 2
3. Adults <i>“behind the curve”</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Parenting and monitoring 2. Need for knowledge, not fear 3. Lack of training and guidance 	2
4. Recommendations to modernise	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Cross-agency working 2. <i>“a glaring gap in the assessment of children”</i> 3. <i>“Upskill the whole community”</i> 4. New tools required 	3

Theme 1 – Internet as a medium

The internet was described as a *“neutral instrument”* [P3] with significant value, increasing access to information and facilitating social connections. There was also a sense that the internet is a medium which *“magnifies the good and the bad of what’s available”* [P10]. A disproportionate relationship between what gets attention and what occurs on the internet was described, suggesting that stories of harm and risk outweigh the good.

1.1 Increased opportunities

Participants depicted the internet as a tool which increases children’s access to content for learning and offers a sense of opportunity. This was described as offering *“freedom and resource”* [P11], such as accessing online therapy out of hours, and allows children to develop *“a voice of their own”* [P7]. Participants with counselling backgrounds spoke about working

with young people who “*use tech to self-soothe*” [FG]. This was also raised by participants with backgrounds in e-safety training, sharing that “*games help them escape from whatever else they are facing*” [P5].

As a result of increased access, there was a sense that young people adopted a digital culture of consumerism, as illustrated in the example below. Participants raised concerns over young people having “*no respite*” [FG] from the internet, sharing that “*their reality can be quite distorted*” [P9]. This appeared to be enabled by the use of smartphones and perpetuated by persuasive design: “*the design of the games is very addictive*” [P10].

“the way that children consume media now seems to be so bespoke to what they are interested in [...] it’s just whatever you want, whenever you want it.” [P10]

1.2 Social connectedness

An important aspect of young people’s digital lives raised by participants revolved around them “*seeking emotional connection via the internet*” [FG]. There was a sense that a sanctuary existed online, for instance LBGT+ young people or young people with social or communication needs: “*the opportunity for cooperative play for people who may really struggle with peer interactions in other settings is [...] really important to them*” [P14]. Furthermore, for young people in care, being able to connect with family was described as a significant source of support and helped facilitate transitions to placements.

As highlighted in the example below, in addition to facilitating social connectedness, online platforms were also perceived to facilitate harassment or bullying. Online activity appeared to influence young people offline, for example children playing games or engaging in sexting from fear of missing out and to avoid being “*socially punished*” [P5]. There was also a sense that the internet was used to perpetrate social exclusion, facilitated by blocking functions. Participants raised that dissociation and desensitisation online may facilitate Cyberbullying: “*they’re not seeing the reaction of the other person*” [P2].

“The very space where good things can be happening for that young person socially is also the space where someone bullying or harassing is going to come into” [P3]

1.3 Image and identity

Participants described the importance of image and identity online. This ranged from the internet offering “*opportunities for [an] alternative identity*” [FG] to young people perhaps

being more themselves online as their “*protective casing comes off*” [P9]. The importance of image relates to a “*need to be liked*” [P2], with young people seeking validation online, illustrated below. One example of online personas was in gaming, where “[*young people*] can be popular in games and it boosts their confidence” [FG].

“*they just want to be important and relevant and powerful and ‘somebody’*” [P10]

The impact of the images of others was described more negatively, particularly through the “*image of perfection on social media*” [FG] and influencers, where “*everybody else seems to be prettier, slimmer*” [FG]. Another challenge raised by participants is that many young people can appear older online, which may distort how others interact with them.

Theme 2 – Understanding of vulnerability and online risk

There was little homogeneity in participants’ views and definitions of online vulnerability, ranging from describing traditionally vulnerable groups to vulnerability depending on situational context. With regards to awareness of online risks, participant knowledge was fragmented.

2.1 Vulnerability online as an extension of offline vulnerability

When asked about vulnerable groups online, participants largely described those traditionally vulnerable, for example with SEN or in youth justice services. Individual experiences and social skills were said to underpin some of the harms experienced. For example, previous experiences of abuse may “*impact on what they accept or look for in relationships*” [P9]. In addition, participants shared that in care settings and among young people with SEN, “*online safeguarding [...] is not given the priority*” [P11], as the focus is on behavioural and emotional interventions. This was related to concerns that some carers underestimate young people’s “*capacity to even go online*” [P11], particularly those with SEN who can progress their digital skills more rapidly than carers expect.

Participants shared that the pathway to vulnerability online may be a result of some groups of young people not receiving adequate e-safety training, for instance due to school exclusion or SEN: “*I do feel there’s that attitude of ticking the box, and one size fits all does not work*” [P13]. Importantly, this links to risks of multiple disadvantage and perpetuates risk for those already experiencing adversity.

2. 2 *“Vulnerability can be a state of mind”*

There was a sense that vulnerability online was related, but separate to offline vulnerability, with many participants sharing views that internal characteristics affect that association. There were a variety of individual constructs mentioned by participants, most frequently being difficulties with *“self-esteem”* [P13] and *“resilience”* [P8].

It was suggested that that emotional intelligence, mental health and social isolation influenced young people’s experiences online and amplified the risks of harm. Participants identified a tension between the skills that young people have digitally, emotionally and socially: *“we often see digital skills but not emotional skills”* [P13]. Challenges with identifying internal constructs, as well as the array of definitions of vulnerability online shared by participants, suggests a significant risk of children falling through the gaps, as shown in the following extract.

“We don’t even get access to those young people unless they’re acting out or look different, so we’re missing the child who carries on OK at school holding it together.” [P4]

2.3 *Everyone can make mistakes*

Participants shared that *“Potentially everybody, everybody is vulnerable, suggestable, able to be exploited”* [P10]. There was a sense that education was central to protecting young people online, as well as the systems and services which exist for that purpose and which may be failing: *“is that a vulnerable child or is that a child which is not getting what they are entitled to by the systems which are designed to help them thrive”* [P10].

Participants also identified the unpredictable nature of risk of harm online and the speed at which this can occur: a *“ripple effect, [...] one action just opens up a can of worms”* [P9]. The notion of a mistake being more unforgiveable on the internet because of the ‘permanent’ nature of data stored online: *“there is always the chance that... just there is a mistake made, that you say something or it gets carried away or gets shared”* [P10].

2. 4 *Fragmented awareness of online risk*

The types of risks identified by participants were broad, such as child sexual exploitation, but also relatively specific, with a sense that participants (other than e-safety trainers) had a piecemeal understanding of the range of risks that exist. Some participants identified gaps in knowledge that they or services may hold, as well as a discrepancy in

perceptions of safety between children and adults: “*Schools didn’t realise how big sexting was*” [P5].

When asked to describe experiences of cases with digital components in practice, some participants identified distinct areas of concern, including risk of radicalisation, county lines or grooming and child sexual exploitation. Again, however, participant insight into current challenges were mixed: “*I don’t necessarily think I’m well enough informed at this moment to see what the trends are going to be*” [P11]. Participants with experience of delivering e-safety training were better able to discuss particular incubators of risk, such as livestreams, and expressed concern over the lack of understanding of location-based tracking.

Theme 3 – Adults “behind the curve”

Participants frequently described a digital divide between young people and adults in terms of use, knowledge and literacy of the internet. Participants shared “*We’re not digital natives, but they are*” [FG]. The importance of the internet to young people was described as “*almost unquantifiable*” [P3] and “*an integral part of their lives. It governs how they look, how they feel*” [P8].

3.1 Parenting and monitoring

One challenge of the ‘digital divide’ was regarding adults monitoring young people’s online activities. Across participants, there was homogeneity in terms of professionals observing parents to “*have no clue of how to set parental controls*” [P10]. Participants expressed that “*Adults don’t know how to behave online*” [FG] and that frequently parents are poor role models. Some benefits to parenting included digitally facilitated parental supervision and allowing young people to connect with their parents, for instance when in care.

A recurrent theme to monitoring online activities was taking phones off children and the complexities around this. For example, removing phones could lead to losing a source of support and not fitting in: “*Parents feel that if they stop their kid playing it, they will be isolated in the playground*” [FG]. There are additional challenges for foster carers or residential workers in confiscating phones, for instance if purchased by a parent, resulting in legal complexities about ownership and parental responsibilities.

Challenges of monitoring children’s activities also included privacy and judgement. A particular concern raised by participants was the high expectations that adults have of young people, and the culture of “*victim-blaming*” [P8] that exists: “*Children are fearful of being honest, ‘hiding’ what has happened because parents demonise that*” [FG] and “*I think one of*

the greatest dangers of children's vulnerability online is the fact that they're punished for it [P9].

3.2 Need for knowledge, not fear

As highlighted in the extract below, all participants highlighted a need for adults working with or caring for children to better understand and monitor behaviours and risks online, arguing that online activity has *"got to be part of the narrative"* [P9]. The generational gap described by participants was founded on adult lack of awareness and avoidance of tech: *"I totally avoid anything to do with tech."* [FG]. Although participants stated there exist *"pockets of a few professionals who do have a good understanding"* [P8], many described professionals having little and out-of-date knowledge: *"GPs completely not aware"* [FG]. Foster carers and social workers were said to be *"woefully unprepared and lacking in knowledge about internet safety"* [P7], or for example, live streaming. There was some hope raised because younger professionals entering social services who have grown up with the internet were used by one service to help educate their seniors, although this view was challenged by another participant who said using younger staff in this way raised complexities, due to their lesser understanding of boundary setting.

"If you're working with children and young people you need to understand what they're doing online. This should now be an integral part of your role" [P8]

This gap in understanding was also discussed in relation to challenging opinions of internet use, including misconceptions or *"unconscious bias"* [P9]. For example, a participant shared that *"I can imagine somebody disapproving of the amount of time kids spend online and being highly critical of their carer"* [P12].

3.3 Lack of training and guidance

Participants shared a variety of experiences on receiving e-safety training. What was apparent was that *"there are training gaps"* [P2] and that training is likely out-of-date and *"generalised"* [P3]. For example, a therapist appeared to rely solely on knowledge of their own child. A trainer shared that *"we're not even scratching the surface yet and those who come to our training are lucky"* [P15]. Participants stated that *"digital [training] is not standard and it is not mandatory"* [P7] both in individual services but also in National Minimum Standards for Foster Carers.

A challenge identified was the discrepancy in expertise and training available across services nationally, with particular groups such as parents, teachers, foster carers and social workers needing more up-to-date and applied training. Participants also spoke of a lack of data and research, limiting what trends and gaps could be identified. Participants shared concerns about lack of digital knowledge and professional code of conduct, brought to a head by Covid-19 restrictions, such as delivering therapy online: *“Everything changes so quickly within the digital world that it’s an ongoing training need for us all.”* [P13].

Theme 4 – Recommendations to modernise

In addition to highlighting gaps in expertise and resource, participants shared recommendations for improving practice and cross-agency collaboration. Participants identified gaps that are maintained by a lack of data and assessment tools: *“I don’t think we’re always asking the right questions”* [P9]. Participants called for change, identifying staff training and up-to-date assessments tools as important markers for success.

4.1 Cross-agency working

Most frequently, participants of cross-agency working described their experiences as poor and inconsistent collaboration and communication, particularly around online risks: *“I guess from my experience multi-agency working around online is really poor”* [P8] and *“kids fell through the net the whole time”* [P12].

Perpetuating factors of poor-cross agency working included delays, understaffing, staff turnover and a more general lack of resource: *“services are understaffed and people are struggling to get through the work. They can’t keep up with decimated services”* [P4]. This was related to not having services to refer to in crises and unsuccessful attempts to raise concerns, particularly with police, who were described as not *“sufficiently resourced for the volume of material that’s coming to them”* [P12]. Participants identified gaps in services and service delivery where in some cases, *“services don’t even exist”* [P10]. Difficulties of cross-agency working were also maintained by the concept of referral thresholds and premature discharge, relying on young people to engage: *“we’ve built this really defensive system where it’s about thresholds [...] Do you tick a box, do you not?”* [P12] and *“[if young people] don’t show up for so many appointments, they’re just struck off”* [P15]. Participants described relying on social care or schools to pick up such cases, placing additional pressures on an already limited resource.

A root of poor agency collaboration identified by participants was data, described as “*not routinely collated and analysed*” [P12] and sometimes incorrect: “*social workers just copy and paste from their case notes. Often items get mixed up or missed*” [P7]. Positive data sharing existed from a contextual safeguarding and police mapping standpoint, but most commonly participants expressed difficulties. A participant identified that challenges in data collection and data sharing were perpetuated by out-of-date systems: “*Some systems were designed in 1988 and can’t speak to each other*” [P5]. The lack of data on digital behaviours was also apparent in referral and background information. Concerns were raised by information being actively omitted as to not detract from primary concerns or due to pressures to get children placed: “*It [digital] is not always included even if other professionals around the child know there are digital issues*” [P7]. Worryingly, cases with digital aspects were shared to result in additional difficulties in finding placements and ultimately poorer outcomes.

4.2 “a glaring gap in the assessment of children”

Participants pointed out that most assessment tools used did not contain digital but focussed instead on “*emotional issues*” [P13] and that there is limited routine enquiry regarding online risk: “*it is insufficiently built into procedures [...] and depends on how switched on the social worker, the team is. It doesn’t feel yet for me, integrated into practice*” [P12]. There was little overlap between assessments across services, other than the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaires (SDQ; Goodman, 2001). The SDQ was largely criticised, described as “*not a sensitive measure*” [FG], which needs to be updated to contain digital concerns. This was also highlighted in relation to the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) Risk Assessment: “*they ask questions that don’t fit – with only a tiny bit on online safety*” [P5].

Some efforts to improve assessment tools and data management locally were described as very successful, leading to new systems and community resolution. The challenges of developing these tools locally appeared to revolve around validation. However, there still appeared to be a gap for cross-agency data sharing and monitoring, particularly as local authorities use different tools. This can cause difficulties for a fostering agency working with more than one authority. Participants stated that challenges were not simply in the tools themselves, but how they are used and what is done with the information, such as a tension between what Ofsted will measure and practice goals.

4.3 “Upskill the whole community”

During interviews, there was sense of an urgent need for change as “*services mainly work to identify risk, but don’t enable children to avoid risk*” [P15] and there is a focus on protection with gaps in supporting young people with recovery. The first step identified was training, where there was agreement that training on e-safety and online risks should be “*mandatory*” [P2], illustrated in the extract below. There were suggestions that experiential learning would enhance participants’ experiences of training and make the training feel more relevant, in addition to tailored training to the young people professionals work with: “*to understand how the mental health problems that we work with can be manifesting online*” [P14]. Participants asserted that training in digital literacy and online risks for both children and adults should be integrated into all aspects of learning, such as “*relationship and sex education*” [P10].

“There should be an absolute steamroller drive forcing Digital Citizenship to be taught in all areas of the curriculum.” [P7]

A further recommendation by participants revolved around language, which also needs to be updated. For example, “*Digital life? They see no boundaries between online and offline*” [FG]. Another participant expressed the challenges of ‘e-safety’, something young people view as an “*adult term*” [P9].

4.4 New tools required

Participants repeatedly shared being ill-equipped to manage online risks due to digital risk being insufficiently integrated into practice. Frustrations and concerns included: “*right now there is no data and tools are too generic, not specialised*” [P2] and the data “*is within case notes and only shared if trying to prove a hypothesis and doing dip sampling*” [P12]. Recommendations were made for a universal tool that could be used across services: “*A licence is needed for a diagnostic tool that you could use across the local authority*” [P2].

When asked about the development of a diagnostic intervention and tool, the concept was described by participants as “*a great idea*” [P6]. Recommendations for the tool included keeping it “*diagrammatically simple*” [P9], like a checklist, so that it can be “*really easily remembered*” [P9]. One participant suggested that new changes should be integrated into the basic foundations which exist, such as the Blue Book. The importance of accessibility adjustments and other language versions of resources was raised, particularly for different cultures or languages.

Child-facing assessments were recommended to be short and focussed, for instance on safeguarding, with relevant add-ons to move into where necessary: “*one of the things that alienates children is if they are asked questions that they don't feel are relevant*” [P14].

Primary challenges of developing a universal tool were identified as ensuring it is tailored, adapted and up to date. The concept of a Digital Passport for young people in care was viewed very positively, with hopes that this could improve cross-agency working, data sharing and avoid young people having to repeat their story.

Discussion

There is increasing evidence of disadvantaged young people encountering risks online (Livingstone et al., 2011a), especially those classed as traditionally vulnerable (El-Asam & Katz, 2018). Previous research has suggested that professionals working with children may not be fully equipped to understand and manage cases which include digital risk, such as social workers and foster carers (Fursland, 2011) or the wider workforce (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2020). This study explored professional understanding of online risk and vulnerability, professional experiences of managing cases with digital risks and recommendations for improving practice at a time when young people's use of technology is soaring as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and national agencies report a surge in online abuse of children (Europol, 2020; Internet Watch Foundation, 2020).

Fragmented understanding of digital lives, online risk and vulnerability (Themes 1 & 2)

The first research question sought to understand professionals' understanding and awareness of digital lives, vulnerability and online risk. The internet was viewed as a neutral tool which could deliver both good and bad outcomes, corroborating previous findings on the perceived positive and negative impact of the internet (Keles et al., 2020) particularly for some children for whom it is both a refuge and a risk (Katz & El-Asam, 2020b).

Online vulnerability was largely defined by participants as belonging to traditionally vulnerable groups, such as young people in care or young people with SEN. In line with previous findings (Children's Commissioner for England, 2017; El-Asam & Katz, 2018), participants shared concerns that young people in these groups are at additional disadvantage due to lack of adapted e-safety education. Participants were aware that vulnerability online may be more complex, where psychosocial skills, loneliness or self-esteem influence vulnerability. Indeed, an additional view in the literature is that building resilience in children and young people will help them navigate risks found on the Internet (Wisniewski et al., 2017). Lastly, participants suggested that vulnerability can be situational and can result from mistakes, which highlights how easily a situation can get out of hand and interventions may be needed unexpectedly. This supports that lack of e-safety awareness and the anonymity of the internet may provide a misleadingly comfortable social situation due to a perceived lower risk for self-disclosure (Peter et al., 2005). The lack of homogenous definition of online vulnerability from professionals, including e-safety trainers, would support the argument that this is a gap in the evidence-base and that e-safety is not inclusive (Jones et al., 2014; Phippen, 2019). Both

practice and research would benefit from further investigations into the complexities of what vulnerability online means and how this presents.

Although some participants were able to identify risks online and trends in practice, awareness was generally fragmented. As in previous research (El-Asam et al., 2021) CSE and cyberbullying were mentioned more broadly whereas other risks, such as content and Cyber-scams, were not identified. Although we cannot confirm whether or not participants are aware of these risks, the lack of information would suggest that these are either not known or not as prominent in their practice, despite high prevalence (Lupiáñez-Villanueva et al., 2016). An e-safety trainer raised concerns over the lack of understanding in both young people and professionals around the legal implications of engaging in online risky behaviour, such as sexting, suggesting that there is a divide between policy and practice. These findings support previous proposals that e-safety training is poorly understood and out-of-date (Annansing & Veli, 2016; Cranmer et al., 2009), and not adapted or applied to different groups and risk types. Furthermore, participants did not speak to frequency or severity of encountering risk online in their work because this information was not formally collated in their services. Further research should explore this to better understand the prevalence and impact of digital risks in the UK.

A system ill-equipped to identify and manage online risk (Theme 3 & 4)

Confirming concerns raised in previous research (Fursland, 2011), professionals, such as foster carers and social workers, tasked with keeping the most vulnerable young people in society safe were identified as being significantly ill-equipped or supported to do so. This has significant implications for practice and keeping children safe, particularly if risks are not identified, or if information is omitted or considered secondary. Participants explained that adults, particularly parents, are ill-informed and consistently poor role models, raising pertinent concerns following research proposing that parental control is the first level of protection for young people online (Khurana et al., 2014). With children concurring, 50% of UK children aged 11-17 think sometimes their parents do not understand enough about online issues' (Katz & El-Asam, 2020a).

Furthermore, supporting previous literature, participants highlighted challenges of the victim-blaming culture associated with young people encountering or engaging with online risk (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2017). This culture implies a lack of training in both unconscious bias and in awareness of risks and vulnerabilities online, and is a distinct area of concern as it likely impacts on young people's help-seeking behaviours (Heirman, & Walrave, 2008; Zilka, 2017).

In addition to lack of training and gaps in knowledge in the network around the child, participants described distinct practical challenges to assessing and managing online risk in their assessment tools and data more broadly. For example, the most frequently described measure in the sample was the SDQ (Goodman, 2001), which was widely critiqued for being outdated. Tools used in multi-agency services also did not include opportunities to incorporate wider online risks and harms. This is in line with research highlighting the need for newly designed assessment tools which fold in digital components (El-Asam et al., 2021; Hamilton-Giachritsis et.al., 2017). Some participants described adapting their practice and making local efforts to be more inclusive of digital lives to make up for the lack of standardised measure and tools. Despite these efforts, there remain key challenges in data sharing, consistency of care and cross-agency working which are only likely to be overcome with improved and compatible systems, especially across local authorities. This is significant due to the high number of young people who move between local authorities and are placed out of area (Foster, 2020).

As in the literature, participants focussed largely on identifying online risks rather than acknowledging how to protect and support children and young people from such risks. A study by Bond and Dogaru (2018) argued that multidisciplinary training, combined with real-life case studies, can effectively improve professionals' knowledge and understanding of online CSE, in turn enabling them to support children and young people. Participants suggested that if children's basic needs were met and they were appropriately supported with e-safety education and social isolation, young people would develop the resilience to better cope with navigating digital platforms, supporting previous research (Wisniewski et al., 2017; Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012). However, such recommendations require well-resourced and well-trained children's services with sufficient capacity, data management, multi-agency collaboration, and assessment procedures. Acute shortages of staff and resources were frequently reported by interviewees.

A Way Forward (Theme 4)

Participants were insufficiently trained and supported to identify and manage online risk, as previously found (El-Asam et al., 2021; Somerville, & Brady, 2019). Participants highlighted a need for widespread upskilling of adults who work with and care for children and recommended that this be mandatory. They also expressed a strong desire for the development of assessment tools which are up to date (therefore including digital components in the young person's narrative) and easy to use. Participants suggested that a change in language and way of working must echo change in culture, where there is no longer separation between online

and offline lives. This is significant, as despite digital being fundamental to young people's lives, participants unanimously expressed that digital does not feel integrated into practice and work with young people in a meaningful way.

Poor data was another issue raised in line with previous findings (El-Asam et al., 2021). Participants outlined a need for improved data collection and data sharing to help facilitate cross-agency working. This is contingent on improved data systems and is in line with efforts to integrate inclusive practice and update working practices nationally (e.g. Five Year Forward View; NHS, 2014). Local authorities were highlighted as being in particular need for reform. The recommendation is to improve communication and data sharing systems across services so that young people can be followed through transitions. The concept of a digital passport to accompany a child in care was highly valued, seen to reduce the need for information to be repeatedly gathered, particularly because older children in care are shown to have multiple placements and maximum instability (Children's Commissioner for England, 2020).

Implications

Findings suggest clear gaps in knowledge and awareness. It is still unclear why online risks/harms are still patchily understood by many, with media headlines often driving policy. It is probable that societal attitudes or possibly a form of prejudice, give legitimacy and a rationale for a wide range of acts that are not in the best interests of children (Young-Bruehl, 2012). This was evident in Rochdale (UK), where professionals and police overlooked long term sexual abuse of girls. The children's behaviour was described as a 'lifestyle choice' rather than recognising the situation as exploitation (Rochdale Borough Safeguarding Children Board, 2013). Societal attitudes change slowly. It was only in May 2000 that 'children involved in prostitution' were officially described as 'children in need' (Department of Health et al., 2000).

Children's externalising behaviour, such as unwillingness to co-operate or challenging conduct, which can be exacerbated by placement instability, or by prior abuse or neglect, may also influence professionals' perceptions of children and their decision making (Wilkinson and Bowyer, 2017). Learning points from the NSPCC, UEA report on neglect in serious case reviews, highlighted that young people with long experiences of chronic neglect and rejection find it very difficult to trust and may present as hard to help. The authors emphasise the importance of understanding the root causes of young people's behaviour, so that the responses of carers and professionals do not reinforce young people's sense of themselves as unworthy or unlovable.

In line with previous research (e.g., Helsper and Eynon, 2010; Selwyn, 2011), this study suggests that terms that increase generational digital divides (e.g., natives vs. immigrants) are not helpful. Labels such as these, could hinder adults' skills attainment and might be used to excuse the inability to understand and help young people navigate their online lives safely. Practitioners need to empathically understand young people's experiences online to facilitate better safeguarding work (Helm, 2011).

In practical terms, it is anticipated that these findings will inform widespread reform of online-safety training and the development of a practice tool (guide) and digital passport for children in care to support professionals working with children to identify and manage vulnerability to online risk. The implications of these are extensive. For example, equipping professionals and systems more broadly in monitoring and keeping children safe online may facilitate increased internet usage for young people in secure care. As highlighted in this study, communication and social connections using the internet have been reported to increase wellbeing and facilitate transitions into services; using the internet as a tool in secure settings could increase avenues for isolated young people to communicate with their peers and family and mitigate against risk of re-traumatisation.

In addition, participants shared that Covid-19 and the remote working necessary due to pandemic-related restrictions highlighted significant gaps in practice and codes of conduct. To provide adequate care in climates such as these, and to tailor methods of communication to better suit young people, it is imperative that professionals increase their understanding of how to safely use the internet as a tool and develop effective and ethical digital safeguarding procedures. There have been urgent calls for modernisation since the Coroner's Report (2014) into the death of Tallulah Wilson in 2012. This stated that although Tallulah was treated by a variety of professionals,

“no person who gave evidence felt that [...] they had a good enough understanding of the evolving way that the internet is used by young people, most particularly in terms of the online life that is quite separate from, but sometimes seems to be used to try to validate, the rest of life.” (p. 2)

Eight years later the testimony of professionals in this study suggests that change is slow.

Strengths and limitations

This study generated in-depth understanding of professionals' views on online risks in practice. Participants represented different professionals across services and local authorities across England, including e-safety specialists. They were selected for their extensive experience or expertise, which several exhibited in relation to more than one setting. These first-hand accounts complement previous research in the area. However, there is naturally a risk of non-participation bias, whereby individuals who did not participate may differ significantly in experience or knowledge than those who did. Furthermore, while combining qualitative data collection methods (i.e. conducting individual interviews and focus groups) allowed for flexibility in recruitment and possibly enhanced data richness (Lambert & Loiseau, 2008), there may remain methodological challenges in the merging of data from multiple sources. Increased understanding of the implications of merging qualitative data methods is required. Although there is no attempt to generalise the findings, these findings need to be considered with caution based on the UK context. Parents, schools and teachers play a significant role in children's lives and upskilling them in e-safety, this study did not consider their views. We encourage more research in this field, building on the extracted themes. Quantitative representation of parents, schools and teachers would add value in tackling online risks in practice and improving e-safety.

Conclusion

This study corroborates concerns that professionals and carers are not adequately prepared to work with and care for young people who encounter risk online or to prevent harm, in particular among those who are vulnerable. There is insufficient knowledge of how to help a child recover if incidents are discovered or disclosed. This is a result of a lack of training and knowledge which is often out-of-date and fragmented. The findings outline a distinct lack of a mandatory training containing content up to an advanced level and tailored for professional services. There is a requirement for resources and tools which allow for services to effectively assess digital risk and collaborate more easily to protect young people. A reform of training and practice is recommended.

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