

JANET STANLEY argues that the community has a responsibility to protect children from abusive experiences through the internet, especially those children whose parents are unable or unwilling to protect them.

“Downtime” for children on the internet

RECOGNISING A NEW FORM OF CHILD ABUSE

It is said that children in the United States spend more time with electronic media than they spend in any other activity, except sleep (Anderson 2003). There is a long history of research on the impact on children of watching violence on television and film, which reveals an association between exposure to dramatic violence and violent behaviour in children. In contrast, there has been very little research on the impact of the internet on children. This is despite the fact that as the availability and use of the

internet expands, increasing numbers of children are being exposed to content via the internet, which has already been judged to be inappropriate for children in other media outlets, such as television and film. In addition, through their use of the internet, children are being involved in activities considered to be abusive in other contexts, such as sexual exploitation. Work at the National Child Protection Clearinghouse at the Australian Institute of Family Studies has highlighted the seriousness and extent of these problems (Stanley 2001).

While there have been some moves to protect children from aspects of the internet, the issue of child exploitation through the internet has not entered the mainstream discourse in the field of child abuse and neglect. Rather, child protection in relation to this medium is seen as a matter which largely needs to be addressed by parents and children themselves, guided by advice from the government and other organisations.

In this paper it is argued that, as with other forms of child maltreatment, the Australian community has a responsibility to protect children from exploitation through the internet, especially those children whose parents are unable or unwilling to protect them.

Child abuse and neglect

Child abuse and neglect has been present (although often not recognised as such) throughout history. The concept of child abuse and neglect is a constructed notion created from beliefs and values about children, and shaped by politics, economics, cultural attitudes and knowledge. Thus, society's understanding of, and position on, child abuse and neglect are not only dependent on "scientific" knowledge but also on other contextual factors.

In the last 40 years, knowledge and understanding of child abuse and neglect has evolved. Various forms of maltreatment have been successively "discovered", such that it is now common to view child abuse as falling within the categories of physical, sexual and emotional or psychological child abuse, and neglect. Other categories of abuse have been proposed but they have not become routinely accepted in mainstream literature and practice. Child abuse is still largely written about, and responded to, within western countries. However, even within western countries, what is perceived as child abuse and neglect is often narrow and selective.

According to Gil (1975: 347), child abuse and neglect should be viewed as: "any act of commission or omission by individuals, institutions, or society as a whole, and any conditions resulting from such acts or inaction, which deprive children of equal rights and liberties, and/or interfere with their optimal development." Despite this early and valuable perspective, child abuse and neglect is still almost exclusively viewed as particular instances of unacceptable interaction between a parent or child carer, and a child. The processes of responding to abuse and neglect are moulded to fit in with this individualistic philosophy and have been built into bureaucratic, judicial and legislative systems. Because of this it is very hard for the child protection system to respond and adapt to new and changing developments. Despite the fact that the internet has been used fairly widely in Australia for at least a decade, and that it has extensive penetration at points readily accessible by children (via home, schools, public libraries and internet cafes), its potential as a form of child abuse has been largely overlooked.

INTERNET USE IN AUSTRALIA

The Australian Bureau of Statistics published information on internet use by adults in November 2000. It was reported that in the previous 12 months, half of the adults in Australia had accessed the internet. Internet use decreased with increasing age, with 74 per cent of the youngest group measured in this survey (18–25 year olds) using the internet (ABS 2000). While it is unclear how many children use the internet, it is likely to be high and increasing, fostered by increased home ownership of PCs, increasing access through outlets such as internet cafes, and the promotion of computer use through schools.

Child abuse and the internet

The internet is a medium that facilitates access and communication between people, which is direct and private. While this new medium has considerable benefits, the downside is that, unlike most other information and communication sources available to children, the internet is largely uncensored and only partially regulated. Children live mainly in an environment where most information is filtered by parents, carers and teachers, where television and film content is regulated to some extent, and where a person has to be 18 years of age or over to access "adult" content and venues.

Despite the development of some measures aimed at preventing children's access to inappropriate material on the internet, such as filtering software and the production of guidelines for internet use, these processes have not been particularly effective (Flood and Hamilton 2003a). Children are still accessing unsuitable and highly offensive sites and are being exploited and abused on the internet, both directly and indirectly (Finkelhor, Mitchell and Wolak 2000).

Exposure to inappropriate material

Children may be exposed to inappropriate material on the internet, such as sexual and violent material and pornography featuring both adults and children. It would seem that the internet has promoted the pornography industry as it probably provides the largest collection of pornography currently available, including sexual chat channels, pictures and text (Holmes and Holmes 2002). A recent press release from the Australian Minister for Justice and Customs reports that about 85 per cent of child pornography seized in Australia is distributed via the internet (Ellison 2003).

Australian research, which sampled 200 children, found that 38 per cent of boys and two per cent of girls aged 16 and 17 years deliberately use the Internet to see sexually explicit material (Flood and Hamilton 2003a). They also found that 84 per cent of surveyed boys and 60 per cent of girls had unwanted exposure to sexual material (Flood and Hamilton 2003b). As the authors note, the discrepancy between desired and undesired exposure, particularly for girls (two per cent desired and 60

per cent undesired), is of considerable concern, as it would appear that exposure is difficult to avoid.

A study from the United States on children aged between 10 and 17 years placed the level of undesired exposure much lower than this, at 25 per cent (Mitchell, Finkelhor and Wolak 2003). However, this figure could at least partially be explained by the inclusion of younger children in the American study, who are less likely to undertake independent exploring on the internet (Mitchell, Finkelhor and Wolak 2003). Of additional concern is the fact that many children (for example, 43 per cent of those in the United States study) do not report this exposure.

The Australian research which explored the exposure of teenage children to both X-rated videos and sex sites on the internet, found the internet pornographic content involved much more violent, extreme, and deviant behaviour than was found in videos (Hamilton 2003). In addition, the internet presented sex as “divorced from intimacy, loving affection, and human connection”, it commodified, subjugated and degraded the role of women and showed non-consensual sexual assaults (Flood and Hamilton 2003b).

According to Mitchell, Finkelhor and Wolak (2003: 334), no research has been undertaken on the longer-term impact of exposure to pornography on children under 14 years. They also report that the long-term impact of this exposure – whether it causes “psychological, moral, or developmental harm to children” – is not known. Research that has been undertaken on pornography use has been entirely on desired and anticipated exposure. However, Australian research concludes that, in relation to one aspect of this problem, evidence of the association between adult use of certain pornography and sexual aggression provides grounds for “serious concern” where children are exposed to this material (Flood and Hamilton 2003a: xi).

The small amount of research on the shorter-term response of children to offensive material suggests that some children are being severely affected. About a quarter of the children in the American study (24 per cent) reported being “very or extremely upset by the exposure”, with younger children experiencing the most distress (Mitchell, Finkelhor and Wolak 2003: 346).

Sexual exploitation

Interactive communication on the internet, such as chat rooms, offer child sexual offenders additional means of accessing children. This technology provides a means by which children can be groomed or prepared for sexual use, in a context where the child is usually alone and therefore susceptible to influence and persuasion by the offender. An offender uses misinformation and deception, often misrepresenting him/herself as a child or a friend. Offenders may include threats and techniques such as blaming the child for the illicit interaction, or the use of behaviour suggestive of positive interaction (such as attentive and apparently caring behaviour), thus making it difficult for even parents to identify inappropriateness (Smallbone and Wortley 2001). The

internet allows potential offenders into a child’s environment which is usually perceived as being safe – home, schools, libraries and friends’ houses – thus providing mixed messages and ambiguity about reality for children.

The aim of the offender may be to engage in cybersex or virtual sexual activity with the child, and/or persuade the child to meet with the offender. Research from the United States (Finkelhor, Mitchell and Wolak 2000) has found that 19 per cent of 10–17 year olds who regularly use the internet have experienced an unwanted sexual solicitation or approach in the previous year. Research from Scotland has shown that 49 per cent of children who use the web have taken part in a sexually explicit conversation with another person in a chat room (Ward 2003). Based on the figures from the United States study, it is possible that over 50,000 Australian children are approached annually for sexual purposes.

OTHER INTERNET RISKS TO CHILDREN

The internet provides a means for other forms of exploitation and abuse of children. Children may be exposed to inappropriate material other than pornography, such as the recent proliferation of suicide sites on the internet, estimated at over 100,000, many of which encourage suicidal behaviour (Ellison 2003). Other offensive sites include those promoting illicit drug use, anorexic behaviour and weapon manufacture.

The use of children in child pornography

The internet provides an additional medium to existing venues for the distribution of child pornography. It is difficult to make definitive statements about whether the child pornography industry is growing. However, it is certainly more visible and the nature of the internet, which provides ease of access and storage, secrecy and anonymity, suggests that there is likely to be an increase in use of pornography.

It would appear that some offenders collect child pornography pictures, and often text, for their private use only (Taylor and Quayle 2003). Time is spent sorting and classifying the pictures, sometimes to the point where the behaviour becomes addictive (Taylor and Quayle 2003). However, others use child pornography to facilitate the seduction of new victims, for sexual arousal and to feed sexual fantasies. Commercial opportunists have entered the market for child pornography and charge for the provision of material and access to pornographic sites. An item on BBC News (2003) reported the recent arrest of a man who had sold over 250,000 downloads to people in 60 countries, which to date has resulted in 1,600 arrests in Great Britain.

Whatever the end use, the production of child pornography usually requires a child to be sexually abused, either through actual events or the use of morphing or digitally altering photographs. There has been little research on who the children used for pornography are. One unpublished study found

the children were more likely to be from homes with high discord, often where there was child and drug abuse (Holmes and Holmes 2002). It has also been found that children who have experienced neglect are more likely to be used in the production of child pornography (Collings 1995, reported in Taylor and Quayle 2003).

Illegal and/or abusive activities in relation to children

The internet features of accessibility, privacy and low cost serve to encourage some offences. For example, child pornography is often used by offenders to groom children by “normalising” sexual activity with children and breaking down inhibitions, or to blackmail a child into desired behaviour by threatening to expose their use of pornography (Lanning 2001). Indeed, the saturation of the internet with such material may serve to “normalise” this behaviour and probably makes it easier to objectify children as sexual artefacts. Pornography is also thought to reinforce a person’s sexual attraction to children (Taylor and Quayle 2003).

While the small amount of research that is available as yet provides no clear answers, there are suggestions that an increase in exposure to child pornography stimulates some people to move from viewing child pornography to engaging in the sexual exploitation of children (Taylor and Quayle 2003). In a study of 150 paedophiles, slightly more than one in three reported using child pornographic materials shortly before committing a sexual offence (Wheeler 1996, reported by Holmes and Holmes 2002).

There are some suggestions that the internet may encourage people who were previously not offenders to engage in sexual offending (Stanley 2001). While the child sexual offender is almost always profiled as a mature-aged male, findings from research in the United States report that child sexual offenders who use the internet appear to have a different profile (Finkelhor, Mitchell and Wolak 2000). In this study nearly half of the offenders were under 18 years of age with few over 25 years, about one-third being female. While this needs to be verified with further research, it has been reported that Australian adolescents are becoming increasingly involved in e-crime in general (Etter 2002).

Provision and promotion of information that may be child abusive

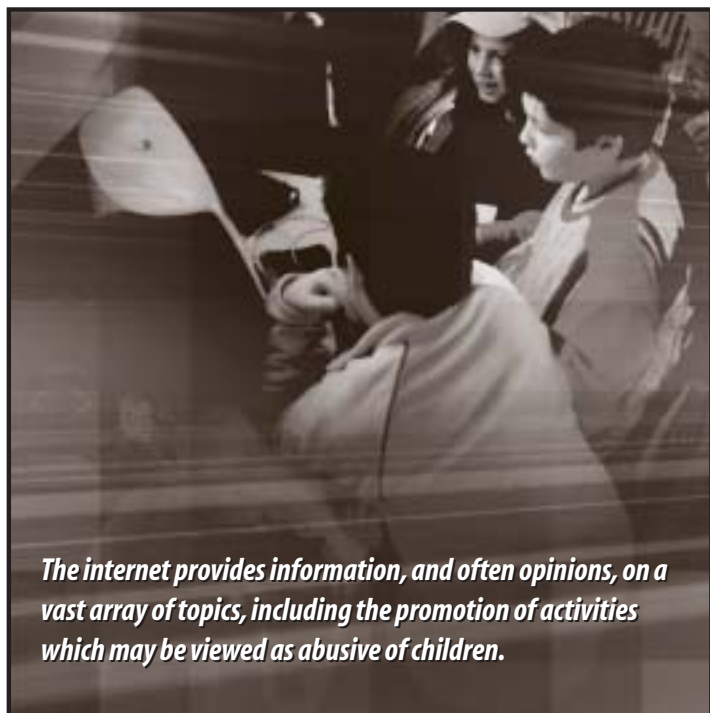
The internet provides information, and often opinions, on a vast array of topics, including the promotion of activities which may be viewed as abusive of children. For example, while many websites are opposed to the physical punishment of children, it is possible to find others which argue for the use of physical punishment, many of which present information in the context of academic or religious authority.

Other sites are maintained by proponents for sexual relations with children, such as the group NAMBLA, the North American Man/Boy Love

Association. The content of this site “justifies, rationalises and normalises” members’ behaviours through newsletters, brochures and booklets, claiming the child will be a willing and active participant in a sexual event (Taylor and Quayle 2003: 66).

Virtual communities

The establishment of virtual communities, or a fairly stable network of likeminded people, offers a supportive environment to pursue and promote a particular interest. Internet child pornography communities have been established where child pornography is both validated and justified. Status in this community is achieved through the extent of a person’s collection of pornographic material and the ability to contribute new material. Such groups



The internet provides information, and often opinions, on a vast array of topics, including the promotion of activities which may be viewed as abusive of children.

provide empowerment to the paedophile, a person often marginalised in society, while at the same time allowing him to remain anonymous (Taylor and Quayle 2003).

The effect of this may be to influence “personal beliefs about efficacy and control that serve to heighten disinhibition” in the offline world (Taylor and Quayle 2003: 78). Put another way, the internet allows child sexual offenders to function more easily as it provides an environment where conventional means of access to children, and the need for social skills, are broken down.

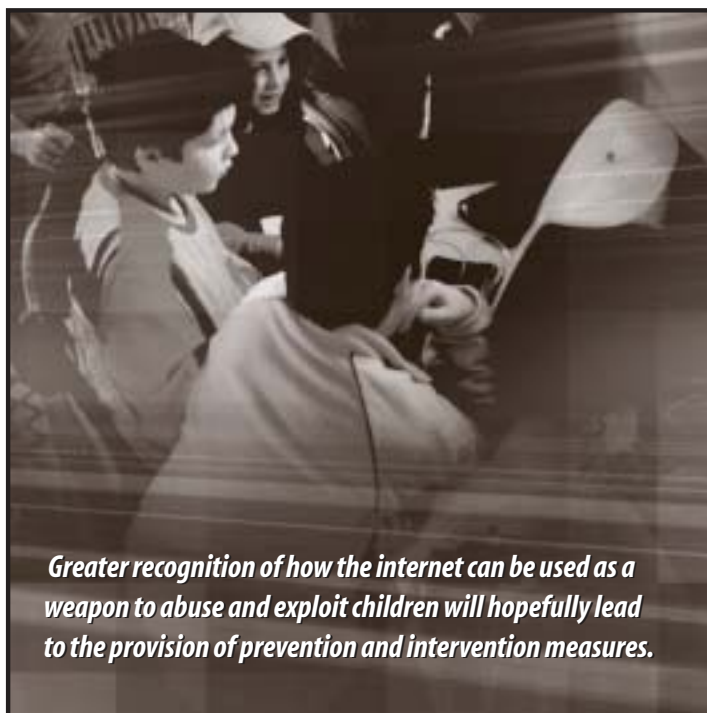
Which children experience abuse?

While the subject of the type of children who experience abuse is severely under-researched, there are suggestions that children who have already been victimised are more likely than other children to be re-victimised, both as a child and later in life. For example, prior victimisation – that is, sexual or physical assault, or witnessing assault of a family member

– is associated with an increase in risk for childhood sexual abuse (Boney-McCoy and Finkelhor 1995).

This pattern appears to hold for child abuse associated with the internet. “Troubled” children, those who have been maltreated, exposed to negative life events and/or depressed, those who are in the care of the state, those who have learning and social difficulties, low self-esteem, and are in need of love and affection, appear to be more likely than other children to be targeted for sexual exploitation on the internet (Mitchell Finkelhor and Wolak 2001). Children with these characteristics are also most likely to be exposed to offensive material (Mitchell, Finkelhor and Wolak 2003). As noted, children used in the production of child pornography are likely to have previously experienced child abuse and neglect.

Thus, while all children need to be protected from exploitation through the internet, it would seem that



there is a group of children who are particularly in need of protection. This high-risk group of children, who may have been previously victimised, need special attention in the provision of prevention measures (Boney-McCoy and Finkelhor 1995).

Recognising and responding to internet abuse

One of “the major lessons of history is that adults prefer not to see most child abuse”, or find it too difficult to believe (Goddard and Liddell 2003). There is a risk that history is repeating itself in relation to child exploitation and the internet. Greater recognition of how the internet can be used as a weapon to abuse and exploit children will hopefully lead to the provision of prevention and intervention measures. Some measures are being taken. For example, the Australian Government recently announced an

increase in jail terms of up to ten years for the possession and distribution of internet child pornography (Ellison 2003).

However, it would appear that, in general, measures to protect children from abuse through the internet are proving to be less than adequate. Regulation of pornography on the internet is reported to be “manifestly failing” (Flood and Hamilton 2003b). The internet filtering software, NetNanny, recommended by all three of Australia’s largest Internet providers, has been found to be ineffective, failing to block sites 38 per cent of the time (Farouque 2003). Telstra is reported as saying that home use of the software is as low as one per cent of their customers (Farouque 2003).

Much of the prevention response presently in place relies on parental supervision. However, these measures have been found to be of “marginal utility” in a major study from the United States (Mitchell, Finkelhor and Wolak 2003: 354). Responsibility for protection has been given to parents rather than to the broader community, and indeed, the internet industry itself (Hamilton 2003). Indeed, at times victim blaming is still present, and children are given the responsibility of protecting themselves. An example of this can be seen on the website, “Kids in Cyberspace: A Guide for Parents and Teachers” (2003), which states that: “No one can harm your child through the internet unless your child opens the door, makes elementary safety errors, or is too naïve and trusting of strangers.”

One might ask why should a child *not* be “naïve” and “trusting”, and *not* make “elementary safety errors”? It would seem that a great deal is expected even of children who live “normal”, happy and well-supported lives. What chance then for vulnerable children, particularly those who have already been victimised, to be able to look after themselves?

The sexual offender usually sets out to deceive and trick the child, seducing the child with attention, and gradually lowering the child’s inhibitions, often using pornography (Lanning 2001). This then leads to one of the “most destructive impacts”, which is “the silent conspiracy into which they feel bound by the offender” (Silbert 1989: 227, quoted in Taylor and Quayle 2003: 25). The child experiences feelings of shame, degradation, and fear of what will happen if their behaviour is revealed. The offender often capitalises on these feelings, and reinforces personal culpability of the victim to encourage them to maintain silence.

Hamilton (2003) argues that society has presently lost the ability to recognise the social limits which should guide individual freedoms gained in the 1960s and 1970s. It should be asked whether an individual should have the right to access, at any time or place, material such as extreme pornography, where granting this freedom is thought to be damaging to other members of society, such as children (Stanley 2001).

Meeting the challenge to protect children on the internet will not be easy. The Director of the Australasian Centre for Policing Research (Etter 2002) believes that: “The growth in the uptake of

Information and Communications Technology (ICT), including the Internet, presents as great a challenge for policing as the introduction of the telephone and the motor vehicle (and) . . . will require a fundamental paradigm shift in policing.”

Perhaps a paradigm shift is also needed in how child abuse and neglect is viewed. A perspective which is broader than that currently in use, such as Gil's, noted earlier, would allow for a strategic understanding of how society's actions are impacting on children. Such a perspective should provide answers to abuse and neglect that are based on the extent of harm to the child, rather than responses based on history, politics, economics, and the right to unrestricted freedom for a few adults.

While there is a need for more research about how the internet impacts on children, enough is already known to begin to take action to protect children. Recommendations for policies and actions that could give children greater protection while they use the internet, include the need for a move from self-regulation by Internet Service Providers to more stringent government regulation and review of the law enforcement process (see Stanley 2001 for further information).

Conclusion

Towards the end of 2001, the National Child Protection Clearinghouse published an Issues Paper on child abuse and the internet which flagged concerns about a range of child abusive behaviours facilitated by the internet (Stanley 2001). Since then, there has been a small increase in research and some increase in discussion of the issues. However, little has been done to adequately protect children, particularly those more vulnerable to exploitation through the internet. Indeed, our increasing knowledge of the potentially harmful effects makes this gap even more remiss.

It is now believed by many that “the internet is fast becoming a significant factor in the sexual abuse of children” (Fournier de Saint Maur 1999). Historically, society has been very slow to acknowledge and respond to child abuse, not recognising the behaviour as abusive, minimising the extent of abuse and the impact on children, and not placing the welfare and rights of children at the centre of concern (Goddard 1996). There is a need to recognise the child abusive aspects of the internet. What is required is more research, and comprehensive prevention and intervention strategies to protect all children who use the internet, and particularly those who may be most vulnerable to experiencing this form of abuse.

References

- ABS (2000), *Use of the Internet by Householders*, Catalogue No. 8147.0, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra.
- Anderson, D.R. (2003), “Testimony by Professor Daniel R. Anderson of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst before the Senate Subcommittee on Science, Technology, and Space of the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation concerning Neurobiological Research and the Impact of Media”, April 10, 2003, http://commerce.senate.gov/hearings/testimony.cfm?id=706&wit_id1881
- BBC News (2003), <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/1/hi/uk/3035115.stm> (accessed 19/5/2003).
- Boney-McCoy, S. & Finkelhor, D. (1995), “Prior victimization: A risk factor for child sexual abuse and for PTSD-related symptomatology among sexually abused youth”, *Child Abuse & Neglect*, vol.19, no. 12, pp. 1401-1421.
- Collings, S.J. (1995), “The long-term effects of contact and non-contact forms of child sexual abuse in a sample of university men”, *Child Abuse & Neglect: The International Journal*, vol. 19, pp. 1-6.
- Ellison, C. (2003), “New offences to clamp down on Internet child pornography”, *Press Release*, Minister for Justice and Customs, 4th April 2003.
- Etter, B. (2002), *Cybercrime - Now This Changes Everything!*, *Growing Australia Online Conference*, Canberra, 3-4 December.
- Farouque, F. (2003), “Online regulations fail to protect children from porn: Researchers”, *The Age*, 4 March, p.2.
- Finkelhor, D., Mitchell, K. J. & Wolak, J. (2000), *Online Victimization: A Report on the Nation's Youth*, Crimes Against Children Research Centre, www.missingkids.com, accessed June 2001.
- Flood, M. & Hamilton, C. (2003a), *Youth and Pornography in Australia: Evidence on the Extent of Exposure and Likely Effects*, The Australian Institute, ACT.
- Flood, M. & Hamilton, C. (2003b), *Regulating Youth Access to Pornography: Discussion Paper Number 53*, March, The Australian Institute, ACT.
- Fournier de Saint Maur, A. (1999), “The sexual abuse of children via the Internet: A new challenge for Interpol”, Paper prepared for the *International Conference, Combating Child Pornography on the Internet*, Vienna, 29 September - 1 October.
- Gil, D.G. (1975), “Unravelling child abuse”, *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, vol. 45, no. 3, pp. 346-356.
- Goddard, C. (1996), *Child Abuse and Child Protection: A Guide for Health, Education and Welfare Workers*, Churchill Livingstone, South Melbourne.
- Goddard, C. & Liddell, M. (2003), “We're listening, Mr Costello”, *The Age*, www.theage.com.au/articles/2003/06/12/1055220705948.html
- Hamilton, C. (2003), “Can porn set us free?” A speech to the Sydney Writers festival, May 25th 2003.
- Holmes, S.T. & Holmes, R.M. (2002), *Sex crimes: Patterns and Behavior*, 2nd ed., Sage publications, California.
- Kids in Cyberspace: A Guide for Parents and Teachers (2003), www.safetynet.org/help/kids.html Accessed 16th June 2003.
- Lanning, K.V. (2001), *Child Molesters: A Behavioral Analysis*, National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, United States.
- Mitchell, K.J., Finkelhor, D. & Wolak, J. (2001), “Risk factors for and impact of online sexual solicitation of youth”, *JAMA*, vol. 285, no. 23, pp. 3011-14.
- Mitchell, K.J., Finkelhor, D. & Wolak, J. (2003), “The Exposure of youth to unwanted sexual material on the internet: A national survey of risk, impact and prevention”, *Youth & Society*, vol. 34, no. 3, pp. 330-358.
- Silbert, M.H. (1989), The effects on juveniles of being used for pornography and prostitution, in D.Zillman & C. Bryant (eds), *Pornography: Research Advances and Policy Considerations*, Lawrence Erlbaum, Hillsdale, NJ.
- Smallbone, S.W. & Wortley, R.K. (2001), *Child Sexual Abuse: Offender Characteristics and Modus Operandi, Trends & Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice*, No. 193.
- Stanley, J. (2001), Child abuse and the Internet, *Child Abuse Prevention Issues*, No. 15, Summer, NCPC, AIFS, Melbourne.
- Taylor, M. & Quayle, E. (2003), *Child Pornography: An Internet Crime*, Brunner-Routledge, N.Y.
- Ward, S. (2003), Children put at risk by new technology, *The Scotsman*, 17th June, <http://www.thescotsman.co.uk/international.cfm?id=666462003> Accessed 23/6/03.
- Wheeler, D. (1996), The relationship between pornography usage and child molesting, *Federal Probation*, vol. 15, no. 2, pp. 34-48.

Janet Stanley is a researcher with the National Child Protection Clearinghouse at the Australian Institute of Family Studies. She is author (with Chris Goddard) of *In the Firing Line: Violence and Power in Child Protection Work*, John Wiley 2002.