Reality of Awareness and Response of Students to the Risks of Child Sexual Abuse in Cyberspace

Pham Thi Thanh Thuy

Faculty of Social Work, Hanoi National University of Education

ABSTRACT: This article mainly discuss the reality of awareness and response of students to the risks of child sexual abuse in cyberspace at Van Hoang secondary School in Phu Xuyen district, Hanoi. The survey results are collected from the opinions of 220 students in the research area. The study indicates that students have a certain understanding of the expressions and risks of sexual abuse in cyberspace, however, many of them fail to be correctly aware of these issues. In addition, the research results also show the limited awareness of students about ways of repsonse, prevention and self – protection agaisnt the risks of sexual abuse. Therefore, it is urgent to improve knowledge and skills of secondary school students to cope with the expressions and risks of sexual abuse in cyberspace and realistic solutions are needed.

KEYWORDS: Awareness, Cyberspace, Child Sexual Abuse, Response, Secondary School Students

1. INTRODUCTION

In the era of the 4.0 technology revolution, the development of technology, especially the digital devices and the Internet play an important role in daily life of each child. According to the latest report of the Research Institute for Sustainable Development Management and Save the Children International in Vietnam in major cities nationwide (2020), Vietnam has up to 96.9% of children using the Internet for various purposes such as learning, entertaining, searching information and playing games [1]. It is undeniable that the internet brings great benefits to the life of each person in general and every child in particular. In contrast, the negative aspects of the Internet, mobile technology or risks and threats in cyberspace have also existed in parallel, which causes a lot of challenges to the safety of child. Especially, the issue of using the Internet and online tools for child sexual abuse is becoming a concerned problem not only inside a country but also a war among all countries in the world.

According to the data from the Institute of Management for Sustainable Development (MSD) and Save the Children in Vietnam, in 2018, Vietnam had 706,435 cases of reporting on images and videos of child sexual abuse online, ranked 2nd in ASEAN, only second to Indonesia.

According to UNICEF, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the lives of millions of children are temporarily confined to their families, computer and television screens. Spending more time on virtual platforms can expose children to harmful and violent contents, raising the risk of cyberbullying, especially for children who are vulnerable to sexual abuse or easily deceived by many bad people who are trying to take advantage of the COVID-19 situation [2]. Meanwhile, children themselves are not equipped with knowledge about sexual abuse prevention as well as skills to cope with situations by safe and healthy intteraction in cyberspace.

In Vietnam, there are currently a number of studies addressing the issue of child abuse in cyberspace. However, they are mainly statistic surveys on the situation of children using the Internet and the problems encountered as children interact on the Internet. In addition, there have been a number of pilot programs and projects with the support of international NGOs such as: "protecting children and teenagers from the risk of sexual abuse in the cyberspace" sponsored by the World Vision in 2019. The program was piloted in Da Nang city with initial results of supporting a part of children and teenagers in a specific area to prevent them from the risk of online sexual abuse. From a legal perspective, Vietnam has also been promulgating legal documents to ensure safety and healthy interactions in cyberspace for children. However, the promulgation and implementation in practice are still confusing and ineffective. The reality of awareness of the community, schools, parents and especially students about behavioral expressions, the risks of sexual abuse in cyberspace and skills of self- protection when using the internet has not been mentioned particularly or in-depth studies.

Specific research on child sexual abuse in cyberspace, risks and consequences from the students' assessment and perception will be the first step to support them to have an opportunity to identify problems that they are facing or will encounter in the future.

On that basis, appropriate measures are proposed for schools in coordination with the support of families and communities to help children cope with sexual abuse and prevent possible risks when they participate in cyberspace. Discovering the reality of awareness and response of students to the risks of sexual abuse in cyberspace at Van Hoang Secondary School of Phu Xuyen district, Hanoi is one of the contents that we conduct the initial survey in the current context as the demand for Internet use is increasing among students.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

The study was conducted with the participation of 220 students from grade 6 to grade 9 of Van Hoang school, Phu Xuyen district, Hanoi, in which:

Regarding gender: the number of female students is 124 (accounting for 56.36%); The number of male students is 92 (accounting for 41.82%), the number of LGBT students is: 04 (accounting for 1.82%)

Regarding grades: Grade 6 has 70 students (accounting for 31.82%), Grade 7 has 65 students (29.55%), Grade 8 has 45 students (20.45%), Grade 9 has 40 students (18.18%)

The study used data analysis, questionnaire, in-depth interviews and mathematical statistics to present the research results.

3. RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Awareness of students about the expressions of sexual abuse in cyberspace

In this study, in order to find out the level of awareness of students about sexual abuse in cyberspace, we conducted a survey on a basis 17 expressions in the table below to collect students' opinions. The given expressions are all specific child sexual abuse behavior currently mentioned directly or indirectly. However, according to the data obtained from the collection process, the students' assessment are not consistent on all the mentioned behavioral expressions.

Table 1. Awareness of students about behavioral expressions of sexual abuse in cyberspace (%)

Behavioral expressions	Rate (%)		
	True	*False*	*Do not know*
1, Being mocked/indecently commented on your appearance or body parts on social media	15,91	55,45	28,64
2, Being texted, chatted, suggested/recommended about sex online	83,18	14,55	2,27
3, Being teased and commented on about sex on social media	96,36	1,36	2,27
4, Being texted for unwanted meeting/dating proposals after talking online	30,45	48,64	20,91
5, Being asked questions about sex, sexual orientation through texting, chat, social networks	45,91	28,64	25,45
6, Being asked by others to see/send your sensitive or nude pictures to them	65	18,18	16,82
7, Spreading rumors online about having sex.	73,63	13,64	12,73
8, Being photographed/used or distributed private images on the internet without agreement.	30,45	68,19	1,36
9, Being forced to view pornographic pictures/videos online	100	0	0
10, Being posted comments, used pictures and videos about yourself into online pornography	100		
11, Being shown or sent nude, sensitive images by others via phone or computer	82,73	14,09	3.18
12, Being invited to watch movies, clips about adult content not for children	63,64	30,91	5,45
13, Being instigated, seduced, forced to talk about sex topics online	87,73	10	2,27
14, Texting on social media with sexual content	84,09	10	5,91
15, Sending links to dark webs or adult websites not for children	90,45	6,82	2,73
16, Being threatened to expose private images on social networks for money (blackmail) or other benefits	40,45	55	4.55
17, Being forced to have sex or expose private parts of the body and livestream on social media.	100	0	0

(**Source:** Author's survey data)

The above data shows that students are well aware of the expressions that directly refer to sexual abuse such as: "Being texted, chatted, suggested/recommended about sex online" (83.18%); "Being forced to view pornographic pictures/videos online"; "Being posted comments, used pictures and videos about yourself into online pornography" (100%). However, the expressions do not directly refer to the sexual factors but are considered as one of the tricks typically used by abusers to "seduce" a child victim with the purpose of sexual abuse, however, students do not have the right awareness or have no idea such as: "Being texted for unwanted meeting/dating proposals after talking online"; or they are not aware of the harmful effects of "Being photographed/used or distributed private images on the internet without agreement", which not only causes discomfort to them, but it is also an "opportunity" of the abusers. They can take advantage of the images to spread rumors about sex or use it into products for sex-related purposes, even blackmail the victims if failing to comply with the request to provide pictures or videos for them. Tran Thi L. said "Sometimes, my friends post some stealthy pictures of me online, which makes me feel a bit uncomfortable. However, they also have no sexual purpose, so I think it's fine, nothing serious."

It can be seen that students had the correct awareness in most of the given expressions, however, they were not consistent and complete. For some expressions, students still have incorrect awareness or do not know whether it is sexual abuse in cyberspace or not; In addition, many children answered according to their subjective and emotional psychology that it was just an online behavior, so it was not serious and could not be a sexual abuse act. It is the incorrect and subjective perception of students about the expressions of sexual behaviors in cyberspace that can cause risks of sexual abuse that they fail to identify or anticipate to prevent and stop in time.

3.2. Awareness of students about the risk of sexual abuse in cyberspace
3.2.1. Awareness of students about the risk of sexual abusers in cyberspace

The expressions of the above-mentioned sexual behaviors are also the tricks or methods of the abuser using the cyberspace to make an access to the victim. With the anonymous feature or the use of "virtual accounts", abusers easily approach children by "hiding" under the "cover" of the child's supporters or friends...

According to a survey from our research, here are the perceptions students about the child sexual abuser in cyberspace:

Table 2. Awareness of child sexual abusers in cyberspace

Type of sexual abusers	Rate (%)
1. Strangers on the Internet	80,91
2. Online acquaintances	92,27
3. Acquaintances (neighbors, friends at schools...)	27,27
4. Relatives	10
5. People of the same sex	18,64
6. People of the opposite sex	98,64
7. Pedophilia people	90
8. Anyone	96,82
9. Unidentified (due to anonymity or online spoofing)	65

(**Source:** Author's survey data)

Most of them think that "the sexual abuser is a stranger" (80.91%); "acquaintance online" (92.27%); "people of the opposite sex" (98.64%), "the pedophilia people" or "anyone" (96.82%). However, they did not appreciate that the abuser could be "relatives or people of the same sex" (18.64%). In fact, many sexual abusers pretend to be relatives or know children's relatives to scam online or seduce children into sexual abuse. Especially with online anonymity, the abusers can also be people who know the child anonymously, understand the child's living habits and problems and easily find reasons to approach. Thereby, they commit sexual abuse acts, which are not easily detected by children.

Thus, the sexual abusers in cyberspace can be anyone, in any gender or age. Online anonymity is a feature that makes it difficult to track down the abusers and deal with sexual abuse. Identifying absuers helps students identify the risks that come from the objects they communicate with in cyberspace. Therefore, they need to adjust their attitude, think and be careful in their behavior when approaching relationships in cyberspace.

3.2.2. Awareness of students vulnerable to become victims of sexual abuse in cyberspace

Students' comments through the survey showed that girls are the most vulnerable to abuse with 97.73% of students choosing. Meanwhile, in terms of age, the majority of students think that the age of 12-18 is vulnerable to online abuse with the percentage of 87.83%: "as at this age, they spend more time on using the Internet and even have their own phones and computers connected to Internet. The more exposure to the network, the more risks it poses," said Tran Thu V (class 8C). They also believe that other young people such as children under 3 years old, children under 3-6 years old or children with special circumstances have little opportunity or ability to access the Internet, so the risk of sexual abuse is lower. On the other hand, in terms of age, for children under 3 years old, students' awareness of the risk of sexual abuse is lower than that of other age groups (21.26%). At this age, children usually live close to their loved ones, cared for and protected, so they are safer and less exposed to the external environment as well as abusers in cyberspace. In many cases, however, there are cases of using children's images, clips or information on the internet posted by relatives and young parents but did not anticipate the consequences. Such images and information may be transformed by online criminals into products with sexual purposes such as child pornography, child prostitution advertisment, etc.

Any child is at risk of becoming a victim of sexual abuse in cyberspace regardless of their exposure to cyberspace or not. Through the above survey, it shows that many students are aware of the high risk of sexual abuse in cyberspace of certain children groups, but they also ignore or underestimate the impact of online sexual abuse on young children, boys or children with special circumstances. This has been explained by the students above according to their emotional thinking, however, this may limit their awareness of the tricks that the abusers have been applying with many complications today.

Table 3. Awareness of students about subject of children at risk of sexual abuse in cyberspace

Subject of children at risk of sexual abuse in cyberspace	Rate (%)
1. Girls	97,73
2. Boys	55,91
3. Children with special circumstances (mountainous areas, disabilities, poverty...)	36,36
4. Children under 3 years old	21,36
5. Children from 3 to 6 years old	44,09
6. Children from 6 to 12 years old	77,27
7. Children from 12 to 18 years old	87,73
8. Any child	77,72

3.2.3. Perception of students about the risk of child sexual abuse from online tools

According to a survey of students within the past 6 months, due to the impact of the epidemic, students have to use the Internet to participate in regular and continuous learning every day. Students' online time is also spent on entertainment activities, exchanges and conversations. The survey results show that 38.6% of the students participated in at least one social network and spent at least 1 hour a day using it for other than learning purposes such as reading the news, watching movies, chatting, play online games and other entertainment activities. They said that they can use the Internet at home, in a private room with little direct supervision of parents and relatives at the rate of 22.3% and the common means of accessing the network other than learning purposes: personal mobile phone (20.9%); personal computers and ipads (6,8%); shared computers including computers, ipads or phones and other means of accessing the shared network (72.3%).

The habit of using the Internet together with the regular and long time of use by students can cause a lot of risks, from which sexual abuse in cyberspace can occur.

Table 4. Awareness of students about the risks of sexual abuse through different methods of using the Internet

Risks of using online tools	Level				Average score
	No risks	Low risk	Medium risk	High risk	
Using the features to send messages, chat online	23,18	36,36	19,55	20,91	2,382
Using a webcam (video chat)	17,27	14,55	44,09	24,09	2,75
Sharing photos and providing private information on social networks	3,64	8,18	46,36	41,82	3,264
Using the feature of adding or accepting friends online with strangers	2,27	9,55	62,27	25,91	3,118
Dating and meeting other people online	6,82	19,09	39,55	34,54	3,018
Participating in online games (online games)	34,09	29,55	25,45	10,91	2,132
Using the Livestream tool on social networks	9,09	31,82	33,18	25,91	2,759

(**Source:** Author's survey data)

According to the assessment of students, awareness of students about the risk of sexual abuse from using the features and tools of the network is not high. They think that these behaviors are all at "medium" and "low" risk, and some behaviors are even assessed to be "no risk". The act of "sharing pictures and providing private information on social networks" is the highest risk behavior (mean score = 3.264) and "Using the feature of adding or accepting friends online with strangers" (mean score =3.118); "dating and meeting online" (mean score =3,018). It should be noted that students assumed sending messages and chatting online not to have any risks or low risks of being sexually abused (59.54%). Participating in online games was the behavior that students rated as having the lowest risk (mean score =2,132). However, by participating in online games, the abuser has the opportunity to pretend to be a friend of the same age and gender to easily approach the child, seduce and influence the child - this is one of the tricks they can commonly use.

The results of the survey on students' awareness about the risks of sexual abuse in cyberspace show that the majority of students are not well aware of the potential risks of using the Internet with tools and means of Internet connection can lead to the possibility of sexual abuse. This affects their ability to self - protect and respond to the risk of sexual abuse in cyberspace.

3.3. Students' responses to the risks of child sexual abuse in cyberspace

"When you face with or witness behavior related to sexual abuse in cyberspace, what will you do?". That's the question we ask the students as we learn about thier response in unexpected situations. Based on the information obtained in the survey below, it is shown that the ways of response of students choose when they are in a situation of being sexually abused online are solutions with both positive and negative aspects.

In particular, we created a hypothetical situation: "Someone sends you a pornographic image/clip or asks you to perform the behavior as shown in the picture or clip they send you, how will you react?". Here are some thoughts and actions students in response to the above situation:

Table 5. Students' responses to online sexual behavior

No.	Response of students	Rate (%)
1.	Think that it only happens online without hurting	20,91
2.	Pay no attention to it and ignore it	35,91
3.	Show a firm disapproval of sexual offers	69,55
4.	Tell the story with your parents	34,09
5.	Tell your teacher for help	35
6.	Seek advice from relatives/friends	70,91
7.	Find advice online	17,27
8.	Unfriend and block that person's account	84,55
9.	Think of a way to do something against it	67,27
10.	Save the evidence for revenge	19,55
11.	Report to the police	5,91
12.	Call the National Telephone Exchange for Child Protection 111	3,64
13.	Have no idea what to do	17,73

(**Source:** Author's survey data)

When faced with situations of sexual abuse in the online environment, most students responded with a firm attitude against sexual offers (69.55) and sought to share to get help from others such as teachers (35%), parents (34.09%), relatives, friends (70.91%) and even from seeking advice online (17.27%). In the way of responding by sharing, students chose to share the most with their relatives or friends (70.91%). Pham Thu H. said "I will only seek advice from friends, but if I tell my teachers or parents, I will be scolded or not let me use the internet anymore".

To deal with sexual abuse in the given situation, many children also choose to avoid it, such as unfriending and blocking account (84.55%). However, there is also a part of students who choose to simply respond with thoughts such as: "Think that it only happens online without hurting" (20.91%) or "Pay no attention to it and ignore it" (35.91%). However, disregarding these behaviors makes students often lose their guard against possible dangers and consequences while they themselves fail to anticipate many unexpected situations that may happen in reality.

The survey also shows that a low rate of children chooses to call the police or call the 111 because many think that "it is not enough to call the police" or some children have no full access to information of National child protection so they never contact. It should be noted that 17.73% of surveyed students felt confused about what to do in a situation.

"What have you done to prevent and protect yourself from the risk of sexual abuse in cyberspace?"

According to the surveyed students, they have initially formed in terms of their awareness and actions in proactively avoiding the risk of sexual abuse in many ways such as: "not participating or encouraging activities related to the issue of sexual abuse in cyberspace" is the positive action chosen by the majority of students (average score = 3,768). Besides, many students also choose action of "not making friends with strangers or sharing personal information on social networks" as measures to prevent sexual abuse online. However, in the methods of deterrence and prevention of this negative behavior, not many children notify teachers/parents or relatives about the cases encountered (mean score =2,241). Other activities such as: "raising awareness of sexual abuse online, practicing skills in using information technology effectively and safely" and "learning how to protect yourself against

risk factors from using the Internet through classes/skills or club activities" are things that most of them have never done or participated in or have a very low level of participation.

Table 6. Prevention and self - protection from the risk of sexual abuse in cyberspace

Activities	Rate (%)				Average score
	Never (1)	Rarely (2)	Regular (3)	Always (4)	
1. Raise awareness about the issue of online child sexual abuse and its consequences; practice skills to use information technology effectively and safely	82,73	17,27	0	0	1,173
2. Do not participate in or promote activities related to the issue of sexual abuse in cyberspace	1,36	4,55	10	84,09	3,768
3. Timely notify teachers/parents/relatives when detecting sexual abuse behavior	31,82	29,55	21,36	17,27	2,241
4. Make no friends with strangers on social networks	9,55	13,64	71,36	5,45	2,727
5. Share no personal information and images on social networks	9.09	29,55	48,64	12,72	2,65
6. Always be careful of online conversations and meetings	5,91	30	35	29,09	2,873
7. Learn how to protect yourself against risk factors from using the internet through classes/skills lessons or club activities.	100	0	0	0	1

4. CONCLUSION

It is shown through research results that students have a certain awareness of online sexual abuse and its risks, but a part of students still do not correctly identify these contents. Based on their responses, students easily have a subjective attitude in preventing sexual abuse online. The study also shows that the prevention and self-protection from the risks of online sexual abuse have been mentioned by students, however, those activities have not been really concerned and focused on a regular basis. Therefore, the effectiveness of prevention and self-protection is not high.

On the basis of understanding the reality of students' awareness of behavioral expressions and response to the risk of sexual abuse in cyberspace, the study shows that the risks of child sexual abuse in cyberspace have already existed but still in continuity as their awareness and response have certain limitations. Therefore, the study proposes supportive activities from the perspective of social work at school to prevent and reduce the risk of child sexual abuse in cyberspace for secondary school students in the subsequent research contents.

REFERENCES

1. https://dangcongsan.vn/xa-hoi/bao-ve-tre-em-tren-khong-gian-mang-582802.html
2. https://www.unicef.org/vietnam/en/stories/things-to-know-to-be-all-in-cyber-space
3. Law on Children 2016, No. 102/2016/QH13.
4. Nguyen Le Hoai Anh, "Risks of sexual abuse in cyberspace and prevention measures", Journal of Science, Hanoi National University of Education, 2015.
5. Nguyen Thi Mai Huong and Nguyen Thu Trang "Awareness of child sexual abuse in cyberspace and solutions" Scientific journal, Hanoi National University of Education, No.65, 2020.

6. Institute of Health Economics (IHE), 2010. Sexual abuse of Children and Teenagers in cyberspace: A quick review of the Scientific Literature.
7. Kerryan Walsh (2018), School-Based Education Programs for the Prevention of Child Sexual Abuse: A Cochrane Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis.
8. Nation Crime Agency (2014), What is sexual abuse on the Internet.