Childhood Emotional maltreatment: Experiences of young Australians with Facebook accounts

Summary of Results

During July-August 2011, the Australian Centre for Child Protection conducted research looking at the experience of childhood emotional maltreatment in young Australians with Facebook accounts. Individuals were approached to participate in an online survey of positive and negative childhood experiences through Facebook advertisements and wall posts. This resulted in a participant sample of 101 young adults living in South Australia that was predominantly female. Below is a summary of results obtained through this research. We would like to thank you for your participation and patience in receiving this summary.

Prevalence of Child Maltreatment

It was found that physical abuse was the most commonly experienced form of maltreatment experienced in childhood, followed by neglect, emotional maltreatment then exposure to domestic violence. This study found high rates of childhood maltreatment compared to prior research conducted in Australia; although this is likely due to the self-selected nature of this study resulting in more individuals who experienced maltreatment in childhood taking part.

When compared to the occurrence of abuse and neglect, substantially fewer participants considered the treatment they received as a child to be maltreatment. This provides support to international literature that suggests it is more beneficial to ask about specific maltreatment experiences rather than using general, subjective terms or statements.

Some form of maltreatment was experienced by nearly three quarters of the participants with 47 having experienced more than one form of maltreatment. This is consistent with previous research and, as parenting behaviour often falls into several types of maltreatment, it is suggested that the degree or severity of this behaviour should be investigated not individual types. This means service providers may benefit from focusing less on specifying types of maltreatment, but rather focus on the degree of severity of children’s overall experience. As such, service providers should investigate the occurrence of other types in addition to the presenting concern.

Approximately one quarter of the participants experienced childhood emotional maltreatment with almost 9% of these being serious maltreatment. Childhood emotional maltreatment was found to co-occur highly with other maltreatment types as the majority of those who experienced emotional maltreatment also experienced physical abuse and physical neglect. Supervisory neglect and exposure to domestic violence were also experienced by just over half of the participants who experienced emotional maltreatment in childhood. This also provides support that maltreatment types should be investigated together and not separately because it is likely that more than one type has been experienced.
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Facebook and Research

We were also interested in finding out if Facebook was a viable way for investigating childhood maltreatment experienced by young adults. The results indicate that Facebook has potential for this use as the participant sample was fairly representative of the population of young adults in South Australia when compared to the Australian Bureau of Statistics census data. Also, the majority of participants believed that the use of Facebook is appropriate for research and research on sensitive issues; and that they would take part in other research using Facebook as an invitation.

This means that it may be beneficial for researchers and service providers to further investigate the use of Facebook for recruiting participants to research and distributing the services to a target audience. More research is needed to further investigate and understand the use of Facebook to recruit individuals to participate in research. However, the acceptability of this methodology suggests that it is a promising tool for recruiting participants, particularly young adults.