Title: Risk Behaviors for Cybervictimization among Individuals with Down Syndrome

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Introduction: Individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) increasingly have access to the Internet but little is known about how they interact with others while online. While Internet access increases opportunities for social connection for individuals with IDD, it also may increase risk of cybervictimization. In an earlier study, Lough and Fisher (2016) developed the E-Safety Scenarios task to assess the likelihood that individuals with IDD engage in certain risky behaviors online. This measure was initially administered to 28 individuals with Williams syndrome (WS). The authors reported that individuals with WS were more likely to agree to engage in socially risky behaviors compared to risky behaviors that are not social in nature when online (e.g., participants were more likely to agree to meet an “online friend” in person than they were to give their bank account information for winning a “contest”). Given that individuals with other genetic intellectual disability conditions may also be vulnerable to cybervictimization, the current study will examine the risk of cybervictimization of individuals with Down syndrome.

Method: As a part of a larger study, the E-Safety Scenarios task was administered to 10 young adults with Down syndrome. The E-Safety Scenarios task consisted of 12 scenarios in which the participant was asked how he/she would respond. Three options were presented for each scenario, and the selected answers were scored on a scale of 1 - 3, with higher scores representing higher risk options. Specifically, the option considered the lowest risk (e.g., said ‘no’ to the request) was scored (1). The option considered the highest risk (e.g., agreed to the request) was scored (3). The final option (scored 2) had the potential to lead toward a riskier situation but provided a delay in agreeing to the request. The options were presented in a random order for each scenario. An example of a scenario presented was as follows; ‘You met a new friend online named Alex. You like all of the same things and have a lot in common, but you have never met before in real life. Alex wants to meet up soon so you can do something fun together. What would you do?’ The participants could select their answer from the following options; (scored 3) ‘Make plans to meet Alex as soon as possible’, (2) ‘Tell Alex you’re busy but would love to meet sometime soon’ or (1) ‘Say no, you don’t think it’s a good idea’.

Results: Overall, individuals with Down syndrome chose few risky behaviors when responding to options on the E-Safety Scenarios, although responses varied depending on the type of scenario. For example, when examining the 4 scenarios that were not social in nature, no participant with Down syndrome would share a password (100% chose lowest risk response) and no participant would give their bank account information (87.5% chose lowest risk option and 12.5% chose medium risk). Responses were slightly more variable for social scenarios. No participant with Down syndrome chose the highest risk option for arranging to meet a stranger in person, arranging to go to an online friend’s house, accepting a friend request from an unknown individual, or clicking a link to e-mail unknown person. On the other hand, 40% of participants with Down syndrome indicated that would keep an online relationship a secret from parents if they were asked to do so and 40% indicated that they would send photos of themselves to an unknown person (highest risk option). Additionally, slightly over half of the participants with Down syndrome (57.1%) indicated they would hide their online activity from their parents.

Conclusions: Overall, individuals with Down syndrome displayed low risk behaviors when responding to scenarios designed to assess risk of cybervictimization. Individuals with Down syndrome seemed aware that they should not share personal information with individuals they meet online and that they should not arrange to meet a stranger on their own. At the same time, responses to certain scenarios raise concern for whether individuals with Down syndrome might still find themselves in vulnerable situations that could likely lead to coercion from individuals on the internet. These findings highlight the need for additional research concerning the online behaviors of individuals with Down syndrome and other IDD conditions. Findings point to the need for additional training on internet safety and parental awareness concerning the potential for individuals with IDD to hide online behaviors.

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