

Child Pornography: Not Our Problem?



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Recently, we learned of several youth-serving organizations that had employees or volunteers charged with Internet crimes against children. The most common crime was possession or distribution of child pornography. Most often the incriminating evidence was found on the personal computers of the individuals charged. Some cases had images of children from organizations where the individuals held positions; in some, the images were of children unaffiliated with the organization. In all cases the organizations were blind-sided – they had no inkling that their staff members had any interests in child pornography let alone were actively involved in its possession or distribution.

As law-enforcement agencies become more adept at policing the Internet, we suspect that this kind of case will become more common. Our suspicions are based on several factors:

1. The Internet is perceived as providing a degree of anonymity to users who have an interest that they might not have attempted to satisfy without perceived anonymity.
2. Organizations serving children and youth attract individuals who may seek access to children for a variety of reasons including sexual interests.
3. Law-enforcement agencies give cases involving individuals with connections to organizations a high priority when selecting cases to prosecute.
4. Politically, being tough on Internet users who possess or distribute child pornography is a win-win issue.

Child- and youth-serving organizations need to develop strategies to prevent and respond to staff member involvement in child pornography cases.

Prevention Strategies

In spite of the fact that many child pornography cases do not involve on-the-job behavior, organizations should, through their training programs, institute steps to inform staff about the realities of child pornography and the consequences its possession or distribution. Child pornography is a crime. It is the photographic evidence of a child being sexually abused. There is no justification or rationale for excusing the creation, possession or distribution of pornographic pictures of children. The Internet does not afford protection for distributors or viewers of child pornography. Law-enforcement agencies can identify with an amazing degree of accuracy sources of child pornography. Law-enforcement agencies go after distribution networks and track the receivers of child pornography through their suppliers. Individuals charged with the possession and distribution of child pornography can expect public stigmatization, loss of employment, life-long requirement to register as a sex

offender, and the loss of relationships with loved ones. If charged and found guilty of possession or distribution of child pornography, individuals can expect to receive lengthy prison sentences.

Organizations should also review their internal procedures to ensure that staff members are not using the nonprofit's technology resources to receive or distribute child pornography.

Response Strategies

Organizations cannot stand mute when an employee or volunteer is charged with an Internet crime against children. Here are some suggested response strategies:

1. Validate the victimization of the children whose images were found and reinforce the seriousness of the crime. A statement to the effect that "Child pornography is a serious crime. Each pornographic picture of a child represents an instance of child sexual exploitation. Our care and heartfelt concern goes out to each of the unfortunate children who have been abused in this manner."
2. Cooperate with the authorities conducting the investigation. Indicate, "We are working with the authorities to determine if any of our children were abused. To date, we have been unable to identify any of our children as victims."
3. Educate the community about steps the organization takes to protect children. For example, "Our organization takes the protection of children very seriously. We offer training programs to our employees and volunteers. We have strong policies for screening staff members and enforce youth protection policies as we conduct our programs. We also offer parents and children information concerning sexual abuse."
4. Let the community know that the organization has taken prompt action to remove the alleged abuser from contact with the organization. Issue a statement such as, "Upon notification that _____ was arrested and charged with _____, the organization has suspended the individual from all contact with the organization until the charges are resolved. We will continue to cooperate with authorities."

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