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CHILD & YOUTH ADVOCACY CENTRE of Kelowna

# Technology-Facilitated Harm Among Adolescents: Prevention, Intervention, and Recommendations


## Acknowledgement

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## Introduction

The rapid spread of technology has significantly reshaped interpersonal relationships and identity development, particularly among adolescents. According to the 2016 General Social Survey, 95% of Canadians under 45 access the internet daily, with 76% owning cell phones (Atwal & Browne, 2024). These numbers have likely increased in subsequent years. As young people increasingly interact through social media, messaging applications, and other online platforms, collectively referred to as electronic communication technologies (ECT), these tools have become integral to their experiences in forming and navigating relationships (Draucker & Martsolf, 2010). ECTs also provide a significant context for adolescents to construct their identities and establish interpersonal connections (Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008). However, this shift has also coincided with a troubling rise in what this literature review terms Technology-Facilitated Harm (TFH), a phenomenon that poses substantial risks to the safety and well-being of adolescents.

TFH encompasses a range of behaviours, including psychological, emotional, and sexual abuse, as well as coercive and controlling tactics, all facilitated through digital means. These behaviours often mirror offline forms of violence and aggression (e.g., intimate partner violence, bullying) but with the distinguishing characteristic of being mediated through ECTs (e.g., text messaging, social media, direct messaging, etc.; Cutbush et al., 2012). Likewise, online victimization can predict offline victimization. Empirical research demonstrates that exposure to offline physical dating violence and community violence is positively associated with experiences of TFH among adolescents (Epstein-Ngo et al., 2014).

The literature identifies several overlapping forms of TFH, including Technology Facilitated Sexual Violence (TFSV) or Technology Facilitated Harmful Sexual Behaviour (TFHSB), Technology-Assisted Adolescent Dating Violence and Abuse (TAADVA), Cyber-Dating Violence (CDV), Technology-Assisted Child Sexual Abuse (TA-CSA), Cyberstalking, and Non-Consensual Image Sharing. However, these terms together do not entirely encompass the range and ever-evolving nature of TFH. Furthermore, the availability of similar and overlapping terms for TFH makes the phenomenon extremely difficult to study and to synthesize findings.

TFSV, a specific subset of TFH, encompasses any sexually aggressive or harassing behaviour conducted through technology (Henry & Powell, 2018) and can be categorized into four main types (Henry & Powell, 2016). First, digital sexual harassment includes any unwanted sexual behaviour facilitated by technology that results in feelings of humiliation, offence, or intimidation for the recipient, such as receiving unsolicited sexual images (e.g., "dick pics"). This category also encompasses cyberstalking, characterized by partner monitoring or relational monitoring (Powell & Henry, 2016). Second, online image-based sexual abuse (IBSA) and Non-Consensual Image Sharing are closely related behaviours. IBSA refers to the non-consensual distribution of nude or sexually explicit images, commonly known as revenge pornography. This behaviour is highly correlated with sexting, defined as sharing sexual images via direct messaging or other platforms (Cooper et al., 2016; Patrick et al., 2015; Spencer et al., 2015). Research indicates that about two-thirds of university students have engaged in sexting, with one-fifth reporting coercion into sexting through repeated requests or feelings of obligation (Drouin et al., 2015). Non-Consensual Image Sharing involves distributing private images without permission, often as an act of control or revenge, and is frequently associated with the concept of 'revenge porn' as it is colloquially known (McGlynn & Rackley, 2017; Walker & Sleath, 2017). Sextortion, another form of TFSV, involves sexual coercion through nonphysical pressure, such as blackmail or threats (Barak, 2005). Third, sexual aggression and coercion encompass behaviours that use technology to perpetrate contact sexual offences (e.g., using a dating app to meet and assault someone) or to amplify the harm of an offline sexual offence through the distribution of assault images (Powell & Henry, 2016; Powell, 2010). Fourth, gender and sexuality-based harassment includes unwelcome comments aimed at insulting individuals based on their gender, with cyberbullying often categorized within this group (Powell & Henry, 2016).

Additionally, TAADVA is defined as control, harassment, and abuse of a current or former dating partner through technology (Van Ouytsel et al., 2016), while CDV involves psychological aggression facilitated through technology. TA-CSA includes sexually exploitative

behaviours such as online grooming and image-based sexual abuse (Quayle et al., 2024; Henry & Powell, 2018). Cyberstalking refers explicitly to the repeated use of electronic communication to harass or instill fear in another person (Reyns, 2019). The multiplicity of overlapping terminologies for similar, yet distinct behaviours complicate research and treatment in this field, hindering the standardization of definitions, impeding consistent data collection, and creating barriers to the development of universally applicable interventions (Powell & Henry, 2018; Walker & Sleath, 2017). Despite minor differences in specific characteristics, these terms collectively represent various forms of TFH, united by their reliance on digital means to perpetrate harm.

## Initiation of the Literature Review

During a roundtable addressing the needs of children affected by intimate partner violence, the issue of peer-on-peer abuse was raised by local organizations, highlighting a trend of TFH among adolescents in our community of Kelowna, BC, Canada. Local experts at the table quickly acknowledged that this area requires further attention but is too large to address within the current project. A follow-up meeting was held between key stakeholders and experts in the community, such as the Kelowna General Hospital Foundation, the Child and Youth Advocacy Centre of Kelowna, and a local Youth Field Catalyst to explore this topic and what it might look like for our community. It was determined that there is a need to explore TFH more thoroughly and that consultation with community members and the literature was required before we can determine what our community needs in order to begin to get ahead of the propagation of harmful behaviours online. Given the pervasiveness of TFH, along with anecdotal evidence of its severity within our community, we embarked on a literature review to explore the prevalence and impact of TFH among adolescents, critically evaluate the effectiveness of prevalent prevention and intervention efforts and conclude with evidence-based recommendations to enhance the efficacy of these strategies.

## Methods

### Literature Review

This literature review was carried out by a local expert from the CYAC, with guidance from the Youth Field Catalyst from the Kelowna General Hospital Foundation and oversight from the leadership team at the CYAC. The literature review used a comprehensive search of key terms related to TFH behaviours among adolescents mentioned above. Initial terms included "technology-facilitated harmful sexual behaviour," "adolescents," "teenagers," "youth," and "intervention" and “prevention” strategies. These search terms were used across multiple platforms, including Google Scholar, UBC Library Database, and Elicit's literature review

software. Elicit, leveraging AI technology, enabled a rapid assessment of abstracts from online journal publications to identify relevant studies. As the review progressed, several additional terms were identified to refine the search, ensuring comprehensive coverage of the topic. These terms included:

- Technology-facilitated sexual violence (TFSV)
- Technology-delivered dating aggression (TDA)
- Technology-assisted adolescent dating violence and abuse (TAADVA)
- Cyber-dating violence (CDV)
- Non-consensual image sharing (NCIS)
- Sextortion
- Technology-assisted child sexual abuse (TA-CSA)
- Cyberstalking
- Technology-facilitated peer abuse (TFPA)
- Cyberbullying
- Sexting

**Focus Group with CYAC Youth Advisory Committee**

In addition to the literature review, a focus group was carried out with the CYAC Youth Advisory Committee, a diverse group of 8 youth aged 18 to 26, who provided feedback on strategies that may increase the uptake of prevention and intervention efforts among adolescents in our community. The feedback gathered from this group was instrumental in shaping recommendations for improving engagement with adolescents, addressing TFH, and enhancing the effectiveness of prevention programs. The Youth Advisory Committee's input provided valuable context and direction for how to best implement these strategies within our local community.

**Prevalence and Forms of Technology-Facilitated Harm**

The increasing prevalence of digital communication tools has coincided with a surge in various forms of TFH, including TAADVA, CDV, and TA-CSA. Empirical studies indicate that peers frequently carry out these behaviours. In Canada, the non-consensual distribution of intimate images was primarily carried out by similar-aged peers, with 97% of perpetrators being peers from 2015 to 2022 and the majority of those, 86%, being boys (Canada, 2024). The most common relationships between perpetrators and victims were casual acquaintances (33%), current or former dating partners (28%), and friends (21%; Canada, 2024). Total online child sexual exploitation, including online sexual offences against children, has steadily increased,

with rates of child pornography quadrupling (Canada, 2024). Adolescents may leverage online platforms to exert control, harass, stalk, and abuse current or former partners, reflecting abusive behaviours that often parallel offline dynamics (Cutbush et al., 2012; Van Ouytsel et al., 2016). The spectrum of behaviours ranges from cyber control and harassment to digital sexual coercion, all of which result in significant emotional and psychological consequences for victims (Epstein-Ngo et al., 2014; Patel & Roesch, 2020).

**Diversity and Technology-Facilitated Harm**

TFH disproportionately affects minority groups, with gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status shaping the experiences of victims. 2SLGBTQI+ individuals and those from marginalized racial or ethnic groups are more vulnerable, often facing abuse intertwined with discrimination and limited access to supportive services (Porter et al., 2024; Gamez-Guadix et al., 2015). Cultural norms and socioeconomic challenges, including limited digital literacy, further complicate resource access, increasing vulnerability to TFH (Porter et al., 2024). Studies indicate that TFH is widespread, with 70% of young adults reporting some form of victimization. Victimization is notably higher among women, 2SLGBQI+ young adults, and individuals with a public following (Mumford et al., 2023). Sexual and gender minorities, in particular, experience higher levels of TFH, highlighting the need for culturally sensitive and accessible interventions to effectively support those impacted by TFH, especially among 2SLGBTQI+ youth and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Stonard et al., 2014; Porter et al., 2024).

**Types of Programs**

**School-Based Interventions:** Programs like Kids in the Know, Safe Text, and Digital Respect educate adolescents on both online and offline abusive behaviours, focusing on risks like privacy violations and consent breaches. These initiatives have demonstrated moderate success, with reductions in sexting and digital coercion by 15-20% (Stonard, 2021). Similarly, programs like CyberSafe and Respecting Boundaries focus on improving digital literacy to help adolescents recognize and address abusive online behaviours (Galende et al., 2020; Machimbarrena et al., 2018). Studies have shown that integrating school-wide approaches with parental involvement, as seen with programs like Media Heroes, significantly enhances the effectiveness of these interventions, leading to improved outcomes (Elsaesser et al., 2017).

**Therapeutic Interventions:** Therapeutic programs like Safe Online Relationships combine therapeutic techniques with digital communication training to support victims and perpetrators of abusive behaviours. Participants have reported reductions of 35% in trauma symptoms and a 40% decrease in abusive behaviours (Rey-Anacona, 2019; Shorey et al., 2015). Digital health interventions (DHIs), such as the i-Minds app, incorporate mentalization strategies that help

adolescents better understand online risks and relational dynamics (Bucci et al., 2023; Quayle et al., 2024). Parent-focused interventions, as emphasized by Elsaesser et al. (2017), can complement these therapeutic programs by encouraging parents to model healthy online behaviours and maintain open communication with their children about digital interactions.

**Digital Tools:** Mobile applications like MyPlan and LoveIsRespect provide real-time resources for adolescents to assess relationship safety, access crisis counselling, and recognize abusive behaviours. These tools have been shown to increase adolescents' confidence in identifying and reporting abusive behaviours by up to 25% (Brignone & Edleson, 2019; Levesque et al., 2016). Additionally, digital interventions that incorporate parent-oriented features, such as tracking tools or resources for discussing digital risks, further enhance the effectiveness of these tools (Elsaesser et al., 2017). These combined features help adolescents and parents engage with digital safety tools more effectively.

**Parent-Focused Interventions:** Elsaesser and colleagues (2017) emphasize parents' essential role in preventing cyberbullying. By modelling appropriate digital behaviours, setting clear expectations, and maintaining open communication, parents can significantly reduce the risk of online harm to their children. Programs designed specifically for parents educate them on monitoring online activities, recognizing warning signs of cyberbullying, and empowering adolescents with strategies to navigate digital spaces safely. Blending school, family, and community-level approaches, such as Media Heroes or Expect Respect, demonstrates the importance of a collaborative approach that fosters a culture of safety and respect both online and offline. This holistic model, which includes the involvement of parents, schools, and the community, is crucial in combating technology-facilitated harm and supporting positive digital behaviours among adolescents.

**Public Resources:** In Canada, several public resources are dedicated to assisting adolescents and youth in navigating online safety and addressing digital harm. Programs such as Kids in the Know, developed by the Canadian Centre for Child Protection, provide interactive education to reduce the online and offline victimization risk. MediaSmarts, a national non-profit, focuses on digital and media literacy, empowering youth to assess information and become responsible digital citizens. Cybertip.ca serves as Canada's national tipline for reporting online sexual exploitation, while Get Cyber Safe, a government initiative, offers resources for families and youth to protect themselves online. Kids Help Phone provides 24/7 confidential counselling, supporting various digital safety issues. Additionally, ProtectKidsOnline.ca equips parents with tools to keep their children safe online, and the RCMP provides internet safety resources focused on issues like cyberbullying and online scams. These programs collectively offer resources to support youth in managing online risks and fostering safe digital behaviour.

**Effectiveness of Prevention and Intervention Programs**

Despite the availability of numerous prevention and intervention programs aimed at mitigating TFH, their effectiveness varies widely. Educational programs tend to increase awareness regarding the risks associated with digital relationships, yet achieving sustained behavioural change remains elusive. While interventions such as "Safe Text" and "Digital Respect" demonstrate short-term reductions in abusive behaviours, the long-term impact on digital aggression remains unclear (Stonard, 2021; Reed et al., 2016). Digital health interventions, such as the "i-Minds" app, have garnered praise for their innovative approaches, but challenges related to workload and implementation continue to inhibit widespread adoption (Bucci et al., 2023).

Programs such as the "Safe Online Relationships" intervention, which combines therapy sessions with digital communication training, have shown promising results, particularly in reducing trauma symptoms and abusive tendencies (Rey-Anacona, 2019). Additionally, integrated digital tools, like "MyPlan" and "LoveIsRespect," have been instrumental in helping adolescents navigate abusive relationships by increasing their confidence to identify and report abuse (Brignone & Edleson, 2019). Evaluations show that these interventions significantly contribute to recognizing abusive behaviours and foster improved coping mechanisms (Galende et al., 2020; Emerson et al., 2023). Furthermore, educational and skills-based programs such as "Healthy Online Relationships" and "Teen Digital Safety" have been moderately effective in reducing TAADVA, especially when interactive activities and peer-led components are included (Fellmeth et al., 2013). Evaluations of these initiatives underscore the value of engaging students through interactive methods that foster empowerment and reinforce positive relationship behaviours (Cooper et al., 2016).

The success of prevention programs also hinges on integrating a comprehensive community approach. For instance, Canada's top five successful bully intervention programs shared common characteristics, such as intervening at multiple levels, addressing attitudes and interpersonal skills, and involving parents and the larger community (Canada, 2024). Additionally, the involvement of parents, educators, and community members in interventions enhances their reach and efficacy (Tozzo et al., 2022). Programs like "Safe Text" and "Digital Respect" employ both online and offline components to educate teens about the risks of 'sexting' and digital coercion and have been shown to reduce instances of these behaviours by 15-20% (Stonard, 2021). Digital Respect, for example, emphasizes respect in digital relationships through interactive group discussions about power dynamics and control, resulting in a 20% reduction in technology-assisted dating violence among participants (Stonard, 2021). Moreover, interventions aimed at building digital literacy, such as integrating Digital Citizenship programs,

have been found to promote safer digital habits and reduce risks associated with TFH. The evidence suggests that education focusing on the responsible use of technology is crucial in preventing harmful behaviours (Jones & Mitchell, 2015; Moreno et al., 2013).

Research has demonstrated that integrated programs addressing online, and offline behaviours are more effective than standalone digital safety initiatives. Given that two-thirds of cyberbullying incidents overlap with offline harassment, adopting a holistic approach that addresses both contexts is crucial (Mitchell et al., 2016; Mishna et al., 2010). Furthermore, programs like "Media Heroes," which actively involve parents and students, have shown more significant and lasting reductions in traditional and cyberbullying behaviours (Zagorscak et al., 2018).

**Recommendations for Enhancing Intervention and Prevention Efforts**

The following recommendations integrate insights from literature and the Youth Advisory Committee to create a comprehensive strategy for enhancing these efforts:

1. **Integrated and Youth-Centered Approaches:** Prevention efforts should be embedded within broader relationship education initiatives that address both online and offline risks. Programs should prioritize creating a youth-centered, relatable learning environment that respects adolescents' knowledge and experiences. This approach ensures that adolescents can effectively manage the spectrum of harmful behaviours they may encounter. Programs that reduce the hierarchical nature of interventions, such as those with young presenters who share similar experiences to the participants, are more likely to increase engagement (Finkelhor et al., 2021).
2. **Culturally Tailored and Inclusive Programs:** Prevention and intervention efforts must be tailored to meet the needs of marginalized groups, including 2SLGBTQ youth and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. These programs should be culturally sensitive and inclusive of diverse backgrounds, ensuring that they resonate with adolescents and are accessible, engaging, and effective (Porter et al., 2024; Lucero et al., 2014). Emphasizing cultural relevance makes interventions more relatable, improving both engagement and outcomes.
3. **Parental Involvement and Education:** Programs should encourage parental involvement by fostering open communication rather than relying on restrictive supervision, which has been linked to increased risky online behaviour (Sasson & Mesch, 2014). Involving parents in the creation of rules surrounding internet and technology use and offering training on effective monitoring and supportive guidance has proven to reduce instances of cyberbullying and cyber victimization (Elsaesser et al., 2017). This

collaborative approach between youth and parents enhances the overall efficacy of prevention efforts.

4. **Peer Mentorship and Role Models:** Peer mentorship programs, where older students educate younger peers about online safety, have proven to be effective in raising awareness and reducing harmful behaviours (Boulton et al., 2016; Christensen et al., 2014). Programs like the CATZ initiative, in which older students educate younger peers, have yielded positive outcomes in enhancing knowledge and reducing abusive behaviours (Boulton et al., 2016; Christensen et al., 2014). Adolescents are more likely to engage when they can learn from peers they admire or relate to, such as university students or influencers. These programs leverage peer influence, which plays a significant role in shaping youth behaviour.
5. **Fun and Engaging Formats:** Interventions should integrate education with fun and engaging activities to maintain adolescents' interest. Programs that incorporate gaming conventions, social gatherings, or other interactive formats are more likely to resonate with youth. By blending entertainment with educational content, these programs make learning about technology-related harm more engaging and less like a traditional lecture, enhancing participation and retention.
6. **Incentives and Motivation:** Offering incentives such as food, prizes, or the opportunity to avoid unpleasant situations like tests or detention can significantly increase participation in prevention programs. Other rewards, such as money, trips, or day passes, can further motivate youth to engage and take ownership of their safety online. Clear, meaningful incentives can foster a sense of agency and investment in the program.
7. **Educational Content Focused on Empowerment:** Interventions should prioritize education that empowers rather than instills fear. Programs should raise awareness about online risks while empowering youth to make informed decisions. Including real stories from peers or survivors of TFH makes the content more relatable and impactful. This approach encourages understanding and resilience instead of relying on scare tactics.
8. **Anonymity and Privacy:** The committee highlighted that programs should offer adolescents the option to remain anonymous. Creating environments where participants can engage without fear of stigma or exposure, such as through online platforms or private settings, is essential to making them feel comfortable and supported.
9. **Integration of Digital Tools and Technology:** Given the increasing role of technology in adolescents' lives, interventions should incorporate digital tools and platforms. Programs should be led by individuals who understand the challenges youth face in digital spaces, ensuring that the content is relevant and relatable. This use of technology allows programs to better connect with adolescents and address online risks effectively.

10. **Continuous Program Evaluation:** Ongoing evaluation is necessary to ensure that programs remain responsive to youth's evolving needs. Rigorous assessments, including randomized control trials and longitudinal studies, can help identify the effectiveness of existing interventions. Including qualitative data to capture participants' lived experiences ensures that interventions are both impactful and adaptable to diverse contexts (Wolfe et al., 2009).
11. **Theoretical Alignment:** Prevention programs should be aligned with established theoretical frameworks, such as the Social Learning Theory, which emphasizes the role of modelling and reinforcement in behaviour (Bandura, 1977). This alignment helps to create evidence-based practices that are comprehensive and adaptable to the multifaceted nature of TFH, ensuring long-term success in reducing harmful behaviours (Shorey et al., 2015).

Combining these literature-based recommendations with insights from the Youth Advisory Committee can significantly enhance the effectiveness of intervention and prevention programs. This approach ensures that programs are engaging, culturally relevant, and equipped to address adolescents' diverse and evolving needs in both online and offline spaces.

**Conclusion**

TFH, including TAADVA, CDV, TA-CSA, Revenge Porn, Cyberstalking, and Non-Consensual Image Sharing, represent significant challenges for adolescents. Addressing these issues necessitates comprehensive intervention and prevention strategies. While some existing programs have shown promise, sustained and widespread change requires integrated, culturally tailored, and interactive approaches. The most effective strategies are those that simultaneously address online and offline relational dynamics, involve parents in supportive roles, engage peers through mentorship, continuously evaluate program efficacy, and ensure alignment with established theoretical frameworks. By holistically tackling the complexities of technology-facilitated harm, we can work towards fostering safer and healthier relationships among today's youth.

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