**Article Title**

Online Contact Between Therapeutic Staff and At-Risk Adolescents Through Social Networks: Uses and Challenges

**Abstract**

**Background**: The dominance of social networks among adolescents has led educators to take advantage of this space to strengthen their connection with students, in both routine and emergency situations. This potential is relevant especially for at-risk youths given the place and dominant role of social networks in their lives.

**Research Aim**: To examine if and how therapeutic staff members take advantage of social networks for reaching out and emotionally supporting at-risk adolescents, given the advantages and disadvantages of the online sphere.

**Methodology**: Qualitative methodology including in-depth interviews with therapeutic staff: counselors, youth coordinators, social workers, and clinical psychologists.

**Findings**: Apart from organizational aspects, online communication enables and improves the therapeutic staff’s capabilities in three main areas: 1. Creating initial contact, maintaining reciprocal, continuous, and meaningful contact over time, and establishing a therapeutic bond with the teens; 2. Identifying dangers and distress; 3. Intervention and providing immediate psycho-social assistance. These objectives are made possible because of the unique characteristics that online channels offer, including a mediating presence, concealment, anonymity, and preventive communication, all of which provide a response to the unique traits and preferences of at-risk youth. Concerns that arose from the integration of the new technologies in the therapeutic act touch upon questions related to the privacy of both therapist and patient, blurring of authority and boundaries, and reluctance to use the word “therapy” in the online context.

**Conclusions and Implications**: Given that use of the online space is still “fresh” for most therapeutic staff, their activity is characterized by trial and error, intuitive decisions, and mainly by retrospective reflection as they share their concerns with their peers. In addition, there is a need for a professional training program for members of therapeutic staff who wish to operate (also) by means of technologies in the online space.

Keywords: social networks; interaction between therapeutic staff and at-risk youth; therapy in the online sphere; online outreach; identifying distress on social networks.