

Children and the Internet Update: Issues for Parents and Teachers

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It has often been said - particularly by the media - that the Internet can be a potentially dangerous place for children. Parents and teachers are sometimes left with the dilemma of wanting to give children access to the information superhighway knowing that some of the "information" out there is not the kind of material with which we would want our children to have access to (e.g. pornography, racist propaganda etc.).

One of the major dangers for children - at least according to the media - are the use of Internet chat rooms. In the US there are a number of cases where children have been lured to meet someone that they met in a chat room only to find it was an adult pretending to be a child. This process commonly known as "grooming" is a worrying trend and appears to be on the increase.

Thankfully, on May 1st 2004, the UK Government introduced legislation that made grooming a criminal for the first time. The coverage of the Soham murders highlighted the potential dangers although in this particular instance, it turned out to be a false lead. However, it did at least raise awareness of the issue.

Another worry is children who engage in playful and exploratory word searches can come across hardcore pornography quite accidentally. For instance, one case involved thousands of American children being exposed to very hardcore pornography after typing in the word "Bambi". Other less obvious danger areas include being recipients of "spamming" (i.e., receiving verbally abusive e-mail messages) and invitations to join services related to financial gain.

Pornography and its distribution are now widespread. In the UK, it is estimated that over half of all word searches are aimed at locating pornography (Griffiths, 2000). Further to this, unsubstantiated reports by family campaigners have claimed that in the period 1997 to 1999 there was a 40% increase in the number of UK Internet users who were regularly accessing hardcore pornography and paedophilic material. Academic researchers also claim that "sex" is the most searched for topic on the Internet and as many as one third of all Internet users visit some type of sexual site (Griffiths 2002).

Children and Internet pornography

One of the biggest fears among parents who are thinking of using the Internet is that their children will be exposed to pornography particularly because over 20 million children using the Internet worldwide. Issues surrounding censorship are high on the moral agenda but preventing access to such sites is difficult. A major US

survey undertaken in the late 1990s by the Annenberg Public Policy Center reported that 75% of parents were anxious about what their children might be exposed to on the Internet. To what extent is this fear justified? The media has certainly played a role in heightening parents' fears as two-thirds of all newspaper articles about the Internet highlight negative aspects and one in four mentioned child pornography.

This is not without some real fear as it is not at all difficult to access - especially with the development of powerful yet easy-to-use search engines. In fact, a survey by the National Opinion Poll (NOP) found that a third of UK children had found content on the Internet that upset or embarrassed them - up from 20% in the previous survey (Griffiths, 2000). Of this material, 58% was described as being "rude". Given that the same NOP poll found that one in four UK children aged seven to sixteen years old (i.e., 3 million children) are regular Internet users with half of them doing it from home, it therefore appears there may be widespread cause for alarm.

Preventing access

There are many steps a parent can take to prevent their child from accessing pornography including:

- ✓ reading guidelines for parents which run through issues and possible approaches for overseeing Internet use by children. These include those produced in offline versions (see Figure 1) or those that can be found online. These include such sites as the Netparents resource collection (www.netparents.org/parentstips/resources.html), NCH Action for children site (www.ncha.org.uk/Internet/index.html) and Schoolzone's resources (www.schoolzone.co.uk/resources/safety_frame.htm)
- ✓ being with your children at all times when they access the Internet
- ✓ joining an Internet service provider that prevents its users from accessing such things
- ✓ installing one of the many different types of blocking package on the market that filter content in some way. These include those which use lists of key words that you can define (e.g. Net Nanny), software packages that can block certain areas of the Internet such as Usenet groups or which restrict access at certain times (e.g. Cyber Patrol), packages which have a built in censor to certain categories as defined by the maker of the package (SurfWatch) or packages which block access to certain file types like GIF and JPEG which are lot of pornographic images use. However, there may be a "technological generation gap" as the recent poll by NOP reported that children knew more about filtering software than their parents.

Despite packages which block access to pornographic sites, such packages can still be circumvented. It appears to be the

case that parents are not as vigilant about their children's Internet use as they could be. For instance, a survey of 500 online households by the US-based National Center for Missing and Exploited Children found that 20% of parents did not supervise their children's Internet use, while 71% of parents with children aged 14 or older said they had stopped monitoring their children's Internet use.

The issues raised here are not meant to be alarmist but have been highlighted to raise awareness amongst interested parties of Internet issues concerning the exploitation of children and/or potential unsuitability of some material. These issues need explicitly stating as there may be a "technological generation gap" between adults and children. Everyone involved with the contemporary technological issues needs to be both educated about the Internet as well as being educational with the Internet.

References

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Figure 1: Guidelines for children on how to be safe on the Internet

- (1) Never tell anyone that you meet on the Internet your home address, telephone number or school's name unless you are given permission by a parent or carer.
- (2) Never send anyone your picture, credit card or bank details (or anything else).
- (3) Never give your password to anyone - even your best friend.
- (4) Never arrange to meet anyone in person that you have met on the Internet without first agreeing it with your parent or carer.
- (5) Never stay in a chat room or in a conference if someone says or writes something which makes you feel uncomfortable or worried. Always report it to your parent or carer.
- (6) Never respond to nasty, suggestive or rude e-mails or postings in Usenet groups.
- (7) If you see bad language or distasteful pictures while you are online, always tell your parent or carer.
- (8) When you are online, always be yourself and do not pretend to be anyone or anything you are not.
- (9) Always remember that if someone makes you an offer which seems to good to be true - then it probably is.

(from NCH Action for Children- Children on the Internet : Opportunities and Hazards, 1998)