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Children and the Internet -- Issues for the Criminal Justice System

This Week

Article

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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 (eg, pornography, racist propaganda, etc).

Dangers on the Internet

In addition to parents and teachers, everyone in the criminal justice system should be aware of the potential dangers, and children need to know how they should conduct their time spent online. A recent guide produced by the National Children's Home has provided essential "netiquette" on such matters specifically aiming it at children (see **TABLE 1** for a summary of the main recommendations). All interested parties should read the guide to be "cyberwise" as well as streetwise.

Table 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 too good to be true -- then it probably is.

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

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. Recent 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, a recent 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" (ie, receiving verbally abusive e-mail messages) and invitations to join services related to financial gain.

The US Center for Media Education (CME) alleged in a report called *Web of Deception* that advertisers and marketers are exploiting children by advertising products on the Internet in ways that manipulate children and violate their privacy. They have urged the US Federal Trade Commission to develop safeguards for children and claim that these advertisements would infringe American regulations that put safeguards on broadcast media like the television. They recommend that there should be no children's content directly linked to advertising and that direct interaction between children and product spokes-characters (like Kellogg's *Tony the Tiger* and Frito Lay's *Chester Cheetah*) should not be allowed.

The CME claimed advertisers used a variety of online methods (like "infomercials") to collect detailed data and compile individual child profiles. This information is then used to establish direct and intimate relationships with children online. The report documents how children's privacy is routinely threatened in order to encourage children to disclose personal information about themselves and their families with some sites offering gifts and prizes. This technology makes it possible to monitor every interaction between the child and the advertisement allowing firms to create personalized marketing for a child.

Pornography on the Internet

It is often said that "sex sells" and nowhere is this more true than on the Internet. There are also those who might argue that "sex drives innovation" particularly when the case of pornography on the Internet is examined. From the earliest days of photography to the latest innovations in real-time, one-to-one video conferencing, sex has played a defining role in the development and advance of new communication technology. Although the pornography industry cannot be credited with inventing these new technologies,

they were certainly the first to put them to profitable use. Pornographers have always been the first to exploit new publishing technologies whether it be photography, videotape or the Internet.

As a consequence, online sexual services include the conventional (eg, Internet versions of widely available pornographic magazines like *Playboy*), the not so conventional (Internet versions of very hardcore pornographic magazines) and what can only be described as the bizarre (discussion groups such as alt.sex.bondage.golden.showers.sheep). Further to this, there are also pornographic picture libraries (commercial and free-access), videos and video clips, live strip shows, live sex shows and voyeuristic webcam sites.

One of the main reasons that the pornography industry has such a vested interest in this area is that in the off-line world the buying of most products is hassle-free and anonymous. However, buying pornography in the offline world may be embarrassing or stressful to the consumer particularly if they have to go to venues deemed to be "unsavoury". If pornography consumers are given the chance to circumvent this process, they invariably will.

Pornography and its distribution are now widespread on the Internet but how prevalent is Internet pornography? In the UK, a survey carried out by University of Middlesex in 1995, and replicated in 1997, analysed a million word searches on an Internet search engine and reported that over half of them were aimed at locating pornography (Griffiths, 2000). The top eight word searches were all pornography related. The study also reported that the pornography was more than just pictures of naked people but also included more worrying material. For instance, there was information for paedophiles on how to entrap and (in some instances) kill children. It was also claimed that some bulletin board sites gave information on how to have intercourse with amputees and accounts of child sexual abuse (which appeared to have been put there by the abusers themselves). Further to this, unsubstantiated reports by family campaigners have claimed that in the period 1997 to 1999 there was a 40 *per cent* 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 17 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 1998 by the Annenberg Public Policy Center reported that 75 *per cent* 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 *per cent* in the previous survey (Griffiths, 2000). Of this material, 58 *per cent* was described as being "rude". Given that the same NOP poll found that one in four UK children aged seven to 16 years old (ie, three million children) are regular Internet users with half of them doing it from home, it therefore appears there may be widespread cause for alarm.

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 **TABLE 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.nchafc.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 (eg, *Net Nanny*), software packages that can block certain areas of the Internet such as Usenet groups or which restrict access at certain times (eg, *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 a 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 (Thompson, 1999).

Despite packages like *Surfwatch* and *Net Nanny* which block access to pornographic sites, such packages can still be circumvented. There are also other packages like *Babewatch* which do the exact opposite (ie, locate nothing but pornographic sites for the user). 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 *per cent* of parents did not supervise their children's Internet use, while 71 *per cent* 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 (including all those in the criminal justice system) 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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