Viewpoint

Firms can create personalised marketing for a particular child

People like myself have often said 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 to which we would want our children to have access - such as pornography and racist propaganda.

Dangers on the Internet

Parents and teachers need to know the poten-

Mark Griffiths

Children and the

Internet: issues

for parents and

teachers

tial 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. Parents and teachers should read the guide to be 'cyberwise' (see overleaf) as well as

Perhaps one of the

major dangers for children occur when they are in Internet 'chat rooms'. In the USA there have been a number of cases where children have been lured to meet someone whom they met in a chat room, only to find it was an adult pretending to be a child. Alternatively, children who engage in playful and exploratory word searches can come across hard-core pornography quite accidentally. For instance, a recent case involved thousands of American children being exposed to very hard-core pornography after typing in the word Bambi. Other less obvious danger areas include being recipients of 'flaming' (abusive

The Center for Media Education (CME) alleged in a report entitled 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 in-

e-mail messages) and 'spamming' (invitations

to join services related to financial gain).

fringe 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 characters (like Kellogg's Tony the Tiger and Frito Lay's Chester Cheetah) should not be allowed.

The CME claimed that 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 ogy makes it possible to monitor every exchange between the child and the

> children online. The report documents how children's privacy is routinely threatened in order to encourage them to disclose personal information about themselves and their families, with some sites offering gifts and prizes. This technol-

advertisement, allowing firms to create personalised marketing for a particular child.

Pornography and the Internet

A recent survey by Family PC (an American computer magazine) found that only half the parents surveyed were aware of potential dangers on the Internet, and that only 30% used 'blocking software' such as Net Nanny. Some people say that the great thing about the Internet is that it is completely uncensored, but in that sense it can provide potential dangers for children. Some people have gone so far as claiming that the Internet is now just a heavily-used redlight district. Issues surrounding censorship are high on the moral agenda, but preventing access to such sites is difficult. Packages like Surfwatch, which block access to pornographic sites, can be circumvented, and there are also other packages like Babewatch which do the exact opposite - that is, locate nothing but pornographic sites.

So how prevalent is computer pornography?

streetwise.

A survey showed that more than half the word searches carried out on an Internet engine were for pornography

Guidelines for children on how to be safe on the Internet

- 1. Never tell anyone whom you meet on the Internet your home address, telephone number or school's name unless you are given permission by a parent or carer.
- 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 whom 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 that makes you feel uncomfortable or worried. Always report it to your parent or carer,
- 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 that seems too good to be true then it probably is.

From NCH Action for Children: Children on the Internet: Opportunities and Hazards, 1998.

Dr Mark Griffiths is a Reader in Psychology at Nottingham Trent University. His current interests are concerned with 'technological addictions', particularly to computer games and the Internet. Defenders of the Internet argue that only 3% of the total number of files are pornographic, but a survey carried out by the University of Middlesex analysed a million word searches on an Internet search engine and reported that over half of them were aimed at locating pornography. The top eight word searches were all pornography-related. The study also reported that the pornography was more than just pictures of naked people; for instance, there was information for pædophiles 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, as well as accounts of child sexual abuse, which appeared to have been put there by the abusers themselves.

Another survey by Carnegie Mellon University in the USA (conducted over 18 months) found nearly one million sexually-explicit computer files. On Internet discussion groups, 83.5% of all pictures were pornographic. In another survey, 13 of the 40 most frequently-visited newsgroups were pornographic.

The high level of interest in these sites may not just be restricted to the adult population, since there have been reports of downloaded computer pornography circulating in school playgrounds. Such material is easy to conceal, and it is impossible to determine a disc's contents just by looking at it. A survey by the University of Central Lancashire reported that computer pornography was available at 3 out of 10 boys' secondary schools — a lot of which was bought and sold at car boot sales!

The issues raised here are not meant to be alarmist, but have been highlighted to raise awareness amongst parents and teachers of Internet issues concerning the exploitation of children and the potential unsuitability of some material. These issues need to be explicitly stated, as there may be a 'technological generation gap' between parents and children (and maybe between children and some teachers). Everyone involved with contemporary technological issues needs both to be educated about the Internet and to understand how to be educational with the Internet.

COMING SOON!

A new report from the Schools Health Education Unit

A study of young people's mental health, in the context of their physical health and social relationships.

The data were derived from the Health Related Behaviour Questionnaire, as used in surveys between 1991 and 1997.

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