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, racial propaganda, etc.).

One of the major dangers for children - at least according to the media - is the increasing number of Internet chat rooms. In the US there are a number of cases where children have been lured to meet someone 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 offence for the first time. The coverage of the Seaburn murder highlighted the problems involved, 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 "blacks". Other less obvious dangers include being recipients of "spamming" (i.e., receiving verbally abusive email 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 dramatic 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 children under 16 years of age will access some type of sexual site" (Griffiths, 2002).

Children and Internet pornography

One of the biggest fears among parents is that their children are being exposed to pornography particularly because over 20 million children are using the Internet world-wide. 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?

This is not without some reason, 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 25% in the previous survey (Griffiths, 2000). Of this material, 58% was described as being "true". 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 within half of them doing it from home, therefore, there may be widespread concern for future.

Preventing access

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

- Monitoring rules for parents which run through issues and possible approaches for overcoming Internet use by children. These include those produced in different versions (see Figure 1) or those that can be found online. These include such sites as the Nationalparents resource collection (www.napar.org/napsresources.html), NCH Action for children site (www.nch.org.uk/Internet/index.htm), and Scholastic’s resources (www.scholastic.co.uk/career/starting_internet.htm).
- Having your child at all times when they access the Internet.
- Using an Internet service provider that prevents its users from accessing such things.
- Installing one of the many different types of blocking packages on the market that filter content is some way. These include those which only 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 assist in accessing at certain times (e.g. Cyber Patrol), packages which have a built-in sensor to certain categories as defined by the publisher of the package (Surfstriker) or packages which block access to certain file types like GIF and JPEG which are in pornographic images. 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 300 online households by the US-based National Center for Missing and Exploited Children found that 16% of parents did not supervise their children’s Internet use, while 71% of parents with children appeared to 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 in 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 educationally with the Internet.

References


Nyanda McBride and Fiona Farrington

School Health and Alcohol Harm Reduction Project

Changing 13-16 year olds' alcohol-related behaviours by providing three phases of alcohol harm reduction lessons during secondary school in Western Australia.

John Colwell and Tina O’ Connor

Nurture groups: Theoretical background and research on their effectiveness

The dramatic increase in numbers of nurture groups (helping children in infant and primary schools who exhibit emotional and behavioural difficulties) is itself an index of success.

Angela Balding

Water in schools

The increasing number of school initiatives, to make water more accessible, are raising issues about its image and whether drinking it is a middle-class fashion.

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Issues are highlighted to raise awareness about the exploitation of children and potential unsuitability of some material. Information needs to be both educated about the Internet as well as being educationally with the Internet.