Internet Instruction: Don't let Your Child be Without It
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Protecting our children is of the utmost importance to most parents and teachers. We teach them to look before crossing the street, to wear a helmet when they ride bikes and scooters, and talk to them about the dangers of drugs and alcohol. However, many parents are seemingly unaware of or choose to ignore one of the most dangerous parts of a child's life: time spent surfing the Internet. According to the San Diego District Attorney's office, forty-five million children between the ages of ten and seventeen use the Internet. Fifty-two percent of parents moderately observe their child's Internet use and twenty percent of parents do not observe their child's use of the Internet at all (Pfingst, 2002). Many parents readily admit that their child knows more about computers and the Internet than they do. When parents become aware of Internet dangers, the first concern is generally sexual predators. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) sees an increasing problem related to online sexual predators. Citing that there has been a 1,280 percent increase in the number of cases between 1996 and 2001, the FBI notes that "online child pornography/child sex exploitation is the most significant crime problem confronting the FBI that involves crimes against children" (FBI, 2002). Danger on the Internet is not limited to sexual predators, but includes inaccurate information, hate crimes, stolen merchandise, false identification, and the illegal/illicit gathering of personal information (Pfingst, 2002). Schools are tasked with finding ways to use the Internet as an instructional tool and at the same time, keeping students out of harms way.

To be such a hotly debated topic, very few studies have been conducted on children's use of the Internet. Research more often has been qualitative, not quantitative. Most of the research

on children's use of the Internet has been done by marketing firms to appropriately target

advertising (Valkenburg & Soeters, 2001, p. 652). In their study, Valkenburg and Soeters

questioned 194 Dutch children, ages eight to thirteen, regarding positive and negative

experiences they have had while using the Internet. Negative experiences include computer

viruses, exposure to violence and pornography, and online harassment. The largest percentage

of negative experiences are viruses at ten percent and pornography at four percent. The

researchers find that seventy-nine percent of boys and seventy percent of girls have had no

negative experiences (Valkenburg & Soeters, 2001, p. 667-669). A Canadian study by Taylor

(2002) surveys over 1,000 parents and 5,600 children, ages nine to seventeen about Internet

usage. Her findings are alarming (p.1-2):

- Eighty-three percent of children say they are alone all or most of the time while using the Internet.

- However, Eighty-three percent of parents say they supervise their child's online activities.

- Fifty-seven percent of students have a free e-mail account. A quarter of elementary and half of the secondary students say their parents don't know about all their accounts.

- Forty-five percent of students use instant messaging to talk to people they don't know.

- Thirty-nine percent think you can trust all or most of the information found on the Internet. Less than thirty-three percent confirm the accuracy of online information.

- Over fifty percent of students would give out their personal information to win a contest.

Children are learning about many critical topics from their peers, strangers, and other potentially

inaccurate sources. Also, when parents defined supervision, "[it] meant one of three things:

allocating online time fairly between siblings; making sure homework is done before 'fooling around' online; and keeping the phone line free" (Taylor, 2002, p.2-3). This survey shows that parents and children are a world apart when it comes to the knowledge of Internet use for children. Parents are too busy and many do not feel qualified to teach their children about the Internet (Taylor, 2002, p.4).

A variety of approaches, safeguards, and activities to make using the Internet instructional and safe in school have been suggested. Smith (1999) suggests a three prong approach to school Internet usage. His approach advocates policies and rules, network control, and adult supervision. One thing missing from Smith's approach is student instruction. An Acceptable Use Policy (AUP) is used by most schools offering Internet access. Stahl (1998) suggests that AUP's and rules give a "false sense of security for instructors" (p.20). Stahl advocates instruction regarding the values and concerns of Internet use. These skills are necessary for lifelong learning. She recommends little or no direct Internet access for students; web sites needed could be bookmarked, or harvested using Net harvesting software (Stahl,1998). Concern about network control is expressed by Reilly (2001). His research shows that filters have a twenty to eighty percent error rate and do not block images (Reilly, 2001, p.3). "Adult supervision is still the most effective method of regulating access to the Internet" (Baule & Thompson, 1998 p.1). However, they go on to say that there are three key ways to ensure safety: filters, kid-family friendly sites that are preselected, and unfiltered access combined with instruction. None of these will work independently and none will work without adult supervision (Baule & Thompson, 1998, p.2). Teachers must teach the student how to make use of the computer as a learning tool and to become "educated consumers of information"

(Balajthy, 1999, p.17). It is critical that children be educated regarding the proper use and the

dangers of the Internet. This instruction generally falls to the school and should be of primary

concern when constructing a school's AUP.

When constructing the AUP, educators must ensure that proper instruction regarding the

uses and dangers of the Internet is presented to both students and parents.

Education for children is key because technical solutions are flawed, the home is rarely

so safe an environment as the school, parents are not always able to guide and supervise

appropriately, and so children must be prepared to deal with any harm they encounter.

(Livingston, 2001, p.1)

In her paper, Livingston recommends a slightly different three-pronged approach to protecting

children online. First is a public awareness campaign. Second, a joint effort between concerned

agencies, government, parents, and schools to teach Internet literacy and Internet safety. Third, a

"Surfing Proficiency Certificate" to confirm all children have a basic level of literacy. The

certificate training would be both face to face and online for parental follow up. The classes

involve both literacy and protective instruction to assist students in research, problem-solving,

appropriate reactions to actual and potential harm, and learning to evaluate the authenticity of

sites and communication. Specifically, the instruction includes technical competency, critical

strategies, social guidelines, production tools, and creative ideas (Livingston, 2001, p.20).

Serim (2001) suggests "Instead of 'making the Internet safe for children,' people are

working together 'making children safe for the Internet" (Serim, 2001, p.18). This can be done

by using a multi-pronged strategy for Internet use in school. AUP's must be clearly written,

students and parents must be taught the uses and dangers of the Internet, filters and managed

Internet solutions must be in place, and active adult supervision must be provided both at home and school. It is critical that educators begin significant research into children's Internet use so the findings can be used to develop appropriate instructional methods and tools for schools, children, and parents to make the "children safe for the Internet".

As I revisited this paper in April 2003, I realized that making "children safe for the Internet" is a skill that can in a large degree be taught. That skill is to teach students and educators to be critical thinkers about the information they find. As educators, we teach students about safety, ethics, and copyright laws, but a crucial message that we need to send is to be a discriminating consumer of information. As Livingston's article points out, we must teach the children technical competency, critical strategies, social guidelines, production tools, and creative ideas (Livingston, 2001, p.20). Alan November encourages educators to teach "the grammar of the Internet"(Salpeter, 2003, p 22). Internet grammar, information literacy, and web literacy all involve teaching students to look critically at websites, web authors, and to decode web addresses (Salpeter, 2003). Students who learn to dissect the web address will learn to better evaluate and validate the information provided. Instruction in searching skills; keyword searching, boolean logic, and the difference in databases and search engines are good starting places. Teachers who teach their students problem solving and questioning techniques will enable their students to develop their literacy skills. McKenzie (2000) suggests that students learn more than sixteen types of questioning and practice these questions to refine our information needs (McKenzie, 2000). Schools can build on essential questions by teaching students how to navigate, search, select, question, plan, interpret, and think about the information presented (McKenzie, 2000, p 43-44). There are many ways to work with

information in a more controlled way. WebQuests and hotlists are two ways for educators to

maintain control of the content students find. Students who have been taught proper questioning

skills and information literacy are well on their way to being "safe for the Internet". We must

keep our students safe from the dangers of surfing the Internet. Information literacy is the key to

"making children safe for the Internet". AUPs, filters, and adult supervision are important to the

safety of our students, but teaching students to be discriminating consumers of information will

allow students the freedom to explore and learn many new things via the Internet.

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