

Techno-Panic & 21st Century Education: Make Sure Internet Safety Messaging Does Not Undermine Education for the Future

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Trying to prepare students for their future without Web 2.0 in schools
is like trying to teach a child to swim without a swimming pool!

The Protecting Children in the 21st Century Act of 2008, requiring that schools teach students about Internet safety, presents a clear danger to the transformation of schools into 21st century learning environments infused with interactive technologies if the instruction provided presents information that is not accurate, in a manner designed to inculcate fear.

Over the last decade, much of the Internet safety material, and well as information still present on many state attorneys general web sites, and in instruction material they provide, contains disinformation that creates the fear that young people are at high risk of online sexual predation, when the actual research and arrest data indicates the opposite. There is a tendency among law enforcement officials to think that scare tactics are effective in reducing risk behavior. Research has never found this to be so.¹ The material for teachers and parents on the Internet web site of the attorney general of North Carolina and the public service announcements on the web site of the Attorney General of Nebraska demonstrate the law enforcement seeks to inculcate fear.²

A recent report from the Federal Communication Commission, *Broadband Adoption and Use in America*, found that, among broadband users, 24% strongly agree that the Internet is too dangerous for children.³ Among those who do not have broadband, 46% strongly agree that the internet is too dangerous for children. Clearly, this significant degree of fear, will interfere with the ability of schools to adopt the kinds of technologies that are essential to support 21st Century learning.

There is also growing anecdotal evidence from educators themselves that this disinformation is raising schools' concerns about liability and excuses not to allow the use of Web 2.0 technologies for instruction. Project Tomorrow, an organization that promotes effective use of technologies to support 21st century learning, has reported that students tell them after receiving a school presentation on Internet safety, teachers restrict their Internet access.⁴

If guidance related to Internet risk continues to misinform and transmit fear, it is highly likely that fears will continue to interfere with the transformation of schools into 21st-century learning environments, enriched with interactive Web 2.0 technologies. This will challenge both the competitiveness of American education and the FCC's goal of universal broadband adoption.

Clearly, there are risks to young people online, just as there are offline. Young people must understand these risks, as well as effective strategies to prevent themselves from getting into risky situations, detect when they are at risk, and respond. Effective research-grounded targeted risk prevention and intervention initiatives are necessary to address the concerns of the minority of young people who are at greater risk. It is essential that this education and these initiatives are grounded in an accurate understanding of the degree and manner of risk and use effective risk prevention approaches.

¹ <http://www.socialnorm.org/FAQ/FAQ.php>.

² <http://www.ncdoj.com/getdoc/72b91bd7-6988-4c29-9c7e-4868c2b86515/Internet-Safety-Video-and-Guide.aspx> and <http://www.safekids.ne.gov/>.

³ http://hraunfoss.fcc.gov/edocs_public/attachmatch/DOC-296442A1.pdf.

⁴ Personal Communication from Julie Evans, director of Project Tomorrow, August 2009.

Disinformation and Half-Truths about Online Sexual Predation

Myths and Realities

On its web site the University of New Hampshire's Crimes Against Children Research Center (CACRC), the premier research center investigating these concerns, states:⁵

The publicity about online “predators” who prey on naive children using trickery and violence is largely inaccurate. Internet sex crimes involving adults and juveniles more often fit a model of statutory rape – adult offenders who meet, develop relationships with, and openly seduce underage teenagers -- than a model of forcible sexual assault or pedophilic child molesting.

In addressing the myths and realities, the CACRC states:⁶

Media stories about “online predators” using the Internet to gain access to young victims have become a staple of news reports since the late 1990s, when youth Internet use became widespread. Much of the publicity about these cases depicts online molesters who use the Internet to lure children into sexual assaults. In the stereotypical media portrayal, these online child molesters lurk in Internet venues popular with children and adolescents. They use information publicly divulged in online profiles and social networking sites to identify potential targets. They contact victims using deception to cover up their ages and sexual intentions. Then they entice unknowing victims into meetings or stalk and abduct them. Some news reports suggest that law enforcement is facing an epidemic of these sex crimes perpetrated through a new medium by a new type of criminal. Needless to say, these reports have raised fears about Internet use by children and adolescents and about the safety of specific online activities such as interacting online with unknown people, posting profiles containing pictures and personal information, and maintaining web pages at social networking sites.

The reality about Internet-initiated sex crimes – those in which sex offenders meet juvenile victims online – is different, more complex, and serious but less archetypically frightening than the publicity about these crimes suggests.

Using Internet as Primary Means for Exploitation

The Pennsylvania Attorney General web site states:⁷

The growth of the Internet has been astronomical, and regrettably, predators are using the Internet as their primary means of contacting and communicating with their young victims.

The actual data reveals otherwise. In a study by the Crimes Against Children Research Center, which evaluated national arrest data from 2006, the number of arrests in cases that involved actual victims (not sting operations using police officers posing as children) was just over 600.⁸ This

⁵ <http://www.unh.edu/ccrc/internet-crimes/> (Emphasis added).

⁶ Wolak, J., Finkelhor, D., Mitchell, K., & Ybarra, M. (2008) Online “Predators” and their Victims: Myths, Realities and Implications for Prevention and Treatment. *American Psychologist*, 63, 111-128. <http://www.unh.edu/ccrc/internet-crimes/papers.html>;

⁷ <http://www.attorneygeneral.gov/crime.aspx?id=56>

⁸ Wolak (2008); Wolak, J., Finkelhor, D., & Mitchell, K. (2009) Trends in Arrests of “Online Predators,” Crimes Against Children Research Center. <http://www.unh.edu/ccrc/internetcrimes/papers.html>.

accounted for just 1% of all arrests for the sexual abuse of a minor. To put this risk into perspective, it is estimated that between 100,000 and 300,000 youth are at risk of sex trafficking every year.⁹

1 in 7 Children Are Solicited Online

In many locations there are statements related to sexual solicitation of young people, ostensibly by online sexual predators:

From the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children Web site:¹⁰

And there is another shocking number: 1 in 7 children are solicited online for sex. Sexual predators are exploiting the Internet to victimize children.

The Florida Attorney General's web site states:¹¹

Nationally, one in seven children between the ages of ten and 17 have been solicited online by a sexual predator.

The Texas Attorney General Web site states:¹²

The proliferation of child predators using the Internet to target young victims has become a national crisis. A study shows one in seven children will be solicited for sex online in the next year.

The Delaware Attorney General's web site states:¹³

Every time a child goes online, he or she is at risk of being contacted by a predator. Statistics indicate that one in every seven children has been sexually solicited on the Internet.

Most people think this means 1 in 7 young people were solicited by a dangerous sexual predator. This is a misconception of the findings of a study by CACRC.¹⁴ CACRC asked about a number of different kinds of sexual communications, including whether the teens had received "unwanted communications of a sexual nature." Indeed, 1 in 7 teens had received such unwanted communications. Unfortunately, unwanted sexual communications is a relative frequent occurrence. In a study by the American Association of University Women, 4 of 5 high school students reported being sexually harassed at school.¹⁵

In the CACRC study, only 8% of these "solicitations" came from older adults. The remaining came from other teens (43%) or young adults (30%) or situations in which the age was unknown. CACRC also asked about aggressive sexual solicitations – where there were telephone calls, pressure to meet, or sending gifts. The number of aggressive communications the teens received from older adults was approximately the same as the number or aggressive sexual solicitations they received from teen girls. Most importantly, the teens demonstrated effective responses - including leaving the online environment, blocking the person, filing a complaint, and the like (2 teens did not). Twenty-eight percent of the students who received the unwanted messages reported distress.

9 Shared Hope International; (2006) Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking: Prostituted Children in the United States: Identifying and Responding to America's Trafficked Youth. <http://www.sharedhope.org/dmst/>.

10 <http://www.take25.org/page.asp?page=86>.

11 <http://myfloridalegal.com/pages.nsf/Main/DF75DF6F54BDA68E8525727B00645478>.

12 <http://www.oag.state.tx.us/criminal/cybersafety.shtml>.

13 http://attorneygeneral.delaware.gov/kids/kids_page.shtml.

14 Wolak, J., Mitchell, K., and Finkelhor, D. (2006). Online victimization of youth: Five years later. National Center for Missing & Exploited Children Bulletin - #07-06-025. Alexandria, VA. <http://www.unh.edu/ccrc/internet-crimes/papers.html>.

15 AAUW (2001) Hostile Hallways: Bullying, Teasing, and Sexual Harassment in School <http://www.aauw.org/research/upload/hostilehallways.pdf>.

A recent study of how youth deal with strangers in a social network site found that 92% of youth at the receiving end of sexual solicitations in a social site either had an appropriate reaction or ignored the solicitation.¹⁶ "Appropriate reaction" was defined as telling the person to stop, blocking the person from their page, removing themselves from the situation by logging off, or reporting the incident to an adult or to the site.

An even more disturbing interpretation of the research data is present on the US DOJ web site (referring to an earlier CACRC study that shows that 1 in 5 teens were sexually solicited - with similar breakdowns in ages):¹⁷

The survey also found that offenses and offenders are more diverse than previously thought. In addition to pedophiles, other predators use the Internet. Nearly half (48 percent) of the offenders were other youth, and one-fourth of the aggressive episodes were initiated by females.

Using the DOJ's characterization of teens who deliver unwanted sexual communications, significant concerns should be raised about the safety of teens in this nation's high schools, where, applying the US DOJ terminology to the AAUW findings, 4 of 5 students are sexually solicited by "predators."

Deception ~ Tracking Teens Based on Personal Contact Information ~ Abduction

Representations are frequently made that predators are tracking teens based on personal contact information they have posted online and abducting them. Teens are advised never to post their name, address, school name, sports team name, or pictures. This guidance, tied specifically to the representation these activities present a risk of sexual exploitation, can have a damaging impact on Web 2.0-related educational activities, online school newspapers, and the showcasing of student work online.

Frequently, it is represented that predators are deceiving victims by pretending to be other teens and that young people are meeting with adult sexual predators with no understanding of the actual situation. Internet safety messages raise concerns about communicating with dangerous online strangers – despite the fact that it is well-known that stranger danger warnings are ineffective and the fact that adults who are sexually soliciting teens could be acquaintances.

CACRC's research has indicated that situations involving deception – an adult predator pretending to be a 13 year old and tricking a child or teen into meeting – are rare.¹⁸ In a presentation at an Internet Caucus Advisory Committee event in Washington in 2008, Dr. Finklehor described a typical scenario involving the "at risk" youth who are victimized in Internet-related predation cases :¹⁹

(T)he offenders lure teens after weeks of conversations with them, they play on teens' desires for romance, adventure, sexual information, understanding, and they lure them to encounters that the teens know are sexual in nature with people who are considerably older than themselves.

Efforts of Law Enforcement

Law enforcement officials have what is sometimes a very thankless and emotionally disturbing job in investigating situations where young people have truly been subjected to horrific abuse. It is not surprising that they approach Internet safety from the perspective of criminal danger. However, these are not the experiences of the vast majority of young online users, those not already at-risk youth. As we move forward, it is essential that instruction about these concerns be grounded in accurate research and incorporate effective risk prevention approaches targeted at appropriate audiences. Educators with expertise in adolescent development and youth risk prevention – generally the health

16 Rosen, L. D., et al., (2008) The association of parenting style and child age with parental limit setting and adolescent MySpace behavior, *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*. doi:10.1016/j.appdev.2008.07.005.

17 http://ojp.usdoj.gov/ovc/publications/bulletins/internet_2_2001/internet_2_01_6.html.

18 Wolak, et.al. 2008.

19 <http://www.netcaucus.org/events/2007/youth/20070503transcript.pdf> page 2

teachers and guidance counselors must play a predominant role in addressing these issues with students.

What the Research Indicates About Youth Risk Online

From the significant body of youth-risk research reviewed and presented by the Internet Safety Technical Task Force of 2008 at Harvard's Berkman Center, as well as from subsequent such research, we know the following:²⁰

- Not all youth are equally at risk. The youth most at risk online are those most at risk offline, and a child's psychosocial makeup and home and school environments are better predictors of that risk level than any technology he or she uses.
- Predation is not the most salient risk online youth face. Mean behavior and bullying by peers are much more common. In fact, several national studies have found that about one-third of online youth experience cyberbullying, which is closely associated bullying at school.
- In repeated studies, the vast majority of young people are not engaging in risky behavior online and are responding effectively to the negative situations that do occur.

It is well known that the vast majority of sexual exploitation cases against children are perpetrated by people they know in everyday life offline. A less-well-known fact is that between 1990 and 2005, when the Internet got its start and grew exponentially, there was a 51% decline in overall child sexual exploitation. The latest FBI figures show a continuing drop in violent crimes.²¹

The number of rape cases is down 9.6% since 2004, Dr. Finkelhor reported last September.²² He explained how that spells a decline in child sexual abuse:

While there is no specific child victimization category, bear in mind that well over half of the rapes known to law enforcement are against persons under 18, so this rape decline is very much a drop in child victimization.

Universal Digital Media Safety and Literacy Education

All young people must gain competencies in the safe and responsible use of digital media technologies and resources. This includes understanding risks and effective protective strategies, understanding the standards for responsible behavior, and taking responsibility for the well-being of others. To ensure the delivery of accurate and effective instruction, develop a plan utilizing the expertise of library/digital media specialists, educational technology specialists, counselors, health teachers, school resource officers – and older students. This multidisciplinary coordination approach holds excellent promise.

It is necessary to closely review curriculum and professional development resources to ensure they are grounded in the research literature and incorporate effective risk prevention. Because the majority of young people are generally making good choices online, social norms risk prevention educational strategies can be used. The social norms approach has been shown to be highly effective for risk prevention. Ensure that the materials correct the misperception that many teens are engaging in risky online behavior and identify, model, and promote healthy, protective behaviors. Strongly encourage peer leadership and helping behavior by stressing the importance of helping

²⁰ [Http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/sites/cyber.law.harvard.edu/files/ISTTF_Final_Report-APPENDIX_C_TF_Project_Plan.pdf](http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/sites/cyber.law.harvard.edu/files/ISTTF_Final_Report-APPENDIX_C_TF_Project_Plan.pdf).

²¹ "2008 Crime in the United States" <http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/cius2008/data/table_01a.html.

²² Finkelhor in an email to a group of youth-risk practitioners, researchers, and NGOs.

others who are at risk online, making sure students fully understand the potential harmful consequences to others, and providing practice in helping skills. Especially in the older grades, use peer discussion approaches – with the teacher asking questions that will lead to a deeper level of understanding. Provide opportunities for older students provide guidance to younger students.

Targeted Youth Risk Online Prevention and Intervention

It is essential to effectively address the concerns of the minority of young people who are at greater risk of engaging in unsafe or harmful online behavior or being victimized by others online. To do so, this will require a multidisciplinary collaboration of educators, law enforcement, and mental health practitioners. It is essential that such initiatives proceed in a manner that is grounded in the research and uses effective risk prevention that avoids the scare-tactics approach!

Comprehensive whole school and community approaches can enhance all students' ability to further healthy personal interrelationships and avoid risky online situations. Targeted multidisciplinary approaches can effectively investigate situations where students are at risk, are being harmed, or are harming others using digital technologies.

It is imperative – in order for 21st-century education to move forward – that universal Internet safety education and targeted youth risk online prevention and intervention initiatives proceed in a manner that is grounded in fact and uses effective risk prevention that avoid the scare-tactics approach!

About the Author

Nancy Willard, M.S., J.D. is the director of the Center for Safe and Responsible Internet Use. She has degrees in special education and law. She taught “at risk” children, practiced computer law, and was an educational technology consultant before focusing her professional attention on issues of youth risk online and effective management of student Internet use. She has focused on issues of youth risk online and effective Internet use management since 1995. Nancy is author of two books. *Cyberbullying and Cyberthreats: Responding to the Challenge of Online Social Cruelty, Threats, and Distress* (Research Press) and *Cyber-Safe Kids, Cyber-Savvy Teens, Helping Young People Use the Internet Safely and Responsibly* (Jossey Bass).

Nancy's focus is on applying research insight into youth risk and effective research-based risk prevention approaches to these new concerns. She offers two extensive professional development video presentations, with accompanying handouts that set forth guidance on comprehensive, research-based approaches to address youth risk online: *Cyberbullying, Cyberthreats & Sexting: Responding to the Challenge*, and *Youth Risk Online: Insight for Risk Prevention Professionals* (forthcoming). More information is available on the CSRIU site.

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