

Maryland School Mental Health Alliance*
Internet Safety in Children and Adolescents
Information for Clinicians

Some facts and information to know

Children are increasingly using the internet in their homes, schools, libraries, and communities. Estimates show that in May 1997, nearly 10 million children were online either at home, at school, or in the community. In 1998, for the 50 million children now in U.S. elementary and secondary schools, 27% of classrooms have internet access and 78% of schools have internet access in the building.

Although the internet can be an excellent resource for children and adolescents; it can also pose hazards to your students. Some areas of the internet may provide your students with information that is hateful, violent, or contains other types of material that adults might consider to be inappropriate for children. You may find such material in chat rooms, websites, newsgroups, online services, email, and instant messenger.

The Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) requires websites to explain their privacy policies on their site and get parental consent before collecting or using a child's personal information (e.g., name, address, phone number, social security number). This law also prohibits a site from requiring a child to provide more personal information than necessary to play a game or enter a contest. Although this law exists, it does not entirely protect children from harmful information/materials that can be found on the internet...the rest is up to you and other adults!

Why do we care?

Although most internet use happens outside of your care, there may be times where the internet is accessed while the child is in your care or a parent or child may come to you for information regarding something they've accessed on the internet so clinicians need to be prepared. Children can greatly benefit from being online; however, they can also be the targets of crime, exploitation, and harassment in this as in any other environment. Children are continuously learning and they are often trusting, curious, and anxious to explore something that is new and exciting to them. By taking an active role in your client's internet activities through providing the adult supervision that they need and teaching them and their parents about the risks to internet use, you will be ensuring that he/she can benefit from the wealth of valuable information that the Internet has to offer, while lessening his/her chance of being exposed to any potential dangers.

- There are risks to using the internet. Some of these risks are:
 - *Exposure to inappropriate material* – this material can be sexual, hateful, or violent in nature or that encourages activities that are dangerous or illegal.
 - *Physical Molestation* – a child may provide information or arrange an encounter that could risk his/her safety or the safety of other family members and friends.
 - *Harassment and Bullying* – a child may encounter messages via chat, e-mail, or their cell phones that are aggressive, demeaning, or harassing.
 - *Viruses and hackers* – a child could download a file containing a virus that could damage the computer or increase the risk of a “hacker” gaining remote access to the computer which may jeopardize the family's privacy and safety.
 - *Legal and Financial* – a child could do something that has a negative or financial consequence such as giving out a parent's financial information or purchasing an item without parental consent.

****Although there are risks and crimes being committed online, it should not be a reason to avoid using these services. A good strategy would be to instruct children about both the benefits and dangers of the internet and help them to be “street smart.”****

What can we do about it?

Prevention strategies to use during and before internet use:

- Monitor your client's internet use! Supervise them while they are in your care!
- Help your client and parents to become aware of the seriousness of internet safety. Some things to discuss with parents:
 - Keep the computer in a common area where you can watch and monitor your child. Do not allow the computer to be accessed in individual bedrooms.
 - Set rules/expectations for your child and his/her internet use. Sign a contract with your child so that your child is aware of the seriousness of the issue. Direct them to the SafeKids.com website for an example of a contract for internet safety or to the NetSmartz website for an interactive, educational resource of how to stay safe on the Internet (both links in resource section).
- Become computer literate and learn how to block objectionable material. Many Internet service providers (ISP) may provide the option to block certain materials from coming in to your computer. You may want to also look into these options if you are unable or unwilling to buy filtering software. Filtering software allows you to block your access to certain sites based on a "bad site" list that your ISP creates.
- Bookmark your client's favorite sites for easy access.
- Forbid your client from entering private chat rooms while in your care; block them with safety features provided by your ISP or with filtering software.
- Spend time online with your client (if necessary) and teach them appropriate online behavior:
 - Do not give out personal information such as addresses, telephone numbers, parents' contact information, or location of the school without parental or teacher permission.
 - Tell parents or an adult right away if you come across information that makes you feel uncomfortable.
 - Never agree to get together with someone you "meet" online or send him/her your picture or anything else without first checking with your parents.
 - Do not respond to any messages that are mean or in any way make you feel uncomfortable.
 - Talk with your parents so that you can set up rules for going online. You will need to decide upon the time of day that you are allowed to be online and appropriate areas for you to visit.
 - Do not give your Internet password to *anyone* (even your counselor!) other than your parents.
 - Check with your parents and counselor before downloading or installing software or doing anything that could possibly hurt the computer or jeopardize your family's privacy.
 - Be a good online citizen and not do anything that hurts other people or is against the law.
 - Help your parents understand how to have fun and learn things online and teach them things about the Internet, computers, and other technology.

Strategies to use if your client reports something disturbing to you or you find your client viewing something disturbing on the internet:

- Stay calm. Children are tough, even when it comes to exposure to images that you may find disturbing. Try not to launch into crisis mode because they may get scared and they may never tell you if it happens again. Instead stay calm and talk to the student about what happened and about what you and this student can do about it. Please remember that how

- you respond will determine whether they confide in you the next time they encounter a problem and how they learn to deal with problems on their own.
- If the child is in danger or is going to potentially endanger himself/herself, notify the client's parents and provide the parent with resources on internet safety while discussing with them the importance of internet safety.
 - Praise the student for showing you or telling you about what they have seen on the internet. Say something like, "I'm really glad you showed me."
 - Explain that some sites are for adults, not kids. And remind them that they can always talk to you if they see anything disturbing again.
 - Take your client seriously if he/she reports an uncomfortable online exchange.
 - Forward copies of obscene or threatening messages you or your client receives to your Internet service provider.
 - Call the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children at (800) 843-5678 or report it via their website at www.cybertipline.com if you are aware of the transmission, use, or viewing of child pornography online.

Key Resources/Links

1. Safekids.com offers an article on Child Safety on the Information Highway by Lawrence J. Magid (2003). He discusses benefits, risks, how parents can reduce risks, and guidelines for parents: http://www.safekids.com/child_safety.htm
2. Safekids.com offers 10 rules for children for online safety: <http://www.safekids.com/kidsrules.htm>
3. Kidshealth.org offers an article on internet safety by Steve Dowshen (2005). He discusses internet safety laws, online tools for parents to protect their child(ren), ways for parents to get involved in their child(ren)'s internet activities, chat room caution, and warning signs for parents that their child(ren) may be a victim: http://www.kidshealth.org/parent/positive/family/net_safety.html
4. Childdevelopmentinfo.com offers an article on helping kids use the internet safely. More specifically this article focuses on preventing and dealing with exposure to porn on the internet: http://www.childdevelopmentinfo.com/health_safety/web_safety_for_kids_teens.shtml
5. Childrenspartnership.org presents a Parents Guide to the Information Superhighway by Wendy Lazarus and Laurie Lipper (1998). This guide offers rules and tools for families to use such as the ABC's for Parents for internet safety, how to get started, getting involved, and resources for further information on internet safety, and parent stories: <http://www.childrenspartnership.org/AM/Template.cfm?Section=Home&Template=/CM/ContentDisplay.cfm&ContentFileID=1048>
6. NetSmartz is an interactive, educational resource for children ages 5-17, parents, guardians, educators, and law enforcement that uses age-appropriate, 3-D activities to teach children how to stay safe on the Internet. The goal of NetSmartz is to extend the safety awareness of children to prevent victimization and increase self-confidence whenever they go online: <http://www.netsmartz.org/>

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