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Online safety for families

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In the 1990s there was no actual research concerning young people's use of the internet, which meant that safety advice tended to be underpinned by assumptions and speculations. It was common to disseminate horrific stories about the internet, pornography, sexual offenders and vulnerable children. Not only was advice based on horrible but non-typical anecdotes, it also reveals a view of young people as naïve, reckless and in unlimited need of adult protection and supervision. As with any parenting activity, keeping your children safe online is a matter of calculating risk against possibilities. And in this decision-making the family needs information based on research rather than on prejudice.

When a phenomenon is new, there is no research on which to base views. Research takes time and we can expect to have results only after some years. Today there is a considerable body of research about young people's internet use and its accompanying problems. This research also gives guidance on how to deal with these problems. This article provides a summary of these results, discusses filtering and monitoring of children's internet use, and offers some recommendations.

Research overview

First of all, we should discard the supposition that young people are passive and naïve when it comes to internet safety. In fact, many studies show that young people develop functional online coping strategies. However, children do this mostly on their own while adults are strikingly absent in this process. Some of these coping strategies, however functional, lack skills that can only come with age, such as a general critical approach or perhaps a touch of cynicism.

So we can conclude that the young have control and authority over their own use, but that adult input is of great importance. At the same time the opposite also is true; adults in general need to learn from young people's approaches to contemporary media. Therefore, it would be a good idea to exchange observations and experiences between the generations.

Secondly, today we know more about threats and how to counteract them. Contrary to common belief, there is no simple correlation between giving out personal information and being exposed to online risks such as harassment or stranger danger.

Research shows that the more children are online, the more they are exposed to online risk, which is a natural correlation.

One way of protecting children is to keep them away from the internet in order to keep them safe. However, for most families this is considered too heavy artillery to use. It would be the equivalent of keeping your children at home at all times because statistically traffic, school and the outdoor environment constitute threats to their health. This would probably be very safe for the child, but most people agree that the social consequences would be devastating for the child and the negative effects would greatly outweigh any benefits.

Posting personal information online used to be viewed as unsafe behaviour. However, research shows that the notion of safe conduct is more complex than that. Sharing personal information online is not unsafe as such; it is a question of what you share and with whom. Also, we must take internet culture into consideration when determining what is unsafe behaviour.

Sharing information such as your name and self-portrait is in fact a vital part of social media. Therefore, we must find ways of talking about what to post and what not to post, without claiming that sharing is dangerous. Internet users of all ages are wise to think before they post, because we can assume that everything posted stays online forever. Nevertheless, we must not demonize the fact that online content is basically non-removable.

As time passes, being represented online, even in embarrassing situations, will seem less and less intimidating. More and more people will in fact be found online and much information will drown in the abundance. Also, one can see that a change in attitude is slowly taking place; more young people are aware that online representation is a fact and not always a threat.

The pan-European research project EU Kids Online¹ found that children's online counter-strategies are determined by the child's psychological wellbeing. Children who have low self-esteem and children with psychological and social problems react more passively or even fatalistically when they are exposed to upsetting content online. Instead of actively dealing with the problems, they tend to hope that the problems will disappear by themselves or they just get offline.

Safety measures

Different safety measures have been recommended since the 1990s, when online safety first emerged on the global agenda. Filtering out content and monitoring children's internet use are two of the most widely used strategies. In both cases technological solutions have been employed: software solutions that help adults filter out content and supervise the child's computer activities. Recent research, however, questions these safety measures.

Filtering is the term for any solution aiming at creating a good internet by filtering out unwanted content. This idea is underpinned by a wish to keep the beneficial, positive sides of the internet and get rid of the destructive ones. However, research shows that filtering does not in fact work the way the user might expect. One fundamental problem is that the basis for filtering will always be our ethical values. There is no unbiased way of determining which unwanted content to filter out.

Thus, we would need to establish a set of common values in order to create a functional filter. This may actually be possible in extreme cases. For instance, it is safe to assume that any family or school may want to filter out violent abuse, neo-Nazi propaganda and other extreme content. But as soon as it comes to more fine-tuned values, we are bound to disagree. Not every family will agree on how to teach children about religion, sex, the growing body, politics, etc. This means that there exists no way to single out content, websites or service providers, which would work for everyone. So purchasing filter software with pre-defined filtering parameters is really no option.

Another solution would be that every family or school set their own parameters, which, however, would make the software almost impossible to use. Every user would have to spend hours and hours fine-tuning the software according to their own values. Hours better spent talking to children about these issues. The Swedish expert on online ethics, Stig Roland Rask,² has coined the expression “installing a filter in children’s heads instead of in the computer” to describe the process of abstaining from filtering. His advice is that we replace filters with ethical conversations.

By filtering computers we stop children from accessing unwanted content, even if they want to. Instead, by placing a filter in their heads, metaphorically, we teach them to voluntarily abstain from unethical and illegal content. This gives them tools to navigate in a complex reality, a capacity which will also be helpful offline.

Another piece of criticism in relation to filtering software targets the fact that most adults tend to reduce their online engagement in their children as soon as they have installed a technological aid. Furthermore, the filter-in-the-head solution is platform independent. The filter in the head is always present, whether children use computers or smartphones. Moreover, there is no support for the common assumption that monitoring children’s internet use helps them keep safe online. On the contrary, monitoring their computer and other devices is likely to create an atmosphere of distrust, which in the worst case may lead to children not turning to adults for guidance and help.

Recommendations

This article has argued that we need to help children develop online and offline resilience to keep safe. The following are recommendations based on recent research on online threats and safety.

Learn more! Research shows that informed adults stand a better chance of supporting young people regarding their online activities. Therefore, parents and teachers should learn more about internet cultures. It is vital to keep an open mind in this learning process. When learning more about young people’s internet use, some of the practices we might encounter may seem disturbing to the untrained adult. But to the young person many of these may be perfectly explicable and uncontroversial. So our children may very well be our best chaperons in the realm of internet culture. Yet, there is no support in research for the idea that children would stay safe if their parents monitored their online meeting places.

Think offline! We know for a fact that children’s online resilience is affected by their offline situation. Children with high confidence in themselves and in the surrounding world stand a better chance to be safe online. Instead of monitoring children’s internet use or installing expensive and time-consuming software, you should look your children

in the eyes in order to see how they are doing. And do not hesitate to act if you see that something is bothering them. Naturally, if you have a monitoring parenting style offline, you might want to monitor their internet use as well. If, however, you do not believe in such parenting, then you may want to use some other strategy online as well. What is important here is synchronizing your offline and online parenting.

Discuss strategies! Many studies show that young people often want to talk to adults about internet use. When it comes to possible risks, however, children often turn out to have little trust in adults' ability to help them. Furthermore, some children worry that their internet access will be cut off or reduced if their parents find out what they have encountered. So parents and teachers should talk more to young people about internet use. With regard to the upsides and the downsides and what may be done to counteract the disadvantages, we should try to establish what the children's strategies consist of and then actively strengthen these strategies with applicable parts of our own offline life experience.

Report! Children need to learn when and how to report unwanted or illegal activities online. Adults need to take responsibility if things get out of hand. Try to create an atmosphere of trust, so that children feel comfortable telling you what bothers them. Ask them to forward messages that upset them so that you can take over. In some cases, contacting the offender might be enough. Surprisingly many who send harassing messages are unaware of the harm they cause, and a talk might actually make them stop. In other cases you may have to report unethical messages to the service provider and illegal ones to the police.

Summary

For most children the internet is an arena for making and keeping friends, for love and support, for learning and entertainment. We should be careful to protect and preserve this arena and take its valuable properties into consideration when we make decisions on internet safety. The most important element in online security is trying to discard the technological aspects and acting according to your own values.

Parenting is no harder in a contemporary media landscape than it used to be in the past. The problem seems to be that technology gets in the way of our parenting. If we try to view the internet as just another space for human interaction, rather than a world of its own, then we stand a better chance of helping children stay safe online.

I have no doubt that every adult has the ability to support children in their online activities, whether they are parents, teachers, grandparents or just concerned citizens. The skills and knowledge the adults may lack, the children most certainly can provide. An open-minded and earnest, ongoing dialogue about safety, conduct and ethics, online and offline, is our best way of caring for our children.

Notes

1. d'Haenens, Leen, Vandoninck, Sofie and Donoso, Verónica (2013). "How to cope and build online resilience?" EU Kids Online. www.eukidsonline.net
2. Rask, Stig Roland (2002). *Hotbilder och motbilder [Threats and antitypes]*. Stockholm, Gothia.

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