

Teaching Internet Safety

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When the Internet exploded into public use in the late 1990s, the initial concerns of youth Internet use were: privacy, pornography, and predators. Strategies were developed in good faith to address these concerns. Today's virtual world is increasingly interactive and we know more about youth risk online. The manner in which we provide Internet safety instruction must be grounded in this insight.

For younger children, it is important that adults provide protected online environments and children learn simple guidelines for safe and responsible behavior in these protected environments. Because teens are participating in participatory online environments where there may be no responsible adults present, it is our job to equip teens to engage in effective and responsible problem-solving to address these concerns. The following are suggestions for Internet safety instruction for upper elementary, middle, and high school students.

A Complex and Interactive World

In the Web 2.0 environment, all users can easily post information online and interact with others. Web 2.0 is also highly mobile, shifting from desktop computers to personal digital devices, wireless phones, and even hand-held games. Web 2.0 presents incredible opportunities for interactive learning and educational activities--along with some new risk management concerns.

Web 2.0 safety strategies should empower young people to engage in safe and responsible behavior when using these new technologies.

We must make sure students understand what the risks are and how to prevent themselves from getting into risk situations, detect if they are at risk, and effectively respond--including when they should ask for help. It is also important to impart the guidelines for responsible behavior that respects the rights of others and avoids causing harm. Further, we must encourage them to take responsibility for the well-being of others and the larger digital community.

Instructional Strategies

Avoid Fear-Based Tactics

Some common "old style" messages delivered to teens are: "Online strangers are dangerous and will try to deceive you." "If you meet in person with an online stranger, this person will try to harm you." "If you provide personal information online, a stranger who wants to harm you will use this information to track you down and hurt you."

"Stranger-danger" warnings are not accurate or effective. People whom teens know, including adults and other teens, could just as easily engage in online enticement. The concerns associated with cyberbullying most often involve peers, not strangers. Teens are posting a wide range of information online--some of which is perfectly safe, but some of which might not be safe. Sometimes

teens will want to meet in-person with someone they have first met online, so we need to make sure they know how to do so safely.

Research has consistently demonstrated that fear-based messaging is not effective in reducing youth risk behavior. Furthermore, teens know many adults do not understand the Internet. This makes teens likely to dismiss fear-based messages as evidence that adults fear what they do not understand.

Be a Guide by their Side

Even if you have an excellent understanding of digital technologies and youth online culture, teens are not going to believe that you do. If you try to act like a "sage on the stage" when teaching Internet safety, you are most likely to "trip on your toga."

Be a "guide by their side." You do not need to thoroughly understand the technologies to be able to effectively guide your students in safe and responsible decision-making. Set up situations where the students are providing guidance to each other. You can deepen their understanding by asking questions that will guide their thinking and develop a deeper understanding. Provide the opportunity for older students to teach younger students.

In discussions about online risks, provide scenarios about young people who have gotten into risky or difficult situations or are engaging in risky, irresponsible, or illegal behavior. Inspire students to problem-solve about how they would respond if a friend, peer, or even a stranger were at risk online. What would they advise? What would they do if this person appeared to be unwilling or unable to respond effectively to the risk?

Focus on the three overall objectives: Make sure they understand the risks and prevention strategies. Discuss their standards for responsible behavior based on how they want others to treat them. Reinforce the importance of being responsible for the well-being of others.

Peer Leadership

Many times, young people are interacting with each other in environments where there are no responsible adults present. Therefore it is very important to encourage peer leadership.

Make sure students understand what the possible risk are to their friends. Provide the opportunity for them to think about and practice peer helper behaviors. Make sure they know the importance of and how to report serious concerns to adults.

Basic Instructional Objectives

Engage in Effective Problem-Solving

Help teens gain effective problem-solving skills. Help them learn to evaluate the situations that might emerge and develop possible strategies to respond. In any situation that might occur electronically, they should know at least three ways they can respond--the last one being to talk with an adult.

Understand Personal Disclosure

Many teens appear to have limited understanding of potential harm or damage from inappropriate information disclosure. Given that a major part of social networking is sharing information about who you are online, teens need guidance on how to manage various kinds of personal information. This includes certain personal contact, financial, intimate or reputation-damaging material, and information about others.

It's important to convey the message that anything put into electronic form and sent or posted can easily become very public and very permanent. Teens should understand that while they should use privacy protection features of social networking sites, the material they post is still not entirely private because their "friends" have access to it. Further, they should learn to read and interpret privacy policies and recognize when market profilers are seeking personal information.

Interact Safely

Teens will interact online with friends, acquaintances, friends-of-friends, and strangers--just as they interact with this range of people in the real world. A problem is that when they meet or get to know someone online, that person could be deceptive and this might be harder to detect.

Teens must learn how to assess the safety of those they are getting to know online by closely reviewing their profile, postings, and friends. They must know how to arrange for a safe meeting in a public place with a trustworthy friend--and with a parent nearby.

All teens should know to watch out for anyone--adult or teen, stranger or not--who appears to be trying to

manipulate them by offering complements or gifts, and wanting to establish a "special" relationship.

Curb Addictive Access

Addictive access is an excessive amount of time spent using the Internet resulting in a lack of healthy engagement in other areas of life. Social networking sites can be very addictive for some teens. For others, social networking is simply an extension of their active social lives. Online gaming sites and multiplayer role-playing games can be highly addictive, in part because leaving the game can result in letting your online "team" down. Addictive access is likely a significant new cause of poor school performance. Adults must help teens learn to keep their lives in balance.

Boost Information Literacy

Assessing the accuracy of material online is an essential information-age skill. Some key concepts: Anyone can post anything online--accurate or not. Sites may try to influence the attitudes and behavior of others. The appearance of the site cannot be used to determine credibility. Just because a site appears on the first page of a search return does not guarantee credibility. Sponsored links are advertising.

Make sure teens know the importance of assessing the purpose, and therefore potential motivation or bias, of the creators of the site. Help them learn to investigate carefully--looking for consistent information on different sites.

Youth At Higher Risk

Teens who are at greater risk in general are the ones who are at greater risk online. They are more likely to get into risky situations, less likely to effectively respond, and less likely to listen to what any adult has to say about Internet risks. Targeted risk prevention and intervention initiatives will be necessary to address the concerns of these youth.

Instructionally, these "at risk" youth will be more likely to listen to their peers. This is why it is so important to use a social norms-based instructional approach. It is highly probable that their peers will know when these "at risk" youth are engaging in risky behavior or being harmed. This is why it is so important to focus on peer leadership.

Nancy Willard 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. Nancy is author of two books, *Cyberbullying and Cyberthreats* and *Cyber-Safe Kids, Cyber-Savvy Teens*, numerous articles, and professional development videos, and is currently writing a book on teaching Internet safety. <http://csriu.org>
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