Technology Safety and Security Among Children

What Caretakers Need to Know

Points of Awareness

1. Pornography is VERY easy to find and download. And, it is so pervasive that the likelihood is quite good that you will stumble on it even by accident. Pornography can be in the form of photos, multimedia slide shows (yes, PowerPoints), audio files, videos, and cartoons. Kids can use a search engine and a bit of knowledge that narrows search results to specific file types (e.g., see http://www.googleguide.com/advanced_operators.html) to access all of these in an instant.

2. Pornography can now also be downloaded via PSP, iPods, and cell phones (e.g., check out the following:
   a. http://www.podcast.net/tag/xxx
   b. http://podcast.livexxx.tv/help.asp
   c. http://www.xobile.com

3. **Cyberbullying** is a new problem that is facing our computer savvy students. This issue has become a problem because more of our students are learning to use the Internet, but not being taught the courtesy, ethics, and laws that comes with this privilege. Cyberbullying involves the use of information and communication

Russell A. Sabella, Ph.D.
Counseling Program
College of Education
Florida Gulf Coast University
10501 FGCU Boulevard South
Fort Myers, FL   33965-6565

239-590-7782
rsabella@fgcu.edu

technologies such as e-mail, cell phone and pager text messages, instant messaging (IM), defamatory personal web sites, and defamatory online personal polling web sites, to support deliberate, repeated, and hostile behavior by an individual or group, that is intended to harm others [source: Keith, S. & Martin, M. E. (2004). Cyber-Bullying: Creating a Culture of Respect in a Cyber World. Reclaiming Children and Youth.]

4.   Children can trade or share an array of inappropriate media via their "gadgets" such as cell phones, mp3 players, and/or iPods via wireless connections.

5.   Social network sites now proliferate the web. Many of these sites do not verify for age and allow the user to include almost anything. Children are posting personal information, inappropriate photos/multimedia files, hateful comments about others, and more. Also, these sites make it easier for predators to "connect" with and lure your child, especially because they also include tools such as blogs, chatrooms, classified advertisements, calendars, and more. See the following as examples:

   a.   http://www.myspace.com/
   b.   http://www.friendster.com/
   c.   http://www.livejournal.com/
   d.   http://www.xanga.com/
   e.   http://www.piczo.com/

6.   You've probably heard of the term blog on more than one occasion, most likely in the context of television or print news media. However, you may still not exactly understand what a blog is. According to the Webopedia (see http://www.webopedia.com/TERM/b/blog.html), a blog, short for "web log", is a web page that serves as a publicly accessible personal journal for an individual. Typically updated on a daily basis, blogs often reflect the personality of the

author. Google owned Blogger.com describes a blog as, "A blog is a personal diary. A daily pulpit. A collaborative space. A political soapbox. A breaking-news outlet. A collection of links. Your own private thoughts. Memos to the world." Creating a blog is simple and free. It only takes a few minutes by entering your name, e-mail address and a few other pieces of (usually personal) information. Some blogs ask for the users age and others do not. For those that do, the system does not provide age verification services so faking one's age is a matter of putting in the right birth date. You select "the look" (template) for your blog from a set of standard options, click a few buttons, and another blog has been added to the "blogosphere." Once the blog is set up, a child can post text, links, audio and video to their hearts delight. From their computer or cell phone, they can say or show anything and everything. With a bit of know-how, they can even easily syndicate to other blogs and web sites. Syndication is a process by which the latest content from a blog, or from any other web page, can be made available to re-publication in another website or in some other application. And millions of children are doing it. Any kid can create basic blogs for free, and most of these toolsets have additional features available for a price. Here are just a few of the services available.

a. Blogger (http://www.blogger.com/): Free, automated weblog publishing platform in one easy to use website.
b. BBlog (http://www.bblog.com/): bBlog is a powerful, elegant personal publishing system written in PHP and released as free, Open Source software under the GPL. It is a flexible but simple way to blog that works for blogging beginners, and can grow into a more advanced user's needs.
c. TypePad (http://www.sixapart.com/typepad/): Similar to blogger, another blogging service although this one has a minimal cost.
d. LiveJournal (http://www.livejournal.com/): Joining this service site is free although users can choose to upgrade their accounts for extra features.
e. Moveable Type (http://www.sixapart.com/movabletype/):
f. MySpace.com (http://www.myspace.com/): Actually a hybrid site that allows people to post their personal interests, write blogs, put up video and set up ways to communicate with their friends boasted 34 million users, mostly ages 14 to 34, as of late October, 2005.
g. Xanga (http://www.xanga.com/): a community of online diaries and journals.

7. Some children are using the photo and video features of their cell phones to record and send inappropriate (and perhaps illegal) content. These include photos and/or videos of girls' underwear (i.e., upskirting), sexual activity, or pages from a school exam or other protected materials, these files can easily be posted on websites and shared among many friends.

8. Bluetooth technology is how mobile phones, computers, and personal digital assistants (PDAs), not to mention a broad selection of other devices, can be easily interconnected using a short-range wireless connection. Using this technology, users can have all mobile and fixed computer devices be totally coordinated. "Toothing" is the process by which some children find other people to "hook up." It involves how people on trains, buses, in bars and even supermarkets, use their bluetooth enabled phones or PDA's to set up illicit meetings using messages sent via the latest in networking technology. Although it started as an Internet hoax, there are now credible stories of this actually happening (e.g., see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Toothing). This is a developing use of technology that deserves a watchful eye.

9. Kids can now converse with other children in a multitude of ways using computer based telephone (e.g., Skype), instant messaging, chatrooms, SMS or text messaging via cell phone, bulletin boards, and e-mail. Just because they are not on the phone does not mean they are not talking to their friends.

10. Some children are showing signs of technology based addictions such as with gaming, shopping, social networking, gambling, auctions, and simple surfing.

11. Parents are being held liable for pirating of music and software, especially using P2P networks such as BearShare, LimeWire, Morpheus, Kazaa, eMule, and Grokster (to name a very few).

12. When children disclose personal information or voice their (sometimes exuberant) opinions, they may also jeopardize themselves or others in yet another way. You see, most everything posted on any website today may

possibly, and will probably be accessible for all of time. Information shared with others via listserv, websites, IM, blogs, and other media is typically stored in massive databases, indexed, and easily retrievable for future reference. You or your child may believe that what you communicate today is "no big deal" although, tomorrow, the same information could be considered ammunition by others to use against you or your loved ones.

13. Podcasting, in its basic form, involves creating audio files (most commonly in MP3 format) and making them available online in a way that allows users to automatically download the files for listening at their convenience (i.e., subscribing to the podcast). After subscribing to the podcast, future "broadcasts" automatically download to your computer, which can then be transferred easily to a handheld such as a Palm OS Handheld, a Pocket PC, cell phone, or an iPod - hence, the name Podcast. In essence, anyone with a computer, Internet access, free software, and a microphone can turn their computer into a personal studio and produce their very own radio show/program. Podcasting is clearly in its infancy although shows no signs of abatement. One reason for their popularity is that producing a podcast is relatively cheap. Podcasting requires no more hardware or software than a typical computer user has. Second, the MP3 files and accompanying text which are served over the World Wide Web are supported among virtually all operating systems (i.e., podcasting works across many platforms including Microsoft Windows and Apple Macintosh). As a result, these types of files have become quite pervasive. Third, given the difficulties and intricacies of using computer technology sometimes, podcasting is surprisingly simple to do. Only three steps are required (create the MP3 file, upload the file, and update your RSS feed) to broadcast any content you would like. A fourth reason that podcasting is so popular is that it removes barriers of space, pace, and time by allowing the consumer to download and listen to broadcasts at his or her convenience (sort of like the Tivo® of radio). And, the consumer may listen to a broadcast using various devices such as computers, as, MP3 players, CD players (after burning the files to a CD), personal digital assistants (PDA's), Bluetooth or USB enabled radios, and now cell phones. Finally, I have found that podcasting is just plain fun. Whether adult or child, podcasting helps the user join more closely than ever the ranks of other popular radio show hosts, DJ's, and personalities. As you may have already guessed, the major disadvantage related to podcasting is that, like everything else on the Internet, podcasts are not regulated. Pornographers, bigots, bullies, and others have also discovered podcasts as a powerful method for disseminating information. This information is

currently limited to audio although video podcasts or v-casts are already in development. Anyone who has the knowledge, including children, can easily access (and/or produce) a wide range of smut or obscene matter. Thus, the development of podcasting emphasizes once again the importance of media and technology literacy among youth and adults alike. Evaluating, choosing, and using appropriate information presents challenges that, if not managed, can leave us unbalanced, unfocused, and in a state of deterioration.

Practical Tips

1. First and foremost, develop an ongoing relationship with your child that supports collaborative exploration and learning about technology. Also, help your child to trust you and communicate potentially problematic activity by not "flipping out." That is, stay calm and rational when dealing with technology related problems.

2. Support your child's school in teaching the skills, knowledge, and attitudes included in technology/media literacy. In partnership with your school, instruct your children to:

    a. never arrange a face-to-face meeting with someone they met on- line;
    b. never upload (post) pictures of themselves onto the Internet or on-line service to people they do not personally know;
    c. never give out identifying information such as their name, home address, school name, or telephone number;
    d. never download pictures from an unknown source, as there is a good chance there could be sexually explicit images;
    e. never respond to messages or bulletin board postings that are suggestive, obscene, belligerent, or harassing;
    f. be suspicious of whatever they are told on-line which may or may not be true.
        (Source: http://www.fbi.gov/publications/pguide/pguidee.htm)

3. Learn the lingo or language of technology (e..g, check out http://www.alliancecom.net/internet_lingo.php).

4.   Keep your home computer in a location that is easily viewable.

5.   Talk with other parents who have a computer, internet access, and/or other related technologies in their homes. They may be the "weakest link" in child technology safety.

6.   Turn on the Safe Filtering mode on your search engines. In addition, use other filtering/blocking software such as Cybersitter (which I use and highly recommend). http://www.cybersitter.com/

7.   Investigate and choose a "Family Friendly" Internet Service Provider (ISP) (read more by visiting http://tinyurl.com/f2zxd).

8.   If you choose to give your child a cell phone, choose one that is "child friendly." That is, users of this phone can only call friends approved by parents. For example:

    a.   TicTalk. http://www.mytictalk.com/LeapFrog/
    b.   Firefly. http://tinyurl.com/gsjb6

9.   If you allow your child to have his/her own e-mail account, make sure to screen all incoming e-mail messages. Many free online e-mail services (e.g. Microsoft Hotmail) allow you to set up an account which only allows you to receive e-mails from addresses appearing in your Contacts, service announcements from the provider, and messages you have consented to receive from

the provider. Here is another tip: if you own your own website, you can set up an e-mail account for your child that allows him/her to send out messages although any incoming mail can automatically get forwarded to your account for screening. The screenshot above shows how I set up Joe@schoolcounselor.com which forwards all mail to my account, sabella@schoolcounselor.com).

10.   Learn how to use the V-Chip settings on your television. Relatedly, use websites to help you review movies and other programming to determine appropriateness for your child. For instance, websites such as http://www.familystyle.com/ and http://movies.yahoo.com/mv/moviemom/ provides parents with the information they need to decide which movies, DVDs and videos are best for kids from ages 2 through 18.

11.   Usually the only way to stop pop-ups is to close the browser (in Internet Explorer, hold the Alt key and press F4 very quickly to close these windows at a rapid pace). Another more effective way to prevent pop-ups altogether is to install a program (usually free) called a pop-up blocker. Here are several:

   a.   The Google toolbar (http://toolbar.google.com/) includes a pop-up blocker for the Internet Explorer browser;
   b.   If you're using Windows XP and have the Service Pack 2 (SP2) installed, you have a pop-up blocker. When you install SP2, Pop-up Blocker is turned on in Internet Explorer and set to the medium setting, which means it will block most automatic pop-ups. The default settings for the pop-up blocker allow you to see pop-ups that are opened when you click a link or button on a Web site. Pop-up Blocker will also play a sound and show the Information Bar when a pop-up is blocked. You can adjust these settings so that Pop-up Blocker works the way you want it to (http://www.microsoft.com/windowsxp/using/web/sp2_popupblocker.mspx);
   c.   Another popular pop-up stopper that works with both Internet Explorer is called Pop-Up Stopper® Free Edition (http://www.panicware.com/product_psfree.html). The Professional version works with other such as the increasingly popular Firebox, AOL, MSN, Mozilla Firefox, Netscape 4.x, 6.x, 7.x, Opera 6.x - 7.x, SBC Yahoo, WMConnect, CompuServe, Juno, NetZero, Mozilla 1.7.3 or older.
   d.   Other free pop-up blockers can be found at http://www.popuptest.com/software/freeware_popblock.html.

12.   Gain personal and practical experience of various technologies so you can listen and talk with your children with authority. That is, become more technologically literate yourself. For example, set up your own MySpace.com account and learn how it is used. Relatedly, check out these chatrooms as an example of children chatting. I encourage you to log in (as a guest user if possible so that you don't

have to bother registering for an account) and just read (without interacting) for a while to get a better sense of what some kids may be up to:

a. http://www.ecrush.com/
b. http://www.chat-avenue.com/kidchat.html
c. http://www.kidchatters.com/ (This one requires parental registration and is monitored as well as filtered).
d. http://www.kidscom.com/chat/kidschat/kidschat.html
e. http://www.kidzworld.com/

Helpful Websites

A Byte-Size Online Safety Guide.
Excellent info in a kid-friendly interface from the folks at Nickelodeon TV.
http://www.nick.com/blab/safety/index.jhtm

A Parent's Guide to Internet Safety.
From the Federal Bureau of Investigation Crimes Against Children Program.
http://www.fbi.gov/publications/pguide/pguidee.htm

Computer Security. Nobody is immune from catching a computer virus, becoming victim to a phishing scam, or being the target of a clever piece of spyware unless one practices technology or computing abstinence. To completely avoid computers, the Internet, and, to an increasing degree, gadgets such as cell phones, PDA's, and mp3 players is not an option in today's high-tech world. You can, however, significantly lower your risk by taking some precautions. This is a compilation across various newsletter issues containing detailed information about several common methods for significantly reducing your risk and includes firewalls, spyware, anti-virus, anti-fishing, root kit removal, Active X controls, and Anti-spam. http://www.schoolcounselor.com/resources/computer-security.htm

CyberAngels is an organization who's mission it is to function as a "virtual 411" safety destination, and to address the concerns of parents, the needs of children, on-line abuse and cyber crime, while supporting the right of free speech.
http://www.cyberangels.org

Cyberbullying. Mobilizing educators, parents, students, and others to combat online social cruelty. http://www.cyberbully.org

Internet Super Heroes. Delivering smart, safe and responsible surfing messages to children, teens, schools and parents, online and offline.
http://www.internetsuperheroes.org/cyberbullying

The NetSmartz Workshop is an interactive, educational safety resource from the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children® (NCMEC) and Boys & Girls Clubs of America (BGCA) for children aged 5 to 17, parents, guardians, educators, and law enforcement that uses age-appropriate, 3-D activities to teach children how to stay safer on the Internet. Read an overview of NetSmartz age-appropriate materials for each age group. http://www.netsmartz.org/

SafeKids.com. Your family's guide to making the Internet and Technology fun, safe and productive. http://www.safekids.com/

SafetyNet Links is a page from my website, www.SchoolCounselor.com will give you a list of practical sites about Internet/Technology safety.
http://www.schoolcounselor.com/safetynetlinks.asp

Teen Safety on the Information Highway by Larry Magid is a publication of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children.
http://www.safeteens.com/safeteens.htm

Ten Commandments for Kids Online.
http://www.komando.com/kimskidscontract.html

WHOA is a volunteer organization founded in 1997 to fight online harassment through education of the general public, education of law enforcement personnel, and empowerment of victims. We've also formulated voluntary policies which we encourage online communities to adopt in order to create safe and welcoming environments for all Internet users. http://www.haltabuse.org

WiredSafety provides help, information and education to Internet and mobile device users of all ages. We handle cases of cyberabuse ranging from identity and credential theft, online fraud and cyberstalking, to hacking and malicious code attacks.
http://www.wiredsafety.org/