These Law Enforcement Research Bulletins are based on a larger research project conducted by Drs. Robert Prentky, Ann Burgess, Elizabeth Dowdell, Neil Malamuth, and Paul Fedoroff. This project was supported by Grant No. 2006-JW-BX-K069 awarded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. Points of view or opinions in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice. Each of the three Law Enforcement Research Bulletins will highlight various findings from the larger project including offender demographics, level of technological knowledge by offenders, access to pornography, facts about student Internet use, and implications for policy changes. These Bulletins hopefully will assist law-enforcement officers by translating research into a format that can be used by professionals combating child victimization.

**FEATURED STUDY**

**Research and Applications to Improve Parental Responses to Children’s Use of the Internet**

As technology becomes increasingly sophisticated, families face challenges by having to make informed, reasonable decisions around protecting the safety of their children. One of the tools families should have, but don’t, is access to information and research about what their kids are engaging in that is normative and healthy and what they are engaging in that is unhealthy and potentially risky. This Bulletin is designed to provide information about the Internet behaviors of children and adolescents. With this knowledge, parents and guardians hopefully will be empowered to make more informed-decisions and better understand the challenges their children face. Our ultimate goal is to enable parents and guardians to help their children enjoy and benefit from the Internet safely, while minimizing their exposure to risk.
What Did the Researchers Investigate?

Researchers looked at how pre-teens, teenagers, and young adults are using the Internet and the risk factors parents and guardians should be most concerned about.

Some HIGHLIGHTS from Middle-School Students in Grades 6 to 8

- Girls and boys use the Internet differently, with girls more likely to use instant messaging (IM) and visit websites while the boys were more likely to IM and visit game sites.
- Children tend to engage in clusters of risky Internet behaviors rather than engaging in only one (or two) such as posting phone number, name of school, email address or send/receive a picture from someone they had met online.
- Over half (54%) of the children who had contact with an individual(s) known only from online reported that they had met these individuals offline (in-person).

Some HIGHLIGHTS from High-School Students in Grades 9 to 12

- Again, girls and boys use the Internet differently with girls more likely to use social-networking sites and chat or instant message (IM) online while boys are more likely to be involved in “gaming” and IM.
- Over 30% of students reported having offline contact with people first met online.
- Students who reported risky Internet behaviors were more likely to participate in health-risk behaviors (e.g. drinking alcohol and smoking).

Some HIGHLIGHTS from Parents of Middle-School Students:

- Parents and guardians, in general, reported having a high level of trust in their children’s Internet use. These parents/guardians reported not checking their children’s Internet histories, cookies, or previously visited websites.
- Parents and guardians reported they had a filter or blocking software package on their computer but almost one-quarter (24%) of the middle school students, over half (54%) of high school boys, and a third (32%) of the high school girls reported being able to manipulate or disable the filter/blocking software.
- Three-quarters of the parents and guardians did not know where to report an incident of concern (illegal or otherwise inappropriate) that occurred on the Internet; less than a quarter of the parents/guardians reported knowing who to call.
- At the present time, parents and guardians, are not nearly as knowledgeable as their children about the Internet, social-networking sites commonly used by their children, and computer technology in general. The gap, however, appears to be generational, not educational, and is closing as parents emerge from the younger, Internet-raised, generation.

Risks Defined

Just as many parents and guardians tend to be uninformed about Internet technology, their children are very likely to be naïve about potential risks of Internet use. Neither observation is surprising. Although the first observation will change over time as younger parents increasingly are Internet savvy, at present, most parents have not grown up with the Internet, and make limited use of it – essentially retrieving e-mail and “googling.” Conversely, adolescents, by their very developmental nature, are risk takers. Risk adversity increases with age. Typically, adolescents neither anticipate risk nor comprehend potential risky consequences of their behavior, including various aspects of Internet use, such as freely divulging personal information over the Internet, transmitting images that include nudity, and meeting strangers encountered on the Internet.

In this study more than two-thirds of the high school boys (68%) and 25% of high school girls reported viewing pornography on the Internet within the last six months. The risk associated with accessing pornography is best understood as a slippery slope. In isolation, whatever risk is associated with viewing soft-core pornography, aside from moral or religious considerations, is negligible. The risk comes from the inevitable “slope,” moving to increasingly “deviant” forms of pornography, initially out of curiosity. Increasingly deviant
pornography increases the likelihood of exposure to child pornography and violent pornography (depicting rape and murder), the former being criminal and latter, at the very least, being disturbing, shocking, and potentially traumatizing. The greatest risks are two-fold: (1) being prosecuted for criminal possession or transmission of child pornography and (2) increased exposure to adult child molesters. Thus, beyond the risk of exposure to disturbing images and risk of prosecution for possession of illegal pornography, is the risk of victimization by offenders who use the Internet as a vehicle for finding and grooming victims. Of all the children on the Internet, one third of the high school students (34% of boys and 36% of girls) reported that they agreed to meet in person with someone they first met online. For the students who met offline, 23% of the boys and 13% of girls reported that something sexual happened at the meeting.

**The Risky Behaviors that we Predicted**

*In our study, we predicted 9 Internet-related risky behaviors:*

- Ever been sexually harassed on the Internet?
- Anyone ever talk to you on the Internet about sex when you didn’t want to?
- Have you ever met adults in person that you met online?
- Did the person make you feel uncomfortable?
- Did anything sexual happen when you met?
- Have you ever received sex pictures from anyone online?
- In the past 6 months, have you ever gone on sex sites on the Internet?
- Have you ever used the Internet to harass someone?
- Have you ever sexted?

**The Delinquent Behavior Scale**

*For BOYS, ALL 9 risky behaviors were predicted with a high degree of accuracy using a simple scale consisting of items reflecting troubled, delinquent behavior:*

- Ever had trouble with a teacher?
- Ever been suspended from school?
- Ever stolen something?
- Ever vandalized or damaged something on purpose?
- Ever been in trouble with the police or the law?
- Have you been in a physical fight in the last 30 days?

**For GIRLS, ALL 9 risky behaviors were also predicted with a high degree of accuracy using two scales:**

1. the Delinquent Behavior Scale previously described, and
2. a scale about bullying (have you ever bullied other kids? & have you ever been bullied or beat up?)

*In all cases, the greater the delinquent behavior (and in the case of the girls, the greater the history of bullying), the higher likelihood of the risky Internet behavior.*

**The risky Internet behaviors that were predicted with the greatest accuracy were:**

- Did the person make you feel uncomfortable? Boys and Girls
- Did anything sexual happen when you met? Boys and Girls
- Have you ever used the Internet to harass someone? Boys and Girls
- Have you ever received sex pictures from anyone online? Girls
- Ever been sexually harassed on the Internet? Boys

The Internet is NOT confidential: No “Private” information should be communicated on the Internet.

Parents and guardians must engage their children on a variety of Internet-safety topics and not assume that their children recognize the risks and will heed them. When the children in our survey were asked, the two most common Internet-safety topics they mentioned were not posting a home address and not chatting with “strangers.” Research suggests, however, that kids are likely to treat anyone who contacts them through a friend as a
“friend” and not a “stranger.” Of the middle-school students that we surveyed who were communicating with a “stranger,” the majority soon “felt” that person was a friend, they were willing to talk about “important things” with that person; and the majority, especially girls, felt the relationship was a romantic one. This is an offender’s dream come true and shows why grooming a child for sexual exploitation can happen easily and quickly online.

Parents and guardians should caution their children about taking and sending pictures via the Internet. Students who posted photographs of themselves were three times more likely to report online friendships and twice as likely to report a romantic relationship. Girls were more likely than boys to use a web camera and while the web cams were not always used to “sext” (send sexually explicit photographs via a text message), the pictures that are sent can be altered, used to identify the youngster who appears in the picture, and subject them to bullying or other forms of victimization.

Student-Safety Education

The present research makes clear that effective safety-education programs must target different groups, in different ways, and at different times. Currently, most Internet-safety programs focus on providing children and young adults with information to assist them in staying safe. Such programs should recognize and take into account the developmentally normal factors placing some children at increased risk and the ever-changing social network that is the Internet for many children. This network now includes some children engaging in behaviors that constitute criminal acts as part of their normal activity, such as taking sexually explicit pictures of themselves and electronically sending them to others. The social networking aspect of the Internet will only expand in size and complexity, offering untold opportunities for healthy socializing, as well as unhealthy, risky “socializing.” Overall, effective intervention programs must revamp how children are educated for the process to be meaningful. As mentioned several times, intervention programs must embrace well-known facts about normal developmental characteristics of adolescents that enhance their risk of being victimized. Adolescence (pre-teens and teenagers) is properly viewed as a time of development that is associated with risk-taking behaviors. Those risk-taking behaviors that traditionally have been the focus of adolescent behavior have been smoking, drinking alcohol, drugs, teen pregnancy, STDs, and delinquency. The Internet now provides an entirely new arena in which adolescents can engage in risky behavior.

Family-Focused Education

Most Internet-safety education is focused on children and delivered in a school setting. This approach, although beneficial, may increase the problem of parent/guardian-child communication around Internet risks. Parents and guardians are frequently excluded from the Internet education that their children receive in school. This approach may perpetuate the myth that children can protect themselves if they are simply informed. Parents and guardians are advised to:

• Sit with their children as they use the Internet and ask their children to explain how Internet technology can be misused;
• Get their children to agree to participate in an Internet and mobile-technology safety course together; and
• As always continue to review their children’s Internet accounts and communications.

ADDITIONAL READINGS


Dowdell, E.B. (Forthcoming in Press). Middle school students and risky internet behaviors: communication with online strangers and offline contact. Computers, Informatics, Nursing.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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