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Expanding Practice: Helping Families Develop a Family Internet Plan

By Brian P. Leung

The introduction of the Internet into the home has forever changed the use and availability of information for everyone in the household. A study released by the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (2002) noted that the amount of time the average person spent on the World Wide Web increased from 15 hours per year in 1995 to 160 hours a year in 1999. There is ample anecdotal evidence that children's use of the Internet is likely to have increased even faster than those by adults in a household. Though clear statistics are not available for children's usage, the National School Boards Foundation (2001) indicated that in almost half (49%) of households surveyed, at least one child uses the Internet. By the time they are teenagers, nearly three out of four children are online. Teenagers who use the Internet are more likely to log on at school, while younger children who are online are more likely to log on at home. It is important that parents assume an active role in supervising children's use of the Net.

In contrast to the TV, many parents do not have a developed knowledge of what is possible via the Net. Moreover, even where parents have some experience with the Internet, their children often use it in different ways from the parents. For example, children more frequently use features like Instant Messaging and Chat, with which the parents are less familiar (Haddon, 2001). This suggests that many parents are not in a strong position to influence their children's use of the Net.

The vast array of information and images available on the Internet poses potential

risks to children (e.g., pornography, dangerous ideas, predator online). Although the report from NSBA (2001) noted that parents tend to trust their children's use of the Internet, school psychologists can remind parents of these potential risks, and educate them on resources to aid them in developing a plan for safe use of the Internet at home. Schools psychologists can provide handouts and/or conduct parent seminars to begin this dialogue about setting up a Family Internet Usage plan. Such a plan will especially benefit younger children who are more likely to log on at home, and provide the foundation for proper Internet use as teenagers.

A family's unique characteristics and value will ultimately determine what a family plan might look like. But several themes emerge from a number of references offering guidelines to help parents (see list in References), and these can be used in a handout or presented in a parent seminar by school psychologists.

Preliminary Points

- 1) Encourage parent to talk with children about their use of the Net. Open communication with children allows for ongoing discussion about Net usage, as well as lays the foundation for future discussion of other issues important for parenting.
- 2) Support parents to continually seek advice and counsel of teachers, librarians, and other Internet and online service users in the area. Encourage each to share what they've learned in future parent seminars. This process will encourage everyone to maintain up-to-date information about the Net and other technology.
- 3) Have parents consider making online activities a family activity; for example, have the computer in the family room rather than the child's room to better monitor activities; or talk as a family about what one has learned on the Net this week, etc.

Major Themes

- 1) Outlining the potential dangers online is a good starting point. Since many parents are not as knowledgeable about the Net, some of the dangers are not apparent to them. The NSBA report indicated that parents in general are very trusting of their children in using the Net. It is possible that this trust is based on a lack of awareness.
- 2) Provide information about software that is available for parents to filter out inappropriate sites and to monitor whom their child communicates with on the Internet so that inappropriate exchanges are not made. Some examples of such software are Net Nanny (www.net-nanny-software.com), CyberPatrol

(www.cyberpatrol.com) and iProtectYou (www.softforyou.com). Perhaps the parent seminar can “assign” different parents to research different software and report on their finding for others.

3) Create a “Family Pledge” for online behaviors that includes how much time should be spent online, acceptable chat room topics, and internet etiquette. Discussion should include clear rules for permissible *surfing* (browsing through discussion groups or information sources), removing the child’s access if they engage in *hacking* (destroying files or other material on a computer system) or *flaming* (using abusive or offensive language on e-mail or chat rooms).

4) Specify clear rules prohibiting giving out personal information (credit card, school names, home addresses) and arranging face-to-face meetings with those met online, such as a bulletin board or chat room. In some cases, teaching children ethical use such as respecting confidentiality when accessing sensitive data online is important for parents to undertake. Responsible use of the Net is the desired outcome.

5) Helping older children understand the difference among facts, biases, and opinions expressed on websites is important to help them be critical users of information found on the Net (Leung & Hernandez, 2002).

Parents should be encouraged to view Internet access like other privileges for children in the home. Its use is based on showing responsibility and may be revoked. Once rules are clearly defined, parents can feel a little more at ease, knowing that their children are on their way to becoming critical and savvy Internet users.

Conclusion

The Internet has transformed how many people use and relate to information. As a tool, the Internet has tremendous possibilities to inform, enrich, and educate children, but it also has potential dangers especially for children. It is vitally important that parents, who are often not as technologically savvy as their children, are supported in guiding their children to use this important tool. School psychologists can be helpful in assisting parents to assume this responsibility.

Lastly, it is obvious that the benefits obtained from Internet use will depend greatly on the accessibility of the Internet for all involved. Thus, it is also important that school psychologists continue to strive for increased access for all, especially for low income or culturally and linguistically diverse parents and families.

Web-Based Resources for Parents

http://www.safekids.com/child_safety.htm

http://www.kidsdomain.com/brain/computer/surfing/safe_surf_parents.html

<http://www.nypl.org/legal/safety.cfm>

<http://www.yahooligans.com/Parents>

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