

Reducing the Risk of Internet Luring & Sexual Exploitation of Children

Background

The DFCC recently completed our Reducing the Risk of Internet Luring and Sexual Exploitation of Children initiative. Funded by the Government of Ontario through the Ministry of the Attorney General, our Ontario Victim Services Secretariat project had 3 components. These included 2 free full-day professional workshops, 10 free community workshops and a training program for the DFCC to create a new Violence Prevention Program workshop on Internet Luring. All program training and workshops were done by Dr. Peter Marshall, a well-known psychologist, international speaker and best selling author.

Community Workshop presentations were designed for parents, guardians and concerned citizens. Workshop material focused on recognizing the dangers and risks associated with children using the Internet, and understanding how this exposure can upset and confuse children and even distort their view of healthy relationships. Workshops also focussed on understanding how children can be victimized through the Internet and strategies to help them discuss issues and disclosures.

The following represents a complete report of the DFCC's Community Presentation.

Reducing the Risk Report

The Internet is a major part of young peoples' lives and social structure. It is also a wonderful tool allowing easy, affordable and almost instantaneous access to an amazing amount of information. However, the Internet is also almost completely uncensored and unregulated. Unlike libraries, there is no assurance that what is accessed on the Internet is a legitimate or appropriate source of information. The Internet is also a highly commercialized entity, with pornography being the biggest revenue source driving this medium.

Due to this reality, children can easily be exposed to pornography and its harmful impact. Surveys commonly show that over 20% of children and teens have reported that they've accidentally been exposed to this type of material on the Internet. What is critical to understanding the seriousness of children encountering such material is that Internet pornography is often extremely graphic, degrading and violent and can be very upsetting and disturbing to children and teens. In fact, such exposure can potentially cause a perceptual distortion of healthy relationships during a young person's formative years of development. Access to pornography is also of great concern because pedophiles often use it within their luring and grooming process of children and teens. Furthermore, the creation of child pornography is on the rise with many pedophiles creating, trading and selling it to meet their deviant needs. Sadly, there is also a disturbing trend towards victimizing younger children (5 and under), with an increased use of violence towards these young victims.

One of the greatest challenges to protecting children is that parents and caregivers often don't realize the risks and therefore do not take

sufficient measures to safeguard children from on-line exposure, victimization or the harmful misconceptions that children and teens may develop about healthy sexual behaviour.

Another significant concern regarding the Internet is that it allows pedophiles - those who are primarily sexually aroused by pre-pubescent children - to organize and form groups that support, advocate and contribute to the luring and sexual exploitation of children. By using group processes that have been effectively used by legitimate interest groups, pedophiles can more effectively define themselves as misunderstood and oppressed people to justify and promote their abnormal impulses, distorted perceptions and actions.

Strategies used by pedophiles to lure children can be very sophisticated. Although they come from all walks of life, pedophiles are often defined as intelligent and well organized people who use complex strategies to lure children. The typical profile of a pedophile in North America is a male who is 25-30 years of age and well educated.

During community workshops, Dr. Marshall presented examples of skilfully crafted websites which allow pedophiles to describe themselves as misunderstood and unethical people. Dr. Marshall notes that the purpose for creating such sites could include making direct contact with youngsters as well as providing on-line training for pedophiles regarding methods to lure, groom* and exploit children. (*Grooming is a process used by pedophiles to methodically and progressively work to manipulate their victims into trusting them and making them vulnerable to the predator's persuasion).

Pedophiles usually portray themselves as caring and sensitive friends, progressing slowly towards the suggestion of sexual activity. They will frequently seek an entry point or subject of discussion, such as sports or music, which allows them to connect to their victim and develop a relationship. Pedophiles will often use pornography to indoctrinate children and teens and try to isolate them from their natural and protective support groups. Complex manipulation is frequently used to confuse and distort information given to a victim. If a child or teen begins to feel uncomfortable and questions the pedophile's motives, the youngster is often made to feel guilty for mistrusting their friend and may be accused of betraying the relationship.

Victimization of children can include on-line activities using pornographically written emails, sending/exchanging pornographic images through the Internet and/or personal images using digital cameras and webcams and/or engaging in cyber sex. A pedophile may seek to establish a real-life meeting and work towards having their victims disclose personal contact information.

Signs that an on-line relationship is developing may include: a youngster spending more time using the computer, spending less time with their peers, receiving letters, gifts and/or phone calls from unknown people as well as changes in attitude and behaviour, including being withdrawn.

Although all children and teens are vulnerable to victimization, there are some groups that may be more at risk. These include children who are about 12 years of age and older who are becoming more independent and taking a stronger interest in using Internet technology within their daily lives through on-line chats, researching school projects, playing games and just surfing the Net. As in real world situations, children from single-parent families, youth who are introverted, depressed, in protective care and those with learning disabilities may be more at risk. Statistically speaking, females are at greater risk than males.

What is also important to remember is that children and teens often have a hard time understanding that the people they meet online may not actually be representing themselves accurately and they often think that they can discern misrepresentation. A point worth noting is that most children and teens know that they should not give out personal information to strangers. However, many will do so once they conclude that they can trust their new ifriendí - this usually happens within several weeks of conversation to as little as 15 minutes within a first online encounter.

Clearly, protecting children and teens from adult pornography, pedophiles and child pornography requires the concerted effort of many community partners including the Internet service providers through the provision of innovative safety products and initiatives, government through legislative, judicial and enforcement measures and the community, including schools and families through education and appropriate monitoring. Finally, children and teens themselves have an important role to play.

How to Help Keep Kids Safe

Family communication is very important to protecting children and teens:

When addressing the issue of safety, it is important to realize that we cannot eliminate all the dangers in this world whether we are talking about the physical world or the cyberspace world. Trying to prevent access to the supply of harmful material is a worthy endeavour, but cannot be easily achieved. Dr. Marshall relates this issue with efforts to eliminate the drug trade in the United States. In this situation, efforts to eliminate the supply of drugs by pouring vast resources into enforcement did not achieve the substantial outcomes hoped for. Although it is imperative to put resources into such initiatives, it is also important to educate children, youth and families about Internet safety, the promotion of good choices, positive role modeling within family relationships and the need for ongoing dialogue, appropriate to their age level, about what they see, hear and feel.

Learn the basics about how the Internet works:

To communicate effectively about safety issues, parents and caregivers need to have a basic minimum understanding of the Internet. Simply put, you can't communicate about something that you know nothing about. For parents and caregivers who have little related knowledge, Dr. Marshall encourages spending about an hour on the Internet to learn the basics. He also suggests that children and grandchildren are often the best teachers. Besides the fact that they will love this opportunity, the experience will help establish a good foundation for appropriate supervision and dialogue and will help adults keep up with new technology. Library workshops and local school boards' continuing education classes also provide basic and afford-

able training sessions. At the end of this summary there is also a list of websites that provide excellent resource information.

Teach children to be responsible Internet users:

Eventually children will have full and unrestricted use of the Internet, whether it's in their home, at school, at a friend's house or through technology such as cell phones and mp3 players. The Internet is simply, like in the physical world, a place that requires us to educate children about safety. In the physical world, when children are at a very young age, parents and caregivers have complete control over safety issues. As children grow older, responsibility for their own safety is transferred over to them in incremental steps based on demonstrated success and earned trust. Just as we teach children, through instruction and supervision, how to use the stove and teens how to drive a vehicle, so too should we teach responsible Internet practices.

Establish safety rules for using the Internet:

Kids want us to take an active role in keeping them safe. Establishing rules is important and does make a difference. For example, statistics show that establishing the rule of no off-line meetings can reduce the chance of children doing so by 50%. There are many websites that provide samples of great rules for families to discuss and agree upon. These rules can be posted by the computer and/or even used to make contracts that can be signed by children and teens. Allowing kids to participate in the setting of rules can be helpful, but remember adults must guide this process. (For further information, please view below the suggested websites).

Monitor and restrict according to maturity level:

Effective monitoring may include establishing rules about where computers are kept. Many parents like keeping the computer in an open space, but Dr. Marshall notes that this rule may not work for every family and home. Also, it may make sense, at some point, to allow a responsible teenager to have a computer in their room as long as they demonstrate continued responsible behaviour. Dr. Marshall also warns parents not to fall into a false sense of security. He notes that in reality monitoring is itself very challenging as few parents, if any, have the time to sit beside their children every minute, accept perhaps when they are very young. Many parents, once their children are a little older, forgo continuous monitoring and only check-in every five 5 minutes or so. In reality much more time often elapses between such checks and because access to pornography is almost instantaneous children can, in a matter of seconds, easily connect to hard core pornography.

Use filters:

Filters block information from getting to computers. Basic filtering options are often offered by the Internet provider, with many more comprehensive products available for purchase. However filters are not always sufficient to guarantee children's protection. (Learn more by visiting the websites listed below).

Other related rules:

Check to see if filters are in place: Let children know that you will check to see if the filters are in place and whether the 'History' of where they have been on the Internet is being deleted. If the History is deleted, or safety measures turned-off, let them know that there will be consequences.

Review your child's contact list and ask them to identify everyone listed. Delete second and third party contacts. As in the real world, you don't want your kids talking to strangers.

No off-line meetings: One survey indicates that 16-20% of youth form offline relationships. Make a rule that no off-line meetings should occur without parent approval and supervision. This rule alone can reduce the chance of off-line meetings by 50%.

Do not give out personal information: Most children and teens know that they should not give out personal information to strangers. However, many will do this once they conclude that they can trust their new friend. This usually happens within several weeks to as little as 15 minutes after a first online encounter.

Don't freak: Parents need to encourage children and teens to talk about things that they encounter and things that are upsetting or disturbing to them. Whether encountered inadvertently or on purpose, it is important to stay calm, so that kids feel safe in discussing and disclosing issues.

Keep life balanced:

The Internet is here to stay and it is a central element of young people's lives. It is easy for them to spend hours using this technology, but real life experiences such as socializing, getting together with friends, and physical activity must also play a role in their healthy development. There are many local organizations in Durham Region and the City of Kawartha Lakes that will help keep kids stay active. To learn more, visit www.dfcc.org Current News - Reducing the Risk of Internet Luring - Durham Region Resources and/or Kawartha Lakes Resources.

Report concerns to the authorities

www.cybertip.ca

Cybertip.ca is Canada's National Tipline for reporting the online sexual exploitation of children. It is a centralized web portal for receiving and addressing reports from the public regarding child pornography, luring, child sex tourism, and children who are exploited through prostitution. Cybertip.ca also provides the public with information, referrals and other resources to help Canadians keep their children safe while on the Internet. Child Find Manitoba's Cybertip.ca operates as one of the organization's core services. Although the majority of Cybertip.ca's reports are provided online, the public is also able to contact the tipline by phone or fax. (website description © Cybertip.ca). For more information visit: www.cybertip.ca or call toll free: 1.866.658.9022

Call Police: If anyone is in immediate danger call police.

If needed, get connected to a Counselling Service:

There are many local organizations in Durham Region and the City of Kawartha Lakes that can help with counselling children and families with issues, including those that may make children vulnerable to exploitation. To learn more, visit www.dfcc.org Current News - Reducing the Risk of Internet Luring - Durham Region Resources and/or Kawartha Lakes Resources.

To learn more about Internet Safety Issues, Strategies and Products visit:

www.bewebaware.ca

Be Web Aware is a national, bilingual public education program on Internet safety. Its goal is to raise awareness among parents regarding the online safety issues and the need for parental involvement. It also provides practical information and tools to help parents effectively manage Internet use in the home and to teach their kids to be Web savvy. (© Media Awareness Network, 2006)

www.media-awareness.ca

The Media Awareness Network (MNet) is a Canadian non-profit organization which focuses its efforts on equipping adults with information and tools to help young people to understand how the media work, how the media may affect their lifestyle choices and the extent to which they, as consumers and citizens, are being well informed. MNet also provides reference materials for use by adults and youth alike in examining media issues from a variety of perspectives. (© Media Awareness

www.opp.ca/crimeprev/english/tipsheetcol.htm

This O.P.P website provides a series of crime prevention tip sheets on a range of issues including Internet Safety Tips for Teens and Internet Safety Tips for Parents as well as tip sheets on Bullying and Street Proofing.

www.WiredKids.Org is an American based organization that provides an upbeat approach to basic Internet protection and has a great downloadable booklet at www.wiredkids.org/parents/parentingonline.

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