Proactive Strategies to Safeguard Young Adolescents in the Cyberage

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This Is How You Do It

- Send us a picture of the person you hate!
- Tell us what you want it to say under the picture!
- We will put it on no matter what it says!
- No one will ever know it’s you!
- Send what you have to say in a message!
- Don’t get mad at me for you being on the page!

This is just one example of a MySpace burn book profile that a single student developed for a middle school. This burn book included photos, inappropriate language, threats, and even one student’s home phone number. It had significant ramifications for the middle school students, parents, teachers, and administrators. Keeping kids safe in the era of technology can be complicated, but technology should not and cannot be avoided in the 21st century, when education must prepare students for success in an increasingly technology-centered world (Friedman, 2006; Tynes, 2007). Students, parents, teachers, and administrators need to be educated about a constantly changing technology environment that is simultaneously developing new ways to enhance education and creating new dangers for adolescents.

A wired culture

Teens today have extensive access to various technologies that keep them “connected” (Lenhart, Maddeen, & Hittlin; 2005), including computers, cell phones, and video consoles. According to the Pew Internet & American Life Project, approximately 87% of youth between the ages of 12 and 17 use the Internet, 51% of whom use it on a daily basis (Lenhart, et al., 2005). The Pew study found seventh grade to be a critical point when Internet use surged from 60% among sixth graders to 82% among seventh graders (Lenhart, et al., 2005).

Teens are not just browsing the Internet for information, they are actively creating their own content, such as blogs or videos, and they sometimes include

This article reflects the following This We Believe characteristics: An inviting, supportive, and safe environment — School-wide efforts and policies that foster health, wellness, and safety
information that could be used by peers or predators to do them harm. Cellular telephones, personal digital assistants (PDAs), networked gaming consoles, and instant messaging are also widely used by young teens (Lenhart et al., 2005; Nielsen, 2006; Sachoff, 2007), and many of these programs allow users to communicate, post profiles, share photos or other files, and share videos with friends and strangers, alike.

Although students often use the Internet and other technologies for entertainment and social connection, they also use them as tools for academic purposes. The Pew study found that 78% of teens who use instant messaging use it to discuss schoolwork (Lenhart, et al., 2005). Teens also use social networking sites such as Facebook, chat rooms, and discussion boards to discuss academic subjects (Tynes, 2007). Researchers argue that online tools can assist students with learning traditional subject matter (Lang, 2007; Tynes, 2007), and many educators seem to agree. Increasingly, schools and teachers are distributing assignments and creating channels of communication that require the Internet (Lang, 2007). This significant level of Internet use in schools will likely increase, demanding that educators and administrators respond more robustly to cybersafety.

The Internet and other forms of technology create an environment in which young adolescents need to make choices and decisions about appropriate behavior that they are not developmentally prepared to make. Tragic suicide of Megan Meier, who was harassed and embarrassed through MySpace, raised awareness about cyberbullying, and the NBC television show “To Catch a Predator” reminds viewers of the threats posed by predators, who often use tools of the cyberage to victimize youth. These dangers are real, but they should not discourage schools from using educational technology tools. In this section we, discuss the dangers of technology organized into three general categories: bullies and cliques, predators, and content. For the most part, these threats are not new, but the methods and means perpetrators now use in the cyberage have changed.

Bullies, cliques, and other threats to safety are not necessarily new dangers for adolescents, but in the cyberage these problems are no longer confined to schools and other physical spaces where youth congregate. Today, students may face these issues on a continual basis, and greater fear and tension is invoked because the identity of perpetrators is often unknown (Kowalski & Limber; Limber & Small, 2003). According to Williams and Guerra (2007), Internet bullying rises sharply after the fifth grade and peaks during the eighth grade before declining slightly after the middle school years. In one study, the number of teens who used the Internet to make negative comments about peers increased from 14% to 28% between 2000 and 2005 (Mitchell, Wolak, & Finklehor, 2007). Another study found that 34.5% of students between the ages of 10 and 15 had been harassed through some form of Internet communication (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2007). Disturbingly, these statistics may understate the magnitude of the problem, because students usually will not report an incident of cyberbullying or harassment, especially if it occurred through the use of a cell phone (Agatston, Kowalski, & Limber, 2007).

A common fear for parents and educators of middle grades students is exposure to predators in an online environment. Their fears are not unfounded, as the targets of Internet predators are often young adolescents. For example, Wolak and associates (2004) found that 76% of the victims of predators were between the ages of 13 and 15, and 75% were female. Before the cyberage, many programs helped make children aware of “stranger danger.” Today, however, predators can access vital information about their potential victims, establish familiarity, and enter their private worlds, thereby weakening the “stranger danger” scenario that normally helps children and teens know who is “safe.”
Certain online behaviors or choices perpetuate the risk (Malesky, 2007; Wolak, Finkelhor, & Mitchell, 2004). For example, any mention of sex or flirtation in a screen name, an online profile, an e-mail, or a bulletin posting might attract a predator’s attention, and so might the appearance of neediness, submissiveness, or appearing young either in photos or in screen name identifiers like “Cynthia12.” Predators most often initiate contact through the use of chat rooms (Malesky, 2007; Wolak et al., 2004), but they also use online profiles, screen names, bulletin postings, and any other information they can find to help them identify and groom potential victims. Predators tend to eventually use offline contact, such as the telephone, or they send gifts or money once an online relationship has been established (Wolak et al., 2004). Predators have increasingly used cell phones to facilitate contact and photo sharing away from the supervision of adults, and they have even used GPS tracking capabilities found in modern cell phones to locate their victims.

Adolescents have instant access and exposure to an overwhelming volume of content through computers, cell phones, and video game consoles, and this content can include dangerous or inappropriate language, images, and videos of a sexual and/or violent nature. The potential for middle school students to unintentionally encounter inappropriate content, particularly pornography, is relatively high, since they frequently use the Internet for research either at school or at home (Mitchell et al., 2007). The classic example is whitehouse.com. This website, at one point, was held by a pornography company. Therefore, this sort of tactic can provide a greater danger to teens than adults, who have more developed decision making abilities. Likewise, a harmless search for an image can also result in access to a variety of inappropriate content.

A final danger that is often ignored involves marketing and advertising aimed at children and teens. Although this content may not pose an immediate threat, children and teens, who are major consumers of media, should be aware of it. Only 2% of “kid-friendly” websites lack advertising (Biggest Threat, 2007), which means that even students in schools that do not accept corporate advertising are exposed to large amounts of advertising when they use the Internet. Internet advertisers can maliciously misrepresent themselves and their products to appeal to children or teens. In addition, the ads may link to a variety of inappropriate material, and advertising links frequently install viruses or spyware on computers making teens vulnerable to malware, tracking, and identity theft (Criddle, 2006; Mitchell et al., 2007).

**Implications for early adolescence**

During early adolescence, significant biological changes involving brain development and hormone production have implications for teen safety in the cyberage (Ortiz, 2003; Wallis, 2004). Recent research on brain development has shown that the prefrontal cortex, which is involved with planning, impulse control, reasoning and executing actions, is not fully developed during early adolescence (National Institute of Mental Health, n.d.; Ortiz, 2003; Powell, 2006; Tynes, 2007). Also, increased secretion of adrenal sex hormones, estrogen, and testosterone occurs during early adolescence (Wallis, 2004), and this can lead to an increased desire to activate intense feelings, through either intense interpersonal connections or risk taking behaviors. In short, young adolescents experience hormone-driven desires for intense interpersonal connections, yet their brains are not yet capable of exercising the levels of sound judgment and impulse control that enable them to make those connections safely and securely. This combination puts them at greater risk to the dangers posed by current technology (Wallis, 2004).

The Internet and other forms of technology create an environment in which young adolescents need to make choices and decisions about appropriate behavior that they are not developmentally prepared to make. This does not mean teens should be prevented from using these technologies, but it does mean that schools and parents must provide guidance and support to help them make appropriate decisions about the use of technology (Tynes, 2007). In the next section, we provide an overview of current policies regarding safety.
Students must develop strong technology skills during the middle grades.

Current policy

Setting policies for student safety in the cyberage can be incredibly complex. First, technology is constantly changing, so it is difficult for policymakers to develop policies that will apply to future technologies (Worthen, 2007). Second, educational policy is generated at several levels—federal, state, school district, and building—making policy coordination difficult. Third, many cybersafety issues are inextricably intertwined with free speech and First Amendment issues, so schools have to ensure that their policies and disciplinary actions fall within the somewhat ambiguous precedents of court cases (USA Today, 2008; Student's Threatening, 2007; Wheeler, 2004; Willard, 2007). Finally, courts and legislatures have had difficulty keeping up with the ever-changing policy, making the guidelines for schools even more ambiguous.

Currently, the federal government sets policy regarding student safety through the Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities Act of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) and the Children's Internet Protection Act of 2000 (CIPA) (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Currently, no mandates regarding cybersafety are included in NCLB; however, the Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities Act of NCLB does require schools to write and implement a safe school plan to meet its provisions. Also, CIPA contains provisions that require schools receiving e-rate discount funding for Internet access to filter and monitor student access to Internet content (Federal Communications Commission, 2003).

At the state level, 12 states have passed cyberbullying laws, and a number of other states are currently considering such bills (Calefati, 2009). These laws vary in their breadth and depth, but they all define cyberbullying technology to include electronic communication, Internet technologies, and, in several states, cell phones.

A recent National School Boards Association (NSBA) study found that most school districts have policies in place to protect students from online dangers and to educate and inform students and parents of Internet use policies (Lang, 2007). Ninety-two percent of school districts require parents and/or students to sign an Internet acceptable use policy. In more than 80% of school districts surveyed, such acceptable use policies include rules against chatting online and instant messaging during school. More than half of school districts have policies against the use of blogs, bulletin boards, e-mail, and/or social networking websites during school. Internet filtering software, used to block sites deemed inappropriate or not for educational use, is used by 98% of school districts, which is a condition of CIPA.

Schools are often unsure how to deal with instances of cyberbullying or harassment that occur off campus but affect students during the school day. Because technology is constantly changing, and many of the issues with cyberbullying are relatively new, schools and districts lack a significant amount of legal precedent.
to guide them. A further challenge is that most cyberbullying cases involve issues of free speech. Schools have to be careful not to violate the First Amendment, and the burden rests on them to prove that the actions of a student have caused a substantial disturbance to the educational process during the school day before they can impose disciplinary action (Student's Threatening, 2007; Wheeler, 2004; Willard, 2007).

**Recommendations**

E-mail, online bulletin boards, blogs, and even social networking sites offer powerful educational applications, but schools and districts will need to develop and implement policies and programs to ensure that students use these tools safely. The NSBA urges school districts to adopt guidelines for appropriate technology behavior and use and not deny students the opportunity to use these tools and develop the 21st century skills they will need (Lang, 2007). After carefully considering the educational needs of students, the potential dangers of technology, and the state of current policy, we offer the following recommendations for schools and districts considering cybersafety policies and programs.

School policies should include an Acceptable Use Policy (AUP). Most school districts create a general AUP that covers most issues regarding student responsibility when using computers on a school campus for educational and other appropriate purposes; however, schools should supplement AUPs as needed to include any missing components. For example, a school may need to include using computers for harassment or teasing as an inappropriate behavior if that behavior is not specified in the current policy.

Someone in the school should be designated the resident “expert” on cybersafety who all school personnel, students, and parents can seek when questions or concerns arise. Further, this individual should regularly review and suggest updates to the school’s AUP and assist with investigation of cybersafety problems.

Procedures for investigating cybersafety issues that arise both in and out of school should be delineated and made public to faculty, staff, administrators, and parents. These procedures should include obtaining screen shots (printed and saved) of appropriate information; interviews with persons involved in the case; the possible duplication of the computer hard drive, if the issue is serious enough; and a distribution of responsibilities for appropriate faculty and administrators.

School rules and policies should be updated to address problems and issues with the most current technologies. All school rules related to cybersafety should reference the AUP to reinforce that it is part of the school culture, not just a paper that has to be signed by students or parents and returned to the school. In addition, bullying policies and rules need to be updated to incorporate cyberbullying.

The issue of cell phones in schools should be addressed. Many schools have regulations against the use of cell phones on campus during the school day, and these rules must be enforced to protect students. In one study, students indicated they were using cell phones for text messaging—including bullying—in direct violation of rules against the use of cell phones (Agatston et al., 2007).
Professional development is an essential component of any plan to promote safe and appropriate technology use. Teachers need to be educated about the potential dangers of the technologies students use; they need to be provided with basic information and tools that can be incorporated into current curricula and programs, they must be well-acquainted with the school’s AUP and the procedures for enforcing it, and they should be equipped with the skills needed to save screen shots of computers to document any inappropriate content or cybersafety issue. Finally, teachers should know who to contact with questions about either the cybersafety policies or the technology itself.

Middle schools should design ways to integrate cybersafety into existing curricula and programs. Many middle schools have anti-bullying programs that need to be updated to incorporate cyberbullying (Worthen, 2007). Internet safety, appropriate online behavior, and proper cell phone use are appropriate topics for students to consider in middle grades advisory programs. Most middle schools offer computer courses that can teach “netiquette” and Internet safety topics. Finally, schools can infuse existing character education programs with technology safety and appropriate use areas as they address such topics as respect and responsibility.

Schools need to partner with families to keep young adolescents safe in the cyberage. Schools can use newsletters and school websites to communicate policies and provide appropriate resources to parents, and they can also partner with such organizations as the Parent Teacher Association to disseminate information. Schools can also offer classes to parents and the community to teach and promote cybersafety.

**Conclusion**

Schools should be proactive rather than reactive to issues of technology safety, and this requires careful planning and policy implementation. In this article, we have provided information and recommendations that will help middle grades educators, students, and parents to safely and successfully manage the many technologies they encounter and use daily, and to understand and combat the threats they may pose. Middle schools must develop ways to mitigate the dangers of technologies without denying students opportunities to use them, for the benefits of technology far outweigh the risks.

**References**


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