

Finding ways to change behaviour



What's happening with Internet safety in the United States? Michael Berson reviews the latest initiatives – and offers some thoughts on the way ahead for cybersafety everywhere.

When I was first asked to speak about what's been going on in cybersafety education, it got me thinking about a presentation my wife Ilene and I made to NetSafe in 2002. We talked about a young girl in the United States who'd been abducted from her home and taken to Greece as a result of an online relationship.

Last month, I read about an almost exact same story where a Michigan girl ended up in Amman, Jordan.

The States has some of the largest funding for Internet safety in the world – it begs the question: what has been going on with respect to cybersafety?

Well, we've had some interesting things happening over the last few months. One is NBC's TV series *To Catch a Predator*. It's been running sting operations to catch predators trying to meet online individuals they perceive to be juveniles. These people then show up at homes across the country expecting to meet a child to engage in sex, although many claim they're "just here to talk".

It's proving a very popular series – but it's the furthest thing from cybersafety and has set the whole Internet safety initiative back light years. The focus has shifted to the problem of perpetrators and away from evolving the capacity of young people to function productively in a digital age.

When we first started coming to New Zealand, a lot of our discussions focused on how to get over this constant focus on the 'predator'. How do we get into the schools and start talking to the kids about education – because it's not just about pornography and predators online; there's so many different aspects to Internet safety.

One of the challenges we face in the US is that most of the funding for Internet safety comes from the Department of Justice – which gives an incredibly different spin compared to anything coming from the Department of Education.

It's awarded US\$14 million to the Internet Crimes Against Children programme, which focuses on 16 law enforcement centres across the country. Although there is an education component, we know that when police officers visit a school to talk about drugs or sex it doesn't work – we're setting ourselves up for failure with acts like this unless it dramatically changes.

What else has been happening? You'll see in the accompanying panel [overleaf] my thoughts on some of the major online initiatives. One effort that perhaps has the most potential I've seen yet is the Project Safe Childhood Initiative in Virginia that will legally require public schools to teach students about Internet safety and report back their progress. It's promising to see this initiative, but I'm curious as to how it will be implemented. What will be taught? How will schools be monitored?

A new Bill before Congress – the Deleting Online Predators Act – will require recipients of universal service support for schools and libraries to protect minors from commercial social networking websites (focusing specifically on MySpace.com) and chat rooms. This is doomed to fail. We know that Internet safety changes dramatically from year to year. MySpace wasn't even around a few years ago – we have no idea what's going to be around two years from now. This is a very short-sighted approach.

“Pornography should not be the sole emphasis for discussion about Internet safety. We should expand our focus to enhance the capacity of young people to recognise misinformation online and make good decisions in digital spaces.”

Another problem in the US, or at least one of the concerns, revolves around textbooks. Children use them every single day and Internet safety should be integrated into the textbooks – it should not be simply a stand-alone process. Almost 90 per cent of the instructional resource dollars in some districts goes towards purchasing textbooks, but the publishing industry is wary about taking on the responsibility for keeping kids safe online.

So, what is the way forward? When we talk a lot about cybersafety in the US, a lot of people want to hear us talk about pornography. But pornography should not be the sole emphasis for discussion about Internet safety. We should expand our focus to enhance the capacity of young people to recognise misinformation online and make good decisions in digital spaces.

That's really what concerns me. How do students make sense of it all? When I first started teaching, all I had to deal with was a newspaper. As I've continued, more and more information is reaching our students.

Characteristics of effective prevention programmes:

- ✓ Based on a coherent theoretical basis
- ✓ Includes active, systematic, and specific skills training;
- ✓ Integrates multiple programme components (ie classroom training combined with parent involvement)
- ✓ Interactive instructional techniques;
- ✓ Individualised instruction and lower teacher ratios;
- ✓ Implemented throughout the full programme;
- ✓ Provides intensive training, perhaps surpassing 20 hours of exposure that is repeated over a multiple-year period.

Characteristics of ineffective programmes

- ✗ Teaching, lectures, and presentations targeted simply at increasing knowledge;
- ✗ Use of fear tactics;
- ✗ Efforts to change attitudes alone;
- ✗ Generalised approaches, such as affective education.

Source: Luna, R., & Finklehor, D. (1998). School-Based Prevention Programs: Lessons for Child Victimization Prevention. Durham, NH: Crimes Against Children Research Center.



When we consider Internet safety in the future, it has to be in a context, otherwise we'll fall into the same traps as iSAFE, CyberSMART and others which increase knowledge – don't talk to strangers online, don't give out your password, that sort of thing – but fail to change behaviour.

This is the new face of Internet safety: how to get children to critically examine, critically explore, and critically think about the images and information they are being bombarded with every single day.

I'm not downplaying the importance and issues regarding predators online, pornographic images, and getting entrapped by spam – but the critical question we should be asking ourselves with respect to Internet safety is how do children discern fact from fantasy?

What do we have to do? We have some of the best people in law enforcement and education working on the initiatives that increase knowledge but don't change behaviour.

I'll leave you with this thought. When we write we don't necessarily talk about Internet safety education any more, or cybersafety; we talk about cybercitizenship. We're talking about evolving the whole child, their roles and responsibilities as cybercitizens in a digital world. □

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These are some of the major Internet safety initiatives in the US – the big ones that claim to reach the most students (there are also many localised ones). Preparing for this presentation has given me a good opportunity to reflect on what's been going on. These initiatives have been around for a while... how successful have they been?

i-SAFE

www.isafe.org

Founded in 1998 with a US\$5 million budget (a huge amount for such initiatives), iSafe specifically focused on education. A recent review concluded that there were "positive and significant changes in knowledge" – which is very exciting – but no significant changes in behaviour. There are some outstanding components to iSafe, but one of the biggest complaints by teachers is that there's not enough time in the curriculum to teach about Internet safety.

Evaluation findings:

www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/213715.pdf

CyberSMART!

www.cybersmart.org

This is an interesting initiative that emerged out of a collaboration with a text book publisher and had all the components of an outstanding programme – and some amazing materials. But no great changes in behaviour occurred. The evaluation concluded that it impacted on the quality of "skills and knowledge necessary to make better use of the Internet", but questioned whether a technically-savvy teacher wouldn't have done just as well.

Evaluation findings:

www.cybersmart.org/downloads/pdf/MARTEC-EVAL.pdf

NetSmartz

www.netsmartz.org

Funded through the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, this is really the grandfather of all Internet safety programmes in the US. It's geared for five to 17-year-olds and has some interesting materials. The evaluation is difficult to find and says "teens routinely practice high-risk behaviors online" and that their Internet safety awareness was "disturbingly low". And, again, it concludes that it increases knowledge but does not change behaviour.

Evaluation findings:

www.netsmartz.org/pdf/evalstathigh.pdf

Faux Paw

www.ikeepsafe.org

Faux Paw is the most interesting among the new players and was developed through a concern from the former First Lady of Utah, who wanted to create a cybersafety initiative in her State. She persuaded the First Ladies of all 50 States to support it and attracted considerable corporate sponsorship (Adobe, Dell, AOL, Disney, Intel, Symantec among them) – the funding was tremendous; the support phenomenal. It created a movie called Faux Paw, with a PDF of a book ... and that's it. Millions of dollars have been spent but not one single student I've spoken with knows about Faux Paw!