

Chapter 14

Internet Safety: Proactively Protecting Young Children from Internet Threats

Andrea C. Peach
Georgetown College, USA

Susan Bell
Georgetown College, USA

Alexandru Spataru
Georgetown College, USA

ABSTRACT

Preschool and young school-aged children use the internet at high rates, and with this access, parents and educators worry about safety issues. Reports of cyberbullying, child predators, inappropriate internet content, and violations of privacy, such as identity theft saturate the media (Dowell, Burgess, & Cavanaugh, 2009). This chapter will explore the roots of cyberbullying, including relational aggression and bullying in early childhood, will examine issues in internet safety that pertain to young children, and will differentiate the issues with young children from those that plague older children. Resources for working with children, parents, and educators will be reviewed, and future safety issues of internet and other mobile technology will be discussed.

INTRODUCTION: THE “iGENERATION”

The “iGeneration”, as identified by Rosen (2010), describes the generation of current preschoolers and young children and how they are avid users of mobile devices (iPods, iPhones, iPads, etc.).

These children have grown up with computer-based technology in most aspects of normal life, including the home (toys, personal computers, smart phones, etc.), community (productivity tools, safety devices, edutainment, etc.), and school (educational computer software / hardware). Not only do these children use stand-alone computers and software, they also extensively use the internet. According to US Census surveys and other reports,

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approximately 70 to 80 percent of children have home access to the internet (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009; Mason, 2008). Not only do these young children have ready access to computers, they seem to use the computers for a variety of online and communications tasks. For example, Rosen (2010) found that the 4 - 8 year old children he investigated spend an average of 27 minutes a day online. These young children also were reported to use Email (6 minutes a day), IM/Chat (5 minutes a day), and even texting through cell and smart phones (7 minutes per day) (Rosen, 2010). Young children also have access to the internet at school. NCES (2008) reported that all United States public schools had computers with Internet access, and a growing number of schools (54%) had wireless access throughout the whole school. Considering the rapid evolution of technology and lower costs for it one can surmise that all young children have access to technology at school and the majority accesses it at home as well.

With all of this access to the internet and other communications tools, parents and educators are worried about safety issues. Reports of cyberbullying, child predators, access to inappropriate internet content, such as pornography and hate propaganda, and violations of privacy, such as identity theft saturate the media (Dowell, Burgess, & Cavanaugh, 2009). For example, in a study by Aricek and others (2008) one-third of the students reported that they had introduced themselves to a stranger on the internet. In addition to safety risks, unwise behavior on the internet leaves permanent records which can be accessed in perpetuity – youthful indiscretions becoming eternally and universally accessible (Kite, Gable, & Fillipelli, 2010).

While the focus of most of these reports involves older children and teenagers, younger children also need to be protected from potential internet threats (Cho & Cheon, 2005; Hinduja & Patchin, 2009; Trolley, Hanel, & Shields, 2009). This chapter will explore the roots of cyberbullying, including relational aggression and bullying

in early childhood, will examine issues in internet safety that pertain to young children, and will differentiate the issues with young children from those that plague older children. Resources for working with children, parents, and educators will be reviewed, and future safety issues of internet and other mobile technology will be discussed.

Objectives

1. Discuss internet safety issues directed to preschool children.
2. Identify media, internet, and home / school situations that model positive or negative internet safety / cyberbullying behaviors.
3. Discuss research on bullying and cyberbullying in school-age children, examining their roots in early childhood, with suggestions for prevention and intervention.
4. Provide positive internet safety resources to be used by parents and educators to teach young children about internet safety and cyberbullying prevention.

BACKGROUND: AGGRESSION AND BULLYING DURING THE PRESCHOOL YEARS

Cyberbullying requires a knowledge base and skill set that is, understandably, far beyond the capabilities of early childhood. However, the direct and indirect aggressive acts which lie at the heart of this pursuit of social dominance are observed frequently in the preschool classroom. It is imperative that we examine the roots of these troubling behaviors, easily observed in young children, if we hope to intervene well before these children gain technological independence. While aggression is a frequently observed feature of normal child development, especially for boys, high rates of aggression can be an early warning sign for later childhood and adolescent mental health problems, and have been correlated with

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