

The following document is from:

Safe and Responsible Use of the Internet: A Guide for Educators

Nancy E. Willard, M.S., J.D.

Responsible Netizen Institute
474 W 29th Avenue
Eugene, Oregon 97405
541-344-9125
541-344-1481 (fax)
Web Site: <http://responsiblenetizen.org>
E-mail: info@responsiblenetizen.org

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Part I. Comprehensive Approach

1. Protection and Empowerment

*You'll look up and down streets, look 'em over with care.
About some you will say, "I don't choose to go there."
With your head full of brains and your shoes full of feet,
you're too smart to go down any not-so-good streets.*

- Dr. Suess¹

¹ Geisel, T.S., *Oh the Places You'll Go!* 1990. Random House: New York. The author of this Guide read this section in testimony before the COPA Commission and the NRC Committee.

Raising Children to Make Safe and Responsible Choices in the "Real World"

The development of strategies to address issues of concern regarding the use of the Internet by young people must be grounded in knowledge of effective parenting and educational strategies. Parents and educators already know a great deal about helping young people learn to engage in safe and responsible behavior.

When children are too young to comprehend the dangers, to understand the expectations for their behavior, and to independently engage in safe and responsible decision-making, we keep them in safe places and supervise their activities. We keep them in fenced play yards. When we take our children to places that may be less safe, such as a public park, we even more closely supervise their activities. We also use these public excursions as opportunities to teach our children. We teach them about potential dangers, how to recognize dangerous situations, and what actions to take to keep themselves safe. We introduce these lessons with an understanding of the cognitive development and sensitivities of their age.

We also teach children about our positive expectations for their behavior. We teach them about respect for others and actions that are necessary to support the good of the community. And if they engage in unsafe or irresponsible behavior, we intervene with appropriate discipline. We use transgressions as "teachable moments" to review and reinforce the lessons of safe and responsible behavior.

As children grow, we allow them increasing freedom. We do not expect that teenagers will be satisfied remaining in fenced play yards. But we remain engaged. We know that young people who have parents and other influential adults who remain "hands-on," through active involvement, ongoing communication, and supervision, are much less likely to engage in unsafe or irresponsible behavior.

New issues related to potential dangers and expectations for behavior emerge. Issues that would not have been appropriate to address when a child was younger, such as date rape, become important issues to address at this age. We use the same pattern of instruction -- providing information about the issue of concern, how to recognize a situation presenting the concern, and how to effectively respond to the situation.

In sum, helping children and teenagers learn to engage in safe and responsible behavior involves imparting:

- Knowledge about potential dangers or concerns and expectations or standards for responsible behavior.
- Effective decision-making skills that include being able to recognize situations presenting concerns and knowing appropriate or effective responses to such situations.
- Motivation to behave in a safe and responsible manner. Motivation is grounded in values that promote respect for self, others, and the common good.

Helping Children Learn to Make Safe and Responsible Choices in Cyberspace

How do these basic lessons in raising safe and responsible children translate to the Internet? First and foremost, we have to recognize that even though we may be accessing the Internet from the safety of a classroom or family room, the Internet is very much a public place. Allowing young children to have supervised, open access to the Internet (filtered or not) without close supervision would be the equivalent of leaving a child to play unsupervised in New York City's Central Park. Older children need to have the knowledge and skills to make safe and responsible choices in these public places.

Elementary Students

Students in elementary school are too young to be fully informed about Internet dangers and should not be expected to be able to engage in safe behavior in unsupervised environments. When children are of elementary school age, their use of the Internet should be almost exclusively in "safe Internet spaces" -- environments that provide access to only pre-reviewed, educationally appropriate sites. Their use of electronic communications should likewise be in safe communication environments, such as a classroom e-mail account.

Experienced Internet researchers know the difficulties in finding the quality resources on the Internet and distinguishing such resources from the non-quality resources. Now imagine a 3rd grade student trying to find the quality resources that are at a 3rd grade reading level! Elementary students should simply not be expected to have the necessary skills to be effective researchers on the open Internet. There are simply too many sites that are not appropriate information resources for students at this level of their education. Far too much time would be spent in unproductive searching, and not enough time learning the subject matter under study.

There are a variety of ways to establish these safe Internet spaces. The most common approaches are district or class educational web sites. Some state education systems offer an education web site. The Oregon School Library Information System at <http://www.oslis.k12.or.us/> is an example of such a service. The Education World has an excellent educational web site for students. Subscription services are available from some educational technology companies. There are also technologies that can be used to provide greater security in the establishment of such safe spaces, including proxy servers and the new Internet Content Rating Association system. Clearly, more work in this area is necessary.

If it is necessary for elementary age children to use the open Internet, they should do so only in highly structured environments with close over-the-shoulder supervision.

Since children in elementary school are also using the Internet at home, parents should be provided with information on how to establish safe Internet spaces on their system at home. Parents can be provided with specific information on establishing the school's educational portal as the default portal on their home browser. Parents should also be provided with Internet safety information that is appropriate for elementary age children.

There is one vitally important safety skill that all children should be taught prior to using the Internet, even in safe environments. All children should know that there is "yucky" stuff on the Internet that, through no fault of their own, may appear on the computer screen. Children should

know that if "yucky" material ever appears on their screen, they should immediately turn off the screen (the process to do this may vary depending on the computer system) and tell a teacher or their parent, if at home.

Secondary Students

When students are in middle school and high school, access should be more open and the focus should shift to instruction on basic safety skills, supervision, monitoring, and responsive discipline. The primary *protection* at this point should be the student's own skills and motivation. One strong motivation for responsible behavior in school should be the significant likelihood that irresponsible behavior will be detected and result in discipline.

But more importantly, the focus must shift to the importance of making choices on the Internet that are in accord with the teenager's emerging sense of personal identity and moral values. This issue is discussed more fully below.

The best time to begin to more fully instruct students about safe and responsible online behavior is the last year of elementary school or early in middle school. At this age, students will be demanding more freedom on the Internet at home. They will also be old enough to understand issues related to the potential dangers or inappropriateness of certain materials and to successfully utilize safety skills.

Schools may want to engineer a gradual opening of the levels of access, rather than providing precocious and curious beginning middle school students with wide open access on their first day of school. For example, middle schools may want to generally limit student access to Internet safe spaces, but allow specific exceptions. Exceptions may be specific classroom activities that require open access or open access upon request in the library, if the student has been unable to find necessary information in the safe Internet space. Schools may also want to require successful completion of an Internet safety and responsible use class prior to allowing such open access.

Addressing Issues of Responsible Behavior

Moral Development

To address the question of how to help young people use information and communication technologies in a responsible manner, we must consider how young people learn to engage in an responsible, ethical behavior. Furthermore, we must examine how information and communication technologies and the emerging cyber environment may impact their learning and behavior.

The following discussion comes from the introduction to the author's book *Computer Ethics, Etiquette, and Safety*. This book is distributed by The International Society for Technology in Education².

² URL: <http://www.iste.org>

As young people grow, their emerging cognitive development enables them to gain increasingly accurate perceptions of the world around them. Three principal external influences combine with this emerging cognitive development to affect moral development and behavior. These factors are:

- Recognition that an action has caused harm. When a young person engages in inappropriate action and recognizes that his or her action has caused harm to another, this leads to an empathic response, which leads to feelings of remorse.
- Social disapproval. When a young person engages in inappropriate action and recognizes that others have become aware of and disapprove of this action, this leads to "loss of face" and feelings of shame.
- Punishment by authority. When a young person engages in an inappropriate action and this action is detected by a person with authority over the young person, this leads to punishment imposed by the person in authority, which can lead to feelings of regret, but also can lead to anger at the authority.

These three external influences not only affect behavior in both young people and older people, they also play a major role in a young person's moral development. During adolescence, young people develop a sense of their own personal identity. This personal identity incorporates an internalized personal moral code. In adolescents and adults, our personal moral code functions as an internal influence for ethical and responsible behavior. Behavior is influenced both by the external factors, as well as the internalized moral code.

When we perceive that we have violated our own personal moral code, we feel guilty -- unless we can rationalize our actions in some manner. We are all willing, under certain circumstances to waiver from our personal moral code. We each have an internalized limit about how far we are willing to waiver from the ideal set forth in our personal moral code. This limit protects against unlimited inappropriate activity³.

There are a number of factors that appear to influence behavior that waivers from our personal moral code. We are more likely to waiver when our assessment is that:

- There is an extremely limited chance or no chance of detection and punishment.
- The inappropriate action will not cause any perceptible harm.
- The harm may be perceptible, but is small in comparison with the personal benefit we will gain.
- The harm is to a large entity, such as a corporation, and no specific or known person will suffer any loss.

³ Based on theories of Nisan and Bandura. Nisan, M. (1991) Limited acceptable morality. In Kurtines, W. M. & Gewirtz, J. L., *Handbook of Moral Behavior and Development, Vol III*. Bandura, A. (1991). Social cognition theory of moral thought and action. In Kurtines, W. M. & Gewirtz, J. L., *Handbook of Moral Behavior and Development, Vol I*.

- Many people engage in such behavior, even though some may consider the behavior may be considered illegal or unethical.
- The entity or individual that is or could be harmed by the action has engaged in unfair or unjust actions.

Impact of Information and Communication Technologies

Information and communication technologies have a profound impact on the external influences of behavior.

Technology does not provide tangible feedback.

When people use technology, there is a lack of tangible feedback about the consequences of actions on others. People are distanced from a perception of the harm that their behavior has caused.

This lack of tangible feedback undermines the empathic response, and thus undermines feelings of remorse. The lack of tangible feedback makes it easier to rationalize an inappropriate action.

Technology allows us to become invisible.

In fact, people are not totally invisible when they use the Internet. In most cases, they leave "cyberfootprints" wherever they go. But despite this reality, the perception of invisibility persists. Some actions using technology are quite invisible, such as borrowing a friend's software program and installing it on your own computer. It is also possible to increase the level of invisibility with the use of technology tools. Establishing a pseudonymous account enhances invisibility. The fact that many people may be engaged in a similar activity also leads to a perception of invisibility because individual actions are such a "drop in the pond" that they are unlikely to be detected.

Invisibility undermines the potential impact of both authority and social disapproval. If a transgression cannot be detected and a person is unlikely to be punished, threats of punishment are not likely to have any impact whatsoever on behavior.

The issue of the impact of invisibility on human behavior is not new. Plato raised this very same issue in his story about the Ring of Gyges. In this story, a shepherd found a magical ring. When the stone was turned to the inside, the shepherd became invisible. Thus questions were raised: How will we choose to behave if we are invisible? Will we do whatever we want to do because we know that nobody can catch and punish us? Will we do something that could hurt someone because we know that nobody can tell who did this? Or will we do what we know is right?

It is important to recognize that young people are using the Internet, and thus are influenced by the lack of tangible feedback and perceptions of invisibility, at the same time that they are in the process of developing their internalized personal moral code. We do not know how this will affect their development and internalization process.

Strategies to Address Lack of Tangible Feedback and Invisibility

Focus on Personal Values

Help young people learn to do what is right in accord with their own personal values, regardless of the potential of detection and punishment.

To do this, we must enhance their reliance on their own internalized personal moral code. We must shift our focus away from rules and threats of punishments. Threats of punishment are simply an ineffective approach when the likelihood of detection and punishment is so remote. The message: "Don't do this because it is against the rules" has limited impact if you believe that you are invisible and that your actions cannot and will not be detected and punished.

Within the school environment, there clearly should be a lack of invisibility due to the effective supervision and monitoring strategies. But outside of the school environment, the perception and reality of invisibility will exist. Our goal as educators should be to prepare students for this environment.

The key to such preparation is education and appropriate discipline. We must focus the attention of young people on the *reasons* for the rules, rather than the potential of detection and punishment. Rules are generally enacted because actions that violate the rules can cause harm to someone else. So our focus must be on the potential harm, not the rule. In a world where we are invisible, a much more powerful message is: "Don't do this because if you do you will harm someone by (describe the possible harmful impact of the action)." By focusing on the reasons for the rules, we can help young people develop a more understanding and caring moral code.

Recognize Unseen Harm

Help young people understand how actions can cause harm to people they can not see.

Empathy actually has two components -- a feeling component and a thinking component. When we see or hear someone who is happy or sad, we begin to feel the same way inside. This is the feeling part of empathy. As young people grow, they also gain the ability to understand cognitively how other people think and feel. They learn to look at things from their perspective. This is the thinking part of empathy. Thinking about how someone else feels can also affect how we feel inside. The lack of tangible feedback impairs the feeling component of empathy. We must help young people learn to rely on the thinking part of empathy when they use information technologies.

Use Effective Decision-Making Strategies

Help young people learn to use effective decision-making strategies to help guide their behavior in a responsible way.

These strategies must be effective even though young people do not have tangible feedback and may perceive themselves to be invisible. Effective decision-making strategies, written in language that can be used to communicate with young people include:

- Golden Rule Test *How would you feel if someone did the same thing to you? If you would not*

want to have someone do the same thing to you, then the action is probably wrong.

A version of the Golden Rule is found in every religion in the world. Considering how we would feel if someone did the same thing to us is a powerful ethical decision-making strategy.

- Trusted Adult Test *What would your mom or dad, guardian, or another adult who is important in your life think? Your parents, guardians, or other adults who are important to you may not understand the Internet, but they know a lot about deciding whether an action is right or wrong. Considering how your parents, guardians, or other important adult would judge your actions, you will help you to act in accord with your family's values.*

Philosophers call this the Moral Exemplar. Young people can be encouraged to model the behavior of those whose opinions are important to them. This test also brings in the importance of acting in accord with the values that have been established by the family.

- Is There a Rule? Test *Generally, rules or laws have been created to protect the rights of people and to serve the common good. Rules and laws provide good guidance on whether or not an action is right or wrong.*

It is important for young people to recognize the basis upon which rules have been created. Rules are created to protect the rights of people and to serve the common good. The focus must always be on the reason for the rule, not the rule itself. This is a very important distinction. Young people may think that if they are invisible and no one can punish them for violating a rule, then the rule is of no importance.

- Front Page Test *If your action were reported on the front page of the newspaper, what would other people think? One way to make good decisions is to act as if the whole world can see what you are doing.*

The Front Page Test is another decision-making strategy that can help to address the perceptions of invisibility. There have been a number of widely reported incidents where an individual thought his or her actions were private, only to find them ultimately reported on the front pages of various newspapers.

- If Everybody Did It Test *What would happen if everybody made a decision to do this? Consider what kind of world this would be if everyone did what you are thinking of doing. You might think that you are only causing a "little bit of harm." But if everyone else is also doing a little bit of harm, then someone else might be suffering a lot of hurt.*

This test is an updated version of Kant's Moral Imperative. Encourage students to add up the large amount of harm caused by many people engaging in small acts of harm.

- Real World Test *Would it be OK if you did this action, or a similar action, in the real world? Just because you do something in cyberspace, does not mean that you cannot hurt someone. Actions in cyberspace can cause just as much harm to someone else as actions in the real*

world.

Considering actions in the context of the "real world" can help to create a better understanding of the consequences of actions on unseen others. The Real world Test will help to bring about a better understanding of the real harm caused to real people.

- **Gandhi Test** *Sometimes when people behave inappropriately on the Internet they claim that they are actually trying to make the Internet a better place. Mathama Gandhi was a great leader in India who led a successful revolution using nonviolent resistance. One of the things he said was: "We must the future we wish to see. It is a good thing for people to try to make the Internet and the world a better place. But you will be most successful in making things better if you behave in a way that you want others to behave.*

Ensure Accountability

Remain "hand's on" while young people are learning these lessons.

The children of parents who are "hand's on" -- that is know where their children are, what they are doing, and who they are doing it with -- and who keep lines of communication open, are much less likely to engage in risky behavior. When young people are using the Internet, responsible adults in their environment need to remain "hand's on." Effective supervision and monitoring are essential strategies to remain "hand's on."

NRC Report Findings and Observations

On May 8, 2002, the National Research Council (NRC) released its report entitled *Youth, Pornography and the Internet*⁴. A major conclusion of this report was:

(S)ocial and educational strategies to develop in minors an ethic of responsible choice and the skills to effectuate these choices and to cope with exposure are foundational to protecting children from negative effects that may result from exposure to inappropriate material or experiences on the Internet.

The following findings and observations about social and educational strategies contained in the *NRC Report* emphasize the importance of the comprehensive protection and preparation strategies recommended in this Guide:

1. Social and educational strategies directly address the nurturing of character and the development of responsible choice. Because such strategies locate control in the hands of the youth targeted, children may make mistakes as they learn to internalize the object of these lessons. But explaining why certain actions were mistaken will help children learn the lessons that parents and other adults hope they will learn.

⁴ National Research Council. *Youth, Pornography, and the Internet* (Dick Thornburgh & Herbert S. Lin, eds., 2002) URL: http://bob.nap.edu/html/youth_internet/.

2. Though education is difficult and time-consuming, many aspects of Internet safety education have been successful in the past several years. While it is true that Internet safety education, acceptable use policies, and even parental guidance and counseling are unlikely to change the desires of many adolescent boys to seek out sexually explicit materials, parents are more aware of some of the other dangers (such as meeting strangers face-to-face) and know more about how to protect their kids better than ever before. (This is true even though more needs to be done in this area.) Children are better educated about how to sense whether the person on the other end of an instant message is "for real." Many of them have developed strategies for coping, and children with such strategies increasingly understand the rules of the game better than their parents. Little of this was true 5 years ago.
3. Social and educational strategies are generally not inexpensive, and they require tending and implementation. Adults must be taught to teach children how to make good choices in this area. They must be willing to engage in sometimes-difficult conversations. And, social and educational strategies do not provide a quick fix with a high degree of immediate protection. Nevertheless they are the only approach through which ethics of responsible behavior can be cultivated and ways of coping with inappropriate material and experiences can be taught.
4. Social and educational strategies have relevance and applicability far beyond the limited question of "protecting kids from porn on the Internet." For example, social and educational strategies are relevant to teaching children to:
 - Think critically about all kinds of media messages, including those associated with hate, racism, senseless violence, and so on;
 - Conduct effective Internet searches for information and navigate with confidence;
 - Evaluate the credibility and motivation of the sources of the messages that they receive;
 - Better recognize dangerous situations on the Internet;
 - Make ethical and responsible choices about internet behavior -- and about non-Internet behavior as well; and
 - Cope better with exposure to upsetting and disturbing experiences and material found on the Internet⁵.

⁵ NRC, *supra* at Section 10.11.