

DECEMBER
2012

Educare



Contents

1. TCKs and the Internet - Minimising the Dangers Pg 2

"A third culture kid is a person who has spent a significant part of his or her developmental years outside their parents' culture." Dave Pollock

TCKs and the Internet - Minimising the Dangers

The internet is part of the one of the greatest social revolutions in human history. It has risen from small beginnings in the 1990s to become the enormous worldwide phenomenon that we know now. In many ways the net is so useful and has brought so many benefits to us that it's hard to imagine life without it. In other ways though the darker side of what is available there and its misuse represents one of the biggest challenges that millions of people around the world face. There is particular concern about the problems internet use poses to children and our TCKs are just as vulnerable as any others because of its global reach. This article will focus on the dangers our children face and what we can do as parents, schools and sending agencies to help our children avoid those dangers and maximise the huge potential benefits. It will also consider the related issue of mobile/cell phone use – increasingly with smart phones this is just another facet of the same concerns and potential uses.

A recent UK Department for Education survey¹ produced these figures for parents who say that their children have been exposed to the various internet dangers.

Pornography 41%
Sexual messages 31%
Violence 27%
Gambling 26%
Bullying 23%,
Alcohol/drugs 22%
Text abuse 22%
Self-harm 10%
Anorexia 9%
Grooming 9%
Radicalisation 8%
Suicide 8%



Although these figures are alarming in themselves they are almost certainly underestimates because of the secretive nature of internet misuse. There is also a huge discrepancy between the dangers children and their parents perceive on the internet² -

	Parents' fears	Children's fears
Paedophiles	66%	36%
Net bullying	61%	35%
Inappropriate content	52%	7%

All danger areas show serious differences, but the biggest by far is the fear of inappropriate material such as pornography, violence and gambling etc. This is probably a combination of children's lack of awareness of danger and curiosity or fascination with these forbidden sites.

The various concerns are

- Time wasting. Most of us would concede that we have spent too much time browsing the internet at times. There is no guaranteed exception for TCKs! For some though this goes well beyond the occasional time-wasting that so many internet users have experienced and becomes a real problem preventing proper completion of homework and adequate time for socialisation. In the worst cases this goes as far as addiction with compulsive thinking about internet use, an inability to break or reduce the pattern of excess use, disrupted sleep, and lying or deceiving to cover the extent of the problem. There are now some children, including TCKs, who are looking at screens longer than they have free hours in a day. This is only possible because they are looking at 2 or more screens at once during almost all of their time out of school. Smart phones have made it possible to constantly access screens and the internet almost anywhere.

- Social isolation from real people leading to being lost in a virtual world of internet use and text messages. The screen is a very convenient place to hide behind from real world relationships. Nearly all of us have experienced being with someone who is with us physically but not engaging socially because of constant phone or internet distractions. One case recently related to me was that of a very unhappy grandparent whose grandchildren spent their whole visit texting messages to each other (in the same room!) and to friends. Not once did they meaningfully connect with the grandparent concerned. Although this is an extreme example it is sadly far from unique.



- For many parents one of the biggest problems they face is that of helping children manage social media use, particularly Facebook & Twitter. There have been many high-profile cases of sports personalities and media figures posting very unwise comments and personal information there leading to dismissal from teams, loss of contracts and scandals. This is only the high-profile tip of the iceberg though as many children fall into exactly the same trap. The ability to respond to something instantly and with seeming anonymity deceives children into making these kind of destructive postings which become public and can leave a permanent trail. The phenomenon of e-mail rage noted since the early days of the technology seems to be substantially worse with the multiplication of instant response possibilities. One area of misuse is to post outraged and provocative comments that stir up resentment, unwise accusations and slander that can break friendships, creating long-term enemies. Another is posting sexual comments and images on the encouragement of others. What many don't realise is that potential future employers may be able to see this information as they consider applicants: it is not unknown for a job application to fail because of this. Is this social media misuse a real issue even in "sheltered" TCK communities? The answer is definitely yes – talking with one group nearly all of those present confirmed that they had seen this kind of serious misuse from other TCKs. Another specific problem for some TCKs and their families is that of unguarded comments in conservative societies that could lead to a threat to the family's long-term status there.
- Related to one of the misuses of social media sites is the problem of sexting. This is sending text messages and images of a sexual nature. Again once a message like this has been sent it can be copied, forwarded and/or reused. An unwise text sexual photograph can almost instantly become a major personal embarrassment and a potential long-term issue damaging relationships with family and friends as well as leaving a dangerous impression of being sexually loose.
- Text messages and social media sites are now a favoured method of ongoing bullying as victims can be constantly bombarded with threats, ostracised by a Facebook campaign or targeted by trolls. There is the possibility that a child can be a constant victim with no safe haven even in the home when physically away from the bullies.
- Inappropriate personal calls, text and social media messages from older children and adults, sometimes with intentional grooming for sexual abuse by predators is a real danger, as seen in the figures quoted where nearly 1 in 10 parents say their child has had this. Interestingly it is the greatest perceived danger from both parents and children as well. This issue is so serious that many child protection policies have it written into their good practice standards that staff are not to exchange any personal messages with children they are responsible for. In addition to this is the expectation that children will be educated about proper internet use through the school or organisation concerned.

This is a grey area as information messages to organise an event can easily and unwittingly lead on to more personal ones. However, it is worth noting that many teachers and youth workers have been reprimanded for sending personal messages alone, plus a number of sex offenders have started infatuations with an older child by exchanging such messages.

- There is a great deal of misinformation on the net: some is funny or strange, but some is potentially dangerous – sites offering health advice are an obvious example where quacks offer advice on slimming to vulnerable young people prone to anorexia. Because the net is so unregulated it is almost always possible to find someone promoting bizarre ideas and then meeting others who share them making them seem normal. The internet is contributing to the epidemic of self-harm and suicide in the developed countries. One statistic of concern in this is that just over 30% of children believe that if a search engine lists sites and information then they must be true.³
- Violent and addictive on-line games are a recurring theme when parents and teachers express fears for children: this issue ranks second behind pornography for internet misuse in the UK Government survey. There is clear evidence that these games affect the behaviour of some children.
- Gambling has spread way beyond the casinos, betting shops and race courses to become an easy access global problem. In theory these sites are only open to over-18s, but in reality it is possible for children to access them - as shown in the UK survey where 26% of parents say their children had seen them - with potentially devastating financial consequences.



•Probably the biggest concern for internet misuse is pornography. The statistics on this for young adults are startling with around 95% of men and 75% of women aged 18-30 acknowledging that they had recently watched hard-core porn on-line or on DVD.⁴ The figures for teenagers aren't so extreme, but they are not encouraging, with over half having seen this kind of material.⁵ Normally this is banned in the home, but secretive teenagers can find ways around such bans. Added to this are smart phones without filters being watched at school or other places where groups gather. This multi-million industry is also churning out ever more extreme material and often linking sex with violence. There is no doubt that porn influences behaviour, even more so when younger and more impressionable minds are exposed or even addicted to it.

All of this is an alarming picture and it does affect TCKs who are mostly as internet-savvy as passport country peers. There may be more sheltering and protection in some overseas settings with small teams and supportive schools, but to pretend that internet problems will not happen is naïve and will only increase the risk.

So what can be done to reduce the risks and train children to use this vast source of information, useful material and resource supply centre positively?

A few ideas are recommended here: they are not complicated and the list is by no means exhaustive.

Most parents specify allocations of time for leisure internet use. Some children apply maximum times themselves, but to prevent use from becoming excessive then parents should agree reasonable maximum time limits with them. This should also include regulation of any smart phone internet use and of the amount of text messages sent.

Monitoring what children look at in the home largely involves use in public places. Almost no-one will access inappropriate sites where others responsible for their welfare can see them to avoid being caught out and shamed. Bad habits grow in secret so it is important to avoid any such use.

Sometimes an outright temporary ban on all leisure use of the computer is needed when misuse problems become too severe. This serves a double purpose of providing a sanction as well as a way of breaking the cycle of misuse. What is much more difficult to regulate though is the use of smart phones by peers. This is a major route of pornography access for many teenagers as there always seems to be someone with a device without filters. Given this situation it is always good to be as aware as possible of any misuse by comparing notes with teachers and other parents as well as directly asking your own children if this is happening. It may be possible to help avoid smart phone use like this by not allowing them to be taken into school.

It is relatively easy to install filters at home and they are standard in schools, youth clubs and other children's groups. Such public settings are less favourable anyway to serious internet use. There has been some debate recently in the UK over the different possibilities for limiting children's access to the internet. Under pressure from ISPs and from anti-censorship activists the government there has rejected calls to introduce an opt-in system for pornography and other "adult" content. This has proved controversial with child protection agencies and sections of the press protesting vigorously against this rejection in favour of a much softer recommendation policy. Although personally siding with child protection groups because any tool to help limit the damage is good, one argument of the anti-censorship lobby is true – no filtering system can provide total safety. Therefore any filters used are only an extra tool and not a replacement for parental supervision. This is also very much the case with Facebook use. Parents need to be aware of what their children are posting there. They could still post something damaging or risky, but are much less likely to do so if they know that their parents will see it!

In many families accountability for internet use is taken seriously. In some where there is a mutual arrangement between the older children and the parents, the agreement is not only that the parents know what the children have looked at, but also that the children know the same about their parents. Of course no system is foolproof as it relies on honesty especially when it relates to what they see on other people's machines. Therefore another part of any answer is to have an open and frank discussion about internet use and misuse. There is no point being coy with teenagers about the amount of pornography and violent games available on the internet or about the dangers of Facebook and Twitter misuse. They know a lot of this already, possibly even more than their parents in some cases because of what they see and experience with peers. We have to be very direct about the dangers, looking at both the short-term and long-term damage it can do – just as we would focus on the dangers of drug and alcohol abuse.



We also need to avoid just focusing on the negative side as though the internet is evil in itself. The other side is to train in good internet use such as sifting out relevant information from the irrelevant in research assignments, verifying if something is true by checking unrelated sources, using Facebook and Twitter to send out helpful and healthy information and so much more. We need to ensure that we don't end up sounding like anti-internet dinosaurs otherwise we run a greater risk of the whole message being rejected, however logical it sounds to us. A spin-off benefit of this is that it should help motivate us as parents to ensure that our own internet use is all in order.

We also need open discussion as groups of adults responsible for children – parents in teams, school staff, youth leaders and others about this issue. This will help us as adults to pick up potential problems earlier and also help keep us from personal misuse.

As one of the biggest challenges today so much more could be said about this issue. We welcome any contributions, particularly any other management strategies that could be recommended. Any personal correspondence on this concern is also invited.

References

<http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/research/media-literacy/media-lit11/childrens.pdf>

Research findings on internet use by children; their perceived advantages and dangers from parents and children; measures used by parents to protect children; and more.

<http://www.education.gov.uk/ukccis/about/a0076277/the-byron-review>

Reports and articles from a government-sponsored child internet safety consultancy.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-20649022>

Article about a school in rural Vermont that introduced an internet-free residential programme to break teenagers away from continuous use. The results over the few months are interesting and revealing with most teens preferring much more rationed use afterwards.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-20738746>

15th Dec 2012 Internet porn: Automatic block rejected

Article about the debate raging over introducing a deliberate opt-in for adult-content sites, introducing a voluntary code of recommendation to parents that they introduce filters, or doing nothing. We welcome feedback on this issue from any other country's perspective.

<http://www.annarbor.co.uk/images/PDF/InternetAddiction.pdf>

Article on internet addiction by Martin Phillips who is a licensed member of the American Psychological Association, currently practising as an educational and clinical psychologist in Cyprus and consulting for Ann Arbor Publishers.

¹ Department for Education figures quoted in <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2244842/Four-10-parents-say-children-exposed-internet-porn.html>

² Source <https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/DCSF-RR192.pdf> 2009 survey

³ <http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/market-data-research/media-literacy/archive/medlitpub/medlitpubrss/ukchildrensml11/> The same survey shows that 44% realise that some sites are accurate whereas others are not and the remainder don't consider the issue of truth, misinformation or even deception.

⁴ Figures quoted from Denmark where pornography has been legal for many years. This disturbing reading shows where open access on the internet is leading. Ref; Hald GM Arch Sex Behaviour (2006) 35:577–585 **Gender Differences in Pornography Consumption among Young Heterosexual Danish Adults**

⁵ CRU recently said around 90 percent of the 16-year-olds had viewed pornography and 80 percent of 15- to 17-year-olds had had exposure to hardcore pornography. In a recent study, teenagers were asked if pornography was acceptable, and 67 percent of the boys and 59 percent of the girls said "yes". <http://www.christianpost.com/news/internet-the-greatest-threat-to-christians-apologist-josh-mcdowell-says-52382/>

Educare is an e-magazine written for TCKs, their families and supporters as well as anyone concerned for their welfare.

It can be distributed freely to anyone who would benefit from it.

Direct free subscription from mk_tck@yahoo.co.uk