

Contents:

1 Internet Safety; 6 ACE and European Universities; 6 Multilingualism

Internet Safety and TCKs

Two years ago we ran an article on internet safety that drew quite a lot of response. From my travels and in correspondence, it has become clear that this is a worldwide concern, affecting families of any and every culture who can afford the technology to allow internet access. Given the level of concern that was encountered, we are now including another article.

The dangers posed cover 4 main areas

1. Unhealthy overuse, leading to addiction for a minority.
2. Inappropriate uploads and posting of information. This includes, but is not limited to, posting or sending offensive messages, pictures of a sexual nature - including self-generated images in sexting, material critical of the host culture or authorities, and putting too much personal information into a public domain.
3. Viewing or downloading inappropriate content. This includes, but is not limited to, illegal or "pirate" data and entertainment, violent games, pornography, gambling sites, misinformation, pro-anorexia, and suicide sites.
4. Direct threats when a child is deliberately targeted. The two main areas are cyber-bullying - usually by other children - and grooming where predators target children for sexual or other exploitation. Children can also be subject to data theft risks.

This article focuses on social networking site (SNS) use, cyberbullying and sexting, and then some ways to help children and their parents manage the internet positively.

Cyberbullying

This is where someone is the victim of offensive and/or threatening messages sent to tablets and hand-held phones of all kinds, through e-mail, SNS or posted up on websites. In the worst cases the victim is bombarded with messages from individuals or groups to the point where they can feel that there is no escape from their tormentors. It can also take the form of SNS and text messages spreading rumours about the child. It has become extremely common, with 38% of young people in the UK* and 33% in the USA** having been affected by cyber-bullying. The indications are that these are typical figures for teenagers in developed countries.

There are more girls than boys who are cyber-bullies, and they think that it is easier to get away with their behaviour than bullying in person. The bullies give a variety of reasons, but the most common ones are that the victim "deserves it", or to gain revenge, followed by "having fun" and causing embarrassment.

The consequences for young people include underperformance in school linked with reluctance to attend or even absenteeism. Many victims suffer taunting and threats in silence, but the damage can be severe, leading to depression, suicidal tendencies and potential lifelong emotional wounds. A worrying issue is that many parents are much less aware than their teens of the prevalence and dangers of cyberbullying, with only 7%** recognising it as a major problem as recently as 2011.

*Source: http://www.nspcc.org.uk/Inform/resourcesforprofessionals/bullying/bullying_statistics_wda85732.html

**Source: <http://www.internetsafety101.org/cyberbullyingstatistics.htm> (quoting from PEW internet research)

A useful short film on the subject is found at

"Let's Fight it Together" on cyberbullying <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nbGwCJK7FM>
or from the original source at Digizen at <http://old.digizen.org/cyberbullying/fullfilm.aspx>

Sexting

Some children directly post sexual pictures of themselves and/or friends on social media sites - this has happened even from teens in MK schools. 22% of teen girls and 18% of boys* report sending nude or semi-nude images of this nature. Most of these go to boyfriends or girlfriends, but 15%* admit to sending these pictures to people they have never met and only know from the Internet. Increasingly sexting is seen as a "normal" part of being a teenager. Also nearly 40%* of all teenagers have posted or sent sexually suggestive messages - a practice more common among boys than girls.

A major concern is that such pictures frequently go public, so that they can be saved and copied by others. They may never be completely deleted from all sources and could come to light years in the future, during applications for jobs or university. If the pictures are shared, the child is almost always shamed and humiliated, often feeling that the only ways out are to run, hide or even self-harm or attempt suicide.

Very few children or teens know that it is actually a crime (classed as child pornography) to send or receive such images, and it could potentially lead to police intervention if sexually explicit messages are sent. Posting or sending images also opens up the risk of blackmail afterwards, in an attempt to prevent parents and other authority figures from seeing them.

A further danger is that paedophiles look around for sext messages posted on-line. This is with a view to grooming for sexual exploitation, and is particularly dangerous where a child's location can be determined - very easily with smart phone and tablet technology now - and where the child is a loner or on the margins in some way.

*Source: <https://www.dosomething.org/facts/11-facts-about-sexting>

A useful short film on the subject is found at

"Exposed" on sexting at http://www.thinkuknow.co.uk/14_plus/

Social Networking Sites (SNS)

There is the desire in all of us to want to be heard, and SNS seem to offer that, with its illusion of hundreds of friends. All too often though the reaction from those seeing the posting is an unspoken, but resounding "so what?" SNS can give the impression that the many "friends" are really interested in the everyday details of someone's lives, but the sad reality is that so many of them are busily posting about their lives in the same desire to be heard.

Many young people uncertain of their own identity feel more at ease online communicating via SNS than in person. More time spent in person with real friends and family is the real answer, but how can that be done by people who spend hours each day on SNS?

Although people of all ages use SNS, young people are far more likely to use them, and for longer periods. In fact only a tiny minority of teenagers in developed countries do not use SNS.

Comments like these (taken from <http://www.bbc.co.uk/newsbeat/29457870>) are not unusual:

"I can't do without my phone. I can't do without checking Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat."

"My phone is rarely out of my hand. I check online regularly throughout the day, but I know how to stay safe there."

Parents' lack of knowledge compared to their children can often result in parents feeling that they are playing technological catch-up. However, this should not discourage parents from

setting boundaries and guidelines for SNS and general internet use. Children and young people often lack the maturity required to understand the dangers and consequences of their actions online. Although the children will probably be more up to date with the technology and its use, this does not necessarily make them more digitally competent. Adults must not let any feelings of being uncomfortable with SNS and smart phone apps stop them from taking responsibility for keeping children safe online.

SNS use also has a positive side. SNS users are less likely to feel socially isolated and often have more 'friends' that they relate closely to in person. SNS can help to revive dormant friendships, and to keep in touch with friends and family who live in other parts of the world. The online communication is often also just part of the whole friendship rather than a substitute for meeting in person and helps to deepen the ties. The online friends can also be a great source of support in times of difficulty. Also counselling charities are beginning to use them to support people in emotional distress.

We need to avoid either extreme of just letting our young people use SNS oblivious of the dangers and pitfalls, or of trying to ban all sites because of our scepticism and fear of them. Many Christian young people use the sites very positively to share their faith, promote events, talk about tricky but important issues and much more. We need to affirm that kind of positive use. An analogy would be with having a car to drive. When the rules of the road are followed it is a great asset - when they are broken the results can be disastrous. Likewise with the internet - observing the rules leads to great results, ignoring them creates all sorts of difficulties. Therefore affirmation of positive use goes with the need to set rules or boundaries.

An obvious area is that of distraction and time wasting. SNS can be one of the most addictive areas on the net, but even without addiction it's common for some to spend over an hour a day there; that is a major distraction in itself from other areas of life.

Unaware of the dangers some may well accept complete strangers as Facebook "friends". There are strong peer voices and examples shaping the identity of a young person, telling them who they should be. Many SNS profiles show an exciting, but unreal, fiction world of an internet personality very different to the rest of that person's life. A part of that can include sin made public by SNS bragging about it, even from Christians. This belittles sin to minor misdemeanours or even something to boast about - drunken exploits, airbrushing details to exaggerate and even lie, using obscene language and more.

How can we help young people to discern what is best for their Christian lives, setting boundaries whilst still giving them the freedom to express themselves?

The answers for each family will vary depending, among other things, on the relationship with the young person at the time, their age, and the family location.

Parts of our children's internet use are almost certainly outside of our control and in the future will be almost totally so. Therefore, everything that we do in this area needs to be within the framework of prayer for our children and prayer for wisdom and the best ways for us as parents to help them manage SNS and general internet use.

Setting boundaries is about much more than locking and blocking. Just as we set boundaries offline, such as deadlines for coming in at night, or sensible bedtimes, we do the same online.

- Set time limits for how long they spend online, and specific ones for SNS.
- Do not allow under-13s on Facebook and other major sites; it's surprising how many parents turn a blind eye to under-age children illegally having a profile.
- Ensure that any internet access, including smart phone and tablet use, is supervised.

- Do not allow use late at night, and do not take the phone or tablet to the bedroom. This is a helpful guideline not just for children and young people, but for ourselves too! Too many people lose sleep because of late night internet use, or the phone ringing through the night. Bad habits grow in secret, so it's important to keep discussing why this is a boundary that the whole family keeps.

It is really important to know what they are doing - what apps they have on their phones, where they go on the internet. That involves talking, being ready to start the discussion and help them to start filtering content they read for themselves. If we are there for them offline, in the same way we need to talk with them about life online and seek to understand their experiences there. They are then more likely to approach us if and when they need support.

*A helpful safety guide for children is **ZIP IT, BLOCK IT, FLAG IT**. This guide can be adapted for children of all ages, but also for young people and adults.*

Zip it - keep personal information private, and don't post or send offensive messages.

Block it - prevent access to harmful or offensive material by using agreed filters and following simple protocols such as deleting unknown e-mails, and not responding to pop-up adverts or 'too good to be true' offers.

Flag it - tell a responsible adult if anything disturbing happens, such as offensive material coming to them despite the filters. This is particularly important with cyber-bullying or if they receive messages or offers from unknown "friends" on SNS or by instant messaging.

SNS and other e-communication in TCK Communities

It can be more difficult in a tight-knit situation in mission to identify the details of a school or children's work policy on communication, and how to implement it so that everyone understands and works to it. In many MK schools teachers and other staff are much closer to the students than in passport countries. They often function as substitute family members. In some schools it is almost expected (although never written in policies) that all staff will be social media "friends" with students who are old enough.

It is possible to have social networking and other similar contact with the children as long as it is limited to acceptable contexts:

- a) Group text messages, e-mails or open contact via social networking sites to organise events or issue reminders to prepare for school or club activities.
- b) Sending greetings for birthdays or other major events - especially if done in the same sort of way for all students
- c) Posting messages on an open social network site as long as the content is not embarrassing or over personal in any way.

The following areas are a warning sign that things could be going wrong:

- a) Private messages being sent by any means, as they could easily be misinterpreted in themselves, even if the content is harmless
- b) Frequent messages to the same child, even if sent publicly
- c) Frequent private messages such as daily "encouraging" texts
- d) SNS messages, texts or e-mails being sent early in the morning or late at night - it suggests secrecy
- e) Sharing of personal information such as the staff member's struggles with loneliness, other team members, or feeling homesick
- f) Any sexual content, even simple observations about how attractive the child is

The children also need to know these guidelines and what is and is not appropriate.

There have been a number of cases now where teachers and youth leaders have been reprimanded or dismissed for inappropriate personal contact with children. What began as friendly messages and passing information led on to sharing personal information via text, e-mail or other electronic means. This in itself can be viewed as grooming, where an adult develops a friendship with a child, gives them treats and favours, compliments or other positive attention with a view to sexual contact. Grooming can begin when the adult concerned knows what they are doing, but the adult can also cross the line from correct communication to sharing personal information without realising the dangers.

An example would be a teacher who begins by sending and receiving encouraging texts to his or her students. These texts become more frequent and more personal and lead in due course to private meetings with one or more students to discuss these personal issues. These steps in themselves are inappropriate, but can easily lead on in private meetings to actual or alleged physical contact. This is a trap for a female sex offender who allows her feelings for a student to take over. Typically such an offender is relatively young, just a few years older than her students, is somewhat insecure and is looking for affection - which can be readily provided by a teenager. That insecurity can be exaggerated by cross-cultural and transition stress in our overseas communities and TCK schools.

Most internet dangers are the same anywhere in the world. In restrictive host countries however, a child posting material critical of the authorities there could lead to a breach of security and even the risk of expulsion. Even in open countries there can be serious damage to the family's work and ministry from unwise uploads. There are times when I hear comments about the host country from expatriates that are so negative that they would be seriously embarrassing, if not destructive, should host country residents hear them. The apparently anonymous, but in reality very public, forum of social networking sites can bring such destructive comments made by a child (or an adult in a bad moment) into the open.

Another issue arises in host countries where predatory paedophilia is a major problem because of weak law enforcement – the risks of posting too much personal information are higher there.

References

Websites

Concern about children's internet safety is very widespread and the UK-based **Churches Child Protection Advisory Service (CCPAS)** has some very good materials available, including a lot of free downloads on their "Information - Help Leaflets" page. (<http://www.ccpas.co.uk/>)

CCPAS in cooperation with Microsoft, BT and the police Child Exploitation and On-line Protection Centre (**CEOP**) also offer on-line training on internet safety for children at <http://www.ccpas.co.uk/TrainingInternet.html>

CEOP's own website has very useful free downloads at <http://ceop.police.uk/>

The UK police based CEOP also work closely with the International Child Protection Network; details at <http://ceop.police.uk/icpn/>

There are general internet safety teaching resources at <http://www.thinkuknow.co.uk/>

This includes internet safety for children of almost all ages from 5 to 14+

There are also pages for parents and other carers, and for teachers.

Recent news articles

1 in 3 teenagers meet social media 'friends' in real life - <http://www.bbc.co.uk/newsbeat/29457870>

Generation net: The youngsters who prefer their virtual lives to the real world

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-1354702/Children-happier-virtual-lives-real-world.html#ixzz3GW18s1Kw>

ACE Qualifications and European universities

In August 2014 the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) in the UK made the following statement about the International Certificate of Christian Education (ICCE) end of school qualifications offered by Accelerated Christian Education.

"The ICCE does not attract UCAS tariff points. UCAS would be unable to consider the qualification for inclusion in the current tariff owing to it not being Ofqual accredited."

There had been some debate about the suitability of the qualification for university entrance in the UK and other European countries, but this statement makes it clear that in itself it is not adequate to satisfy academic entrance requirements. The UCAS position was made clear in a Times Educational Supplement article, which also indicated that some students from schools using the system have entered UK higher education by passing university-set entrance exams.

Ref <http://www.tes.co.uk/article.aspx?storyCode=6439808>

Multilingualism

10 years ago we ran two editions on multilingualism. As this issue affects so many TCKs and their families, it is time for a return to this theme. Back then, the various advantages of multilingualism were outlined along with a few potential pitfalls; the follow up edition included a number of personal accounts. We will follow a similar pattern with a brief introduction here and more personal accounts in the December edition.

The advantages of multilingualism include wider communication skills and cultural understanding, greater access to literature. Self-esteem is improved – this is usually a valued skill among monolinguals who have had to toil through language lessons at school. Employment opportunities are also enhanced.

Most of our TCKs are bilingual to some extent. Some have a limited, but functional, knowledge of a second language - usually, but not always, one from the host country. Others are balanced bilinguals or multilinguals with the same apparent ease in two or more languages. Most are somewhere in between - this is also true of the majority of multilingual people around the world.

Thinking skills are enhanced as the part of the brain involved in language learning is exercised and developed in childhood, and future language learning is made easier – as explained below in the summary of findings from the University College of London (UCL). (Quoted in Gulf News 16th Oct 2004, Dubai)

According to research at UCL, being bilingual produces changes in the anatomy of the brain. The findings showed that people who speak two languages have more grey matter in the language region of the brain. The earlier they learned the languages, the larger the grey area. The degree of grey matter enlargement is correlated to the proficiency of languages attained. Learning another language after 35 years old also alters the brain but the change is not as pronounced as in early learners. It reinforces the idea that it is easier to learn early rather than late because the brain is more capable of adjusting or accommodating new languages by changing structurally. This ability decreases with time. The research is based on structural brain imaging comparing the amount of grey matter in 25 monolinguals, 25 early bilinguals and 33 late bilinguals who acquired the second language between the ages of 10 and 15. All of the subjects were native English speakers of comparable age and education.

There is no evidence that multilingualism in itself is psychologically or educationally harmful in any way. Fears of poor academic performance were originally based on bad research done on both sides of the Atlantic in the early 1900s. In both cases children who hadn't yet properly learned English were given the same tests as native English speakers, and therefore assumed to have learning difficulties associated with bilingualism.

(Illustration below from Colin Baker - A Parents' & Teachers' Guide to Bilingualism)



It is possible to get around with a cycle like this



It's better still to have 2 wheels as you can go further and more easily



Even better though to have 2 wheels that are more balanced



As long as the two wheels have the right shape!

On the negative side, there can be real problems if the mother tongue needed for academic re-entry is not strong enough. There can be cultural identity problems if the language acquisition is not done well and the child is uncertain of whom he or she is. Occasionally there can be rejection of one of the languages – the reasons are not related to “difficulties” learning them, but to other factors and negative associations such as bullying from speakers of the language.

With so many cross-cultural marriages in the international community, many of our children are growing up in a bilingual environment in the home as well as in the society around. In bilingual marriages, the ideal is for each parent to speak the mother tongue with the children all of the time starting from the very beginning. This should be continued even as they get older, but can be modified if visitors who do not speak the language are present. For example, if the two languages are English and Spanish, both parents could use English if visiting non-Spanish speakers and vice-versa.

It is common for children in bilingual families to mix the two languages as they learn, and parents should not worry unless this becomes a persistent problem hindering communication. It is also common for a child to answer both parents in one language, especially if the surrounding language reinforces the child's preference. This is a real issue if one parent is the main context for a minority language. However, one thing that a response in the child's

preferred language shows is that he or she has understood which shows that listening receptive skills are not being lost.

The amount of time devoted to the two or more languages will vary through childhood based on the needs at the time. Often small children can become fairly fluent for their age in the language of their local friends, however if there is no context for the language in later life they may lose most or all of it.

As the child grows it is important to focus on the educational language and preferably to be decisive about that from about 11 or 12 onwards. That does not rule out serious academic study of and in a second language, but that the main focus for the future should be on gaining the appropriate qualifications in the main language of education. How much effort is put into the second language should depend on why it is needed. Is it

- a) ...simply to communicate with family and friends in the parents' passport culture or in the host culture? If this is the case then the emphasis can be on conversational skills and developed by normal use within the family - parent/s speaking that language, listening to music, browsing web sites, watching TV etc
- b) ...for work in the future? A good example would be a Korean student who will study at university in the USA, but does not expect to get a Green Card and work there afterwards. In this case, although the school study for university entrance will be in English, it is worth pushing for more academic Korean for the long-term future without overloading the study time.
- c) ...for future study at university? In this case the more of that language that the student can study in advance, the better. A good example here would be a Latin American student studying in school in English, but needing Spanish or Portuguese for university in the passport country. A small number of international schools have time allocated for students like this to learn the mother tongue, but for most it is up to the family to try to do the best job possible.

We would like to receive any accounts from Educare readers to be included with your permission in the next or future editions.

References

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Also

Bowers Joyce Ed; *Raising Resilient TCKs*; pages 305 – 322 have 3 articles on linguistic issues. (Free download)

Blomberg & Brooks (Ed) (2001) *Fitted Pieces*; pages 582 – 599 (Mail order from SHARE Education services, Budapest)

Educare – December 2004 and March 2005; available free from SteveGill@mkea.freeseve.co.uk

Educare is a ministry of WEC International produced for cross-cultural families, their supporters and sending agencies without charge as an e-magazine. Educare may be freely distributed and forwarded to anyone who would benefit from it.