A “Site Map” to Cyber Abuse Prevention

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Cyber abuse on the increase
The incidence of cyber abuse is growing dramatically, including cyber bullying, cyber stalking, cyber sexual solicitation, and cyber pornography. The increase in reporting cyber abuse has been met with more emphasis on developing prevention strategies to protect children from the potential dangers of the Internet. In recent years, new prevention strategies have emerged, each with its unique delivery but most sharing the goal of increasing child and youth awareness of risky online behaviors.

Specialized programs have also been developed to protect children and youth from dangers of the Internet through education, blocking access to unapproved websites, improving parent monitoring of children’s online activities and developing specialized law enforcement programs. However, education remains the predominant prevention strategy.

Teachers in schools can use different strategies to inform children and youth about the potential dangers of the Internet. There are now a number of prevention programs available to educate children and youth about the possible dangers of the Internet and risky online behaviors. Let us look at these.

Resources for education about cyber abuse
While programs have been empirically tested, some educational programs which have been tested and seem promising include:

The Safer Surfing program developed by the Metropolitan Police in England (Davidson & Martellozzo (2005). This program encourages safe use of the Internet. It educates children about strategies for safe use using an interactive session and the SAFER mnemonic: (S) – secrets don’t keep them; (A) – attachments don’t open them; (F) – false don’t believe them; (E) – exit don’t stay there; (R) – remember chat rooms are public provide no personal details.

The Getting to Know IT All program developed by Childnet International (Washrag, Andrews & Yee, 2005). This program is an interactive multimedia slide show aimed at empowering secondary school students, teachers, and parents to keep their computer secure, keep themselves safe online and know where to go for help.

KidSmart has developed print and in-school seminar information for children, parents and teachers about the risks of Internet chat rooms (KidSmart 2000).

The i-SAFE curriculum focuses on teaching children about Internet safety in the United States. The i-SAFE curriculum involves interactive developmentally appropriate lessons for children from kindergarten through high school on such topics as the differences between person-to-person and online communication, how to be safe while online, cyber relationships, cyber bullying, predator identification, and identity theft (Chibnall, et al., 2006).

The Missing program, developed in Canada, involves the use of an interactive computer game designed to encourage youth to develop their own guidelines for safe Internet use. Based on a true story, the game allows children to assume the role of a police officer to demonstrate how people use the Internet to lure children (Crombie & Trinneer, 2003).
“In junior high some girls would threaten me on MSN and call me names all the time. I was really uncomfortable going to school and often skipped just so that I wouldn't have to be there. Mostly because I would cry a lot and didn't want to end up crying in my class or during break.”

Most evaluation studies of prevention strategies measure success by considering whether children and youth increased their Internet knowledge and whether they decreased their risky online behaviors (Chibnall, et al., 2006; Wishart, Andrews & Yee, 2005). Research findings have shown the benefit of educational activities, suggesting that youth who receive education on Internet safety exhibit more knowledge regarding Internet safety strategies (Chibnall, et al., 2006; Davidson & Martellozzo, 2005; Gray, 1997), and are more aware of the dangers associated with Internet use (Davidson & Martellozzo, 2005). Although knowledge was shown to increase, no evidence suggests that these prevention strategies actually decrease risky online behaviors (Chibnall, et al., 2006; Crombie & Trinneer, 2003).

Internet safety and prevention is a young field beginning to take shape. The strategies developed to educate children and youth about Internet safety are gaining momentum.

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Keeping up with technology

More programs are needed to educate parents and caregivers about the potential risks associated with online activities. Parents need effective strategies to engage their children in conversations about their online activities, to monitor their children’s activities, and use the best available blocking and filtering software to reduce the risk of their children being exposed to harmful content and images while online.

As technologies continue to advance at a rapid rate, prevention strategies must keep pace by providing relevant and applicable tools to help children and youth avoid the potential dangers of the Internet and other forms of technology. Although gaining knowledge is clearly important, these programs must actively aim to reduce risky behaviors in which children and youth engage.