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Internet Safety issues in English schools.

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Introduction

This paper arises from an Audit of Internet Safety Practices in English Schools, a research survey sponsored by the British Educational Communications and Technology Agency (Becta) and carried out in the summer term, 2002 (Becta, 2002).

The literature analysis prior to the survey revealed a number of perceptions regarding children's use of the Internet and recommendations for Internet Safety teaching but little direct research in schools. Similar results were found by Livingstone (2002) in her comprehensive review of the research literature. She reports that only one study of the fourteen she found on dangers of children's use of the Internet actually includes empirical research with children.

The literature review for this study identified a large number of organisations and related Web sites that were directly or indirectly linked to Internet Safety campaigns, guidance and resources, both for young people, their parents, carers and educators. Though this showed that concern about Internet Safety was high, few of the Web sites were based on or linked to research in this area. The FKBKO Web site at <http://www.fbkko.net> aims to remedy this by linking the Web site to the Cyberspace Research Unit of University of Central Lancashire as does the more recent Children Go Online project run by Livingstone at the London School of Economics <http://www.children-go-online.net/>. In addition, whenever a survey or research paper was released, the newspapers were swift to provide supporting articles, often

focussing on the more negative findings of the research. For example, 'Children unaware of Internet dangers' (Batty, 2002) was one of the headlines reporting the release of the Cyberspace Research Unit's chat room project.

So, although a recent report examining young people's experiences reported that "Children are missing out on the real gains of the Internet due to parents' fears of dangers in cyberspace" (IPPR, 2001), parents remain fearful, and reportage of survey findings in the press tend to exacerbate this worry. In the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) report *Young people and ICT* on their survey of over 1700 children and young adults across England it was found that "Three-quarters of parents said they were concerned about Internet Safety issues. The percentage was similar across all child age groups and by social grade..." (DfES, 2002, p.36)

Thus a key finding of the literature analysis was that there is a conflict between perceived and actual Internet Safety factors and risks, and this occurs not only with parents but also teaching staff. For example, a 1997 survey (Research Machines, 1998), showed that 78% of respondents felt that filtering out undesirable information was the key Internet Safety issue in a survey of 300 secondary schools. Three years later little had changed, with Springford reporting in a comparative survey of Europeans schools for the Bertelsmann Foundation that:

"Most British teachers, if asked to describe the major concern about safe and responsible use of the Internet in schools, would probably refer to the problem of pornography on the worldwide web. This is understandable, partly because it is the topic most likely to be reported in the mass media. The other concern, again likely to be the result of media publicity, is the use of the Internet by paedophiles.

While these are two very important issues which must be taken seriously, it is equally important for managers and teachers in schools to understand that Internet Safety involves a much broader range of concerns. Teachers and managers will not necessarily be aware that the Internet can be used to transmit racist or politically extremist material or propaganda from religious cults. They may not appreciate the unregulated nature of the Internet and the availability of material which is likely to be illegal in their own country. The possibility of pupils having direct contact with undesirable adults may not be obvious to them. Those responsible for schools must ensure that teachers' knowledge is sufficient for them to recognise and respond appropriately to all these dangers." (Bertelsmann Foundation, 2000, p.6):

Though one of the largest perceived problems is accessing unsuitable material, O'Connell et al (2002, p.45) found that "Accidentally going on these sites [adult sites] often is very low but does seem to increase with age." Another key problem highlighted by O'Connell (2002) is children giving out personal details over the Internet. She found that in chat conversations, at the age of 9, children start giving away personal information such as first name (5%), last name (4%), e-mail address (3%), photograph (2%), phone number (1%) and home address (0.7%). By the time the children reach the age of 16, they seem to be divulging a higher percentage of information at a rapid rate. Furthermore, O'Connell's findings suggest that "1 in 10 children who use chat rooms have attended a face-to-face meeting" (O'Connell et al, 2002, p.104). Also, worryingly, 1 in 4 children have experienced online bullying via mobile phone text messages, e-mail or chat rooms (NCH, 2002).

Commentary in the literature itself highlighted that schools (both in England and internationally) were perceived to have a vital role in promoting and ensuring Internet Safety. For instance, a survey undertaken in Ireland revealed that 49% of parents thought that schools should provide online safety information (Amarach, 2001); a Canadian survey showed that 86% of parents thought it “very important that schools improve the online safety of children using school computers” (Media Awareness Network, 2001). In addition to parents, the Children’s Charities’ Coalition supported the notion that schools had a fundamental role to play in delivering Internet Safety measures - “Clearer guidance should be offered to schools on the safe use of Internet...e-mails...Chat rooms...school web sites...filtering and blocking software” (Children’s Charities’ Coalition for Internet Safety, 2001). O’Connell (2002) herself felt strongly that:

“The shortfall in the Internet Safety training in schools arguably results in children not being adequately equipped to safely deal with the challenging circumstances they may encounter in an on-line situation, i.e. communication with real people in a virtual context.” (O’Connell et al, 2002, p.3).

and recommends that “Schools ought to be the main point of delivery” (2002, p.10) in providing a program of education for Internet Safety guidance, and that they should foster “a synergy between home and school so that young people’s two main sources of advice work together to impart the same messages.” (2002, p.10). This point is also made by Livingstone (IPPR, 2001, p.17), who recommends “A co-ordinated response across school, community and home is essential for safe and fair use of the Internet by children”.

In summary, an analysis of the literature and its findings showed that a thorough survey of Internet Safety practices in schools was a vital stage in examining Internet Safety practices and informing future planning.

Objectives

- To identify which schools teach Internet Safety, in what ways, with which age groups and in what areas of the curriculum.
- To identify which schools have an acceptable use of the Internet policy and whether pupils and/or parents sign up to it.
- To identify which are the particular Internet Safety issues for schools and the overall importance schools assign to the topic.
- To identify where schools currently get advice from on Internet Safety and how they respond to that advice.
- To identify what breaches of Internet Safety have taken place within the school and what impact this has had upon their teaching of the subject.

Method

Just over a thousand schools from 27 Local Education Authorities (LEAs) across England were randomly selected for the investigation. Schools maintained by the state sector, privately funded independent schools and special schools for children

with special educational needs were all included in the survey at both primary and secondary level. Respondents were given the option of completing a questionnaire or responding to the same questions as part of a telephone survey. ICT advisers and representatives of Internet Safety organisations were also invited to complete a linked questionnaire.

Responses were received from 577 schools (a response rate of 57%), 18 of the 27 LEA representatives approached (67%), and from representatives of three of the seven Internet Safety organisations contacted (43%). A further 38 questionnaires were received separately from the schools that had volunteered for the pilot of the Internet Proficiency scheme run by Becta.

The participating schools represented a wide cross-section representative of the different types of school across England.

Table I. School Type	Number
Community	332
Voluntary aided or controlled	125
Foundation	23
Special	27
Independent	58
No data provided	12

Table II. Age Phase of School	Number
Middle (approx 8y -13y)	15
Prep (approx 5y -12y)	8
Primary (5y - 11y)	319
Secondary (11y -16y or 18y)	192
Through (3y or 5y -18y)	40

Key Findings

- Teaching Internet Safety was reported in only 85 per cent of the schools, where it is most likely to take place solely within the subject area of ICT and be delivered via an Internet induction programme or the school's acceptable use policy than through a specific scheme of Internet Safety work. Primary schools are more likely than schools with other age groups to use discussion activities and Secondary schools are more likely to use their Internet Safety policy as a teaching vehicle. Using posters as reminders was popular with all age groups. Schools teaching the entire age range from less than 5 years to 18 years (which tend to be Special or Independent) were less likely to be teaching Internet Safety at all.
- 89 per cent of schools in the main study have an Internet Safety policy in some form or another in school, with about half of these expecting parents, pupils or both to sign to show their agreement to the statements in the policy.
- 95 per cent of the schools surveyed in the main study had Internet filtering arrangements in place though independent schools were slightly more likely than other schools not to have filtering in place.
- Filtering arrangements in state schools tend to be LEA dependent and were not well understood by the teachers. Customised filtering systems with differing levels of access for staff and students were not reported by many schools though this may well be due to a lack of knowledge of the filtering system rather than their absence. There was a good deal of confusion in schools over the presence or absence of walled gardens and firewalls.

- Breaches of Internet Safety reported by schools were most likely to be pupils accidentally accessing inappropriate material. In fact, accessing inappropriate material is the teachers' single most important Internet Safety concern, with accidental access being more of a worry than deliberate access. Whilst LEA advisers and Internet Safety organisations worried about high levels of deliberate access teachers knew their pupils and the ones to watch out for.
- Schools tended to rely heavily on supervised Internet access, often ensuring that pupils only visited websites recommended by the teacher. This is understandable as teachers only have limited time (such as a 50 minute lesson in the ICT suite) for their pupils to find, read and retrieve information from the Web. However, it leads to concerns highlighted by Wishart (2004) that pupils may lack awareness of good Internet Safety practice when surfing the Internet outside school and that there is a lack of emphasis in school on developing Internet search and evaluation skills.
- Use of chat sites, even for school work, was banned in 95 per cent of schools. O'Connell et al (2002) and the Children's Charities' Coalition for Internet Safety (2001) who, like the Internet Safety organisations consulted in this study, argue that schools can better enable children's safety by providing them with the knowledge and skills to allow them to deal safely with chat room situations rather than by restricting their access.

- Teaching Internet Safety as part of Net literacy is the single most important concern for all the Internet Safety organisations and for nearly a fifth of Becta's Internet Proficiency Scheme pilot schools, yet worryingly does not appear as a concern for schools in the main study.
- Schools and LEAs Internet Safety concerns largely focused on pupils' use of web-based e-mail in school. They were also concerned over the time and network resources e-mail used. Internet Safety organisations, on the other hand, had moved on to worries over Internet access from mobile phones.
- Many schools reported they were concerned about parental awareness of Internet Safety issues. Most schools, all the LEAs and Internet Safety organisations recognise they have a responsibility to work together to inform parents about Internet Safety and need resources to support them in this.
- ICT co-ordinators would in general appreciate further guidance on Internet Safety, with most asking for resources they could use with other teachers, parents and pupils.

Conclusion

It is concluded that whilst the vast majority of schools in England are teaching Internet safety they were doing so in a restricted environment with safety conscious supervision preventing exploration and in particular, the use of chat. This will cause problems when children are surfing the web and using chat and instant messaging at home which may well be an unsupervised and an unfiltered environment.

It is recommended that stakeholders such as government organisations and children's charities provide:

- Advice for LEAs on enabling chat in schools and support for schools aimed at teaching children about the use of chat rooms and instant messaging safely.
- An updating service to alert schools and LEAs to developments in technologies and new guidance on their use in school.
- Teaching materials for schools to use with pupils aimed at developing Net literacy and safe surfing practices that enable pupils to use the Internet responsibly and usefully both in and outside school.

In fact, since this study was carried out, an Internet Proficiency Scheme aimed at 7 to 11 year olds has been set up with UK Government support by Becta, the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA). The aim of the scheme is to provide teachers with easily accessible support materials to help their pupils develop a set of 'safe and discriminating behaviours' to adopt when using the Internet and help pupils demonstrate what they know.

Additionally it is recommended that methods of filtering or monitoring Internet access for children using mobile technologies to surf the web need to be investigated through negotiation with Internet Service Providers (ISPs). Their help will also need

to be sought on monitoring peer to peer network use by children as recent concerns have arisen over unmoderated or unsupervised peer to peer network use. Children downloading this software are allowing strangers to share their files and once peer to peer networking is installed it may run undetected by Internet logging software.

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Where to go for more information

Internet Safety for Schools <http://safety.ngfl.gov.uk/schools/>

This UK Government site should be your first stop and provides advice on all aspects of Internet safety for schools and LEAs. It includes advice on Internet filtering, the use of chat rooms and e-mail in education, the use of pupil photographs on school web sites and lots of case studies of good practice.

Kidsmart <http://www.kidsmart.org.uk/>

Kidsmart is a practical Internet safety advice website for schools produced by the children's Internet charity Childnet. As well as providing resources for teachers and schools it acts as a portal to other Internet Safety sites such as the three below.

Advice on Using Chat in Schools <http://www.chatdanger.com/home/index.htm>

The UK based charity, Childnet International, offers important advice on its web site, use the link on the top left to read about using chat in schools.

Grid Club – more than just a safe Chat site <http://gridclub.com/>

GridClub is the official Department for Education and Skills (DfES) education website for 7 to 11 year-old children and hosts curriculum linked activities and games aimed

at KS2 children. For an example of **Design Technology** activities see

<http://gridclub.com/games/dt/designstudio/index.shtml>.

Internet Proficiency Scheme <http://safety.ngfl.gov.uk/schools/index.php3?S=3>

The Internet Proficiency Scheme has been developed by the DfES, Becta and the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) to help teachers educate children about staying safe on the Internet. Detailed information and advice about all of these are included on this site, along with contact details for further sources of help.

Cyberspace Research unit at UCLAN

<http://www.uclan.ac.uk/host/cru/index.htm>

Much of the research informing the Home Office approach to Internet Safety has been carried out by Rachel O'Connell at the University of Central Lancashire. Recent presentations given by her and her colleagues are at

<http://www.uclan.ac.uk/host/cru/presentations.htm>.

Children Go Online: Emerging Opportunities and Dangers

This is Sonia Livingstone's project funded by the ESRC under its e-Society programme. Its aim is to balance an assessment of two areas of risk - (a) inequalities/the digital divide and (b) undesirable forms of content; with that of two areas of opportunity - (c) education, informal learning and literacy, and (d) new forms of communication and participation. The findings will contribute to the developing policy framework regulating children and young people's Internet use.

<http://www.children-go-online.net/>

Jocelyn Wishart joined the University of Bristol PGCE science team in 2003 following seven years at Loughborough University in a variety of roles ranging from initial teacher training in science, specialising in physics, to teaching web page and database design to undergraduates.

At Loughborough she was responsible for a nationwide audit of Internet Safety issues and concerns in primary and secondary schools conducted for Becta. Moving to Bristol has enabled her to follow up her interests in ICT and learning and she has recently won a grant from the Wellcome Trust's Engaging Science Programme to develop a web site to support the teaching of complex ethical issues in school science. She has a second grant from the Teacher Training Agency to investigate the potential of handheld PCs, PDAs and Smartphones for initial teacher training.

Previously to joining Loughborough University she taught science, psychology and ICT in secondary schools.