

Internet Safety And Schools

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Abstract

The New Zealand Internet Safety Group has a wide membership, including as it does representatives from the judiciary, law enforcement, education, child welfare, internet service providers, sexual offenders' treatment programmes, the Peace Foundation, parents and young people. The work done by the Group is being studied as a model by other countries.

Senior school administrators have been involved in the work of the New Zealand Internet Safety Group since its inception in 1998 and played an important role in developing and trialling safety policies and procedures contained in the New Zealand Internet Safety Kit sent out to all schools in 2000.

While acknowledging that the internet is a marvellous tool, the initial focus of the 2000 Kit responded to the risks presented by paedophiles, child pornography and young people trading in this illegal material.

Issues for schools include accountability for maintaining a safe learning environment for students and staff, disciplinary responses to breaches of internet safety protocols by students or staff, and the pastoral care of students who have been involved in at-risk behaviour on the internet.

Schools should also aim to inform and facilitate the education of parents as regards internet safety issues.

Although the Internet Safety Group is involved in internet safety on many fronts, including the present national symposium, and much needed research, the top priority for 2002 is the development of a revised and updated version of the 2000 Internet Safety Kit, to be sent out to all schools later this year.

The need for an updated version is necessitated by further changes to the internet environment experienced by young people , including easy access to unmonitored chatrooms, the proliferation of personal web-sites, harassment, stalking and copyright issues.

The work of schools in putting into effect the information, policies and protocols contained in the Internet Safety Kit is the cornerstone of the Internet Safety Group's work to ensure the internet safety of young people in New Zealand.

1. Background to school involvement

I want to start by stating clearly that I believe the internet is a marvellous tool, one which future historians will surely see as being of the same significance in the social development of mankind as the first printing press or the splitting of the atom.

The New Zealand Internet Safety Group frequently emphasises this point because it would be easy for people to be negative and reactive when faced with the undoubted problems and risks associated with the downside of internet use; the safety issues which are the subject of this conference.

As an educator, my special interest is the safety of young people; specifically, the safety of young people in the school environment.

Schools were involved in the New Zealand Internet Safety Group from the organisation's very inception and developed and trialled the recommendations in the 2000 Internet Safety Kit, ensuring they were practical and user-friendly.

In my role as a member of the Executive of the Auckland Secondary Principals' Association, I had earlier met Liz Butterfield, then Co-ordinator of Auckland Rape Crisis, and formed a high opinion of her leadership and commitment to safety issues in society. Thus, I responded very positively when in late 1998 Liz invited me to join a small group of people with involvement in either internet services or in the welfare of children. The objective of the meeting was to discuss serious concerns expressed by the Police about the way in which the internet was being used by paedophiles and child pornographers to target and endanger New Zealand young people. We were informed that this was a world-wide concern and that there were no national boundaries to the abuse of this new communication tool. New Zealand's physical isolation offered no protection.

Because the New Zealand Internet Safety Group is now a model being studied by other countries, it is of interest to know exactly which sections of the community *were* involved in those original 'think tank' discussions. Those original attendees (most of whom are still active members of the Group) represented the Police (then specifically the Sexual Abuse Team), Internet Service Providers, Auckland Rape Crisis, SAFE Network (a sexual offenders' treatment programme), and secondary school senior management. Before too long this group had grown in number and representation, attracting a variety of agencies and community groups concerned about children's safety: Child, Youth and Family Services, Primary and Intermediate schools, parents, School Boards of Trustees, students, the Peace Foundation, ECPAT (End Child Prostitution and Trafficking), the Department for Courts, and the Department of Internal Affairs/ Censorship Compliance.

It is significant that the venue for all Group meetings has always been a school, in this case, the secondary school where I have a leadership role. This venue is significant because it soon became clear that the only way to protect the young people of New Zealand from those risks which unfortunately accompany the many advantages of the internet, was to educate young people through the one way they can all be accessed at

school. Hence the ‘New Zealand Internet Safety Kit’ was produced by the Group for use in schools, with sponsorship from Child, Youth and Family Services, the Ministry of Education and New Zealand Police, and also endorsed by the Department of Internal Affairs. Launched in March 2000, the Kit was sent out under the auspices of the Ministry of Education to every school in the country, both public and private. In addition, a brochure listing the main safety points was sent with Internet Safety posters to every library in New Zealand, to be displayed alongside computer terminals.

The thinking was that schools could use the Kit to establish a safe internet environment, with the appropriate policies, protocols and follow-up in place. In addition to the advantages of learning in a safe environment, the children and parents would be educated as to the safe use of the internet by making use of the Kit components. As well, because of the requirement for parental agreement to the student/school internet use agreement, the safety message would be taken out through families to the wider community. This original plan has since been expanded to complement this ‘school to community’ education and information flow, through the Group’s work with agencies and organisations in the wider community. However, the importance of the original strategy has not diminished – focus on schools still remains the most important thrust of work in New Zealand to keep young people safe on the internet.

2. Issues for schools

So, what are the issues for schools in achieving a safe internet environment?

In New Zealand, the elected Board of Trustees of each school is charged with the governance of that school and is responsible for the safety of the school learning environment. Thus, internet use which is safe for students and staff has increasingly become an important issue for Boards and school management. Initially this was an issue faced mainly by secondary schools, but as internet access has become more widely available, most Intermediate and Primary schools now need to ensure there are policies and procedures in place to ensure the environment is safe.

By the very nature of their profession, training and experience, all those involved in education have a strong commitment to the safety of students in every learning situation. For this reason, the Safety Kit was welcomed by many schools across New Zealand. Firstly, it brought schools up to date on the potential dangers presented by the internet, and secondly because the Kit provided templates for policies, procedures and use agreements, which schools had merely to personalize for their own use. There was no need to reinvent the wheel!

But it should also be noted that schools are increasingly aware of accountability issues, often made very public by media interest and the educationally competitive environment experienced in some communities. The results of regularly scheduled Education Review Office audits which include review of safety issues, are open to the public and often

highlighted in the media. As well, it can be extremely detrimental to a school's reputation to be the subject of a complaint to the ERO, the Police, or some other government agency. Even a critical letter to the newspaper can cause damage. Any of these scenarios is possible if a student or parent believes the student was put at risk by some action or inaction on the part of the school as regards internet access.

It must not be forgotten, too, that the school environment must be safe for staff as well as students. The possible scenarios relating to students are also relevant to staff safety, especially in the present climate of employer responsibility for the workplace safety of employees.

3. Major areas of concern for School Trustees and Managers

As a senior manager in a large, co-educational, multi-cultural school, these are the major areas of concern I have about the internet and schools:-

(1). Internet safety policy. The school must have a comprehensive internet safety policy (or acceptable use policy), supported by the Board of Trustees and the school management. The responsibility is then to ensure that the policy is carried out.

(2). Internet use agreements. There should be internet use agreements between school and students, and school and staff. These agreements should stress the educational focus of internet use at school and clearly spell out that there will be consequences to internet misuse involving the access of 'objectionable' (illegal) material (e.g. child pornography), material not appropriate in the school environment (e.g. hate, cults, weapon or drug making), or vandalism (e.g. viruses). Consequences include parents/caregivers being informed and in serious cases of misconduct, disciplinary action and even involvement of police.

Some examples of less serious internet misuse would be accessing legal but 'inappropriate at school' material like images of scantily dressed females, the playing of internet games or downloading music.

More serious misuse would include accessing illegal material, downloading and distributing material which endangers the safety of the environment or using the internet to harass students or staff.

The issue of harassment is of growing concern to schools, as use of the internet can be an added dimension to threats and put-downs. The very anonymity of the internet and the ability it gives to widely disseminate unpleasant messages fuels this type of misuse. Text messaging is increasingly being misused in a similar manner, leading to cell phones being banned in some schools.

And of course, these breaches of internet safety policy can apply to adults in a school as well as young people.

(3). Use-agreements for staff. Use agreement signed by staff should outline staff responsibility to follow school procedures so all reasonable efforts to monitor student internet use are made, and to report immediately any incidents of internet misuse. As well, their own use of the internet must meet school policy requirements. There have been several well publicised cases of staff members involved with illegal material on the internet, a wake-up call to any schools which assume any misuse will be carried out only by students.

(4). Community education programmes. Schools with community education programmes which make use of internet facilities should be aware that the school is responsible for the safety of that situation as well; use agreements should be signed by tutors and adult students alike.

(5). An Internet Safety Officer. An Internet Safety Officer should be appointed. It is recommended that this person be a member of the senior management team and work closely with relevant key staff members e.g. the Head of Information Technology, the Head of Guidance, the School Librarian and the Privacy Officer. From my own experience as the ISO of one of the largest and most culturally diverse secondary schools in the country, the role of the ISO is a key component in creating and maintaining a safe internet environment.

All internet infractions must be reported to the ISO so they are dealt with by someone in authority who has the experience to make informed judgements on the situations and issues which arise, and keep the Principal informed. Wherever possible, parents/caregivers need to be informed of any infringements. Especially in the case of a disciplinary response by the school, it will be necessary for the school to organise the School Counsellor to work with the student; a referral is usually recommended even for more minor cases.

(6). Non-disciplinary internet issues. Whilst the disciplinary situations which can arise are at times complex, of equal concern to schools are some other aspects of the impact of the internet on young people.

Some of these aspects impact on students while at school, while others affect students' lives out of school, then come *into* school as personal baggage of stress and unhappiness, possibly leading to misbehaviour and a negative effect on academic progress.

School staff, especially Guidance Counsellors, are aware that because of long hours at night spent on the internet, some students are too tired during the school day to focus on their learning. In some cases this can impact on their behaviour in the classroom as well. School Counsellors are in some cases dealing with students who exhibit symptoms of addiction. Friendships can be neglected and the student become socially isolated, more and more reliant on the internet to provide entertainment and even relationships.

This last is of particular concern to those of us who work with young people. Of prime importance to children and teenagers is feeling accepted and part of the group, as well as developing their individuality. Most do not yet possess the maturity to understand that people they 'meet' in chat rooms on the internet are not necessarily what they seem. The worst case scenario is when the '17 year old male' on the internet who befriends the 14 year old girl is actually an adult male paedophile grooming her for sexual abuse. Even if the new 'friend' is whom he says he is, most educators and parents would feel some unease or disquiet about the basis for this relationship.

The issue of relationships developed via the internet can of course affect adults too, but society has a very special responsibility to ensure the safety of its young and so that is where the focus of safety measures must be. School Counsellors I have spoken to from a variety of schools around New Zealand note the increasing numbers of students involved in at-risk behaviours associated with their use of the internet. Much of this involves forming a 'relationship' on the net and then meeting the person concerned without any safety strategies in place. Some students are being stalked and harassed as the result of their naivety in the chatroom or on their own web-site, where they have posted personal information. Unfortunately, parents are not always told by their children what is occurring and it is the fortunate young person who has access to a Guidance Counsellor to consult. It is not the norm for a Primary or Intermediate school to have a trained Guidance Counsellor on the staff, and increasingly, younger and younger children are involved in at-risk behaviours.

Counsellors themselves are aware that in some cases specialist help is required. The Internet Safety Group is concerned that such specialist support for already over-worked Counsellors is not readily available in this country. It is an issue of which child support and welfare agencies in NZ need to take heed.

Why is this relevant to schools?

You may ask why this is relevant to schools? Surely schools need concern themselves only with ensuring the curriculum as it relates to computers and internet use is delivered in classrooms and other venues such as school libraries in a safe manner?

There are two responses to this. The first is that despite all procedures to ensure safety, there will always be young people who attempt to breach rules. For example, while appearing to work on the assigned activity in a computer room, a student could be using the internet to sent malicious messages to another student, or accessing pornography.

Secondly, as in most countries in the western world, the school has been required to take over responsibility for matters which either were in earlier times dealt with outside the school (e.g. by the family), or which did not exist in the past to any significant degree. Students from dysfunctional families, students who are the victims of abuse, students who present behavioural problems unknown in schools in the past, students who are refugees, do not speak English.....the list goes on.

Schools are accountable for the way in which they work to help overcome the barriers to learning so many young people experience today. Students with problems so often have only the school to turn to for support; problems experienced with the internet are now part and parcel of the workload of counsellors and senior staff. And as noted earlier, where disciplinary action is taken with a student, it is mandatory to provide counselling and support over the issue.

(7). Parents/caregivers. Parents and caregivers need to be informed of the need for internet safety. The Kit recommends that a school's PTA offers parents the opportunity to learn more about the internet. Certainly, the student-school internet use agreement which goes home to parents to be signed, is a good start in raising the issue with parents/caregivers. It should be noted that recent surveys conducted in New Zealand show that most internet activity by young people occurs in the home environment – the very place where it is the perception of young people that the least monitoring occurs.

(8). The use of filters and other interventions. Whilst filters can be useful, it is important that schools (and parents) do not rely on these. As I was told by a parent whose business internet security, there was nothing he could create which his talented teenage son could not get through; the boy saw it as a challenge.

And of course the limitations imposed by most filters can hinder the research senior secondary school students are required to undertake in a number of subjects.

Nothing replaces safety education, monitoring and being informed as to the possible consequences of misconduct. In my school, the Head of Information Technology and his team of technicians report that as educational work permeates the school and a culture of internet safety develops, there have been fewer infringements.

The Safety Kit and schools recommend to parents that any computer with internet access is moved out of the bedroom and into the living area. A formal use agreement with the parent is helpful, along with monitoring. But nothing is more important than an understanding between parent and child, so that if something does go wrong (and it often will, either by accident or because of natural curiosity), the child will feel able to tell the parent about it and receive support.

4. Some recent and future developments

Since its inception, the Internet Safety Group has continued to grow, including individual and group members from Auckland and beyond. It is especially gratifying that Police involvement has increased, with the active presence of Superintendent Howard Broad, District Commander, of the New Zealand Police, and the alliance of the Police Youth Education Unit with the Internet Safety Group, to have internet safety education delivered in schools done by the Police Educators.

Along with most others in the original group, I believed that once the Safety Kit was out to schools in 2000, I would go back to my 'day job', the mission accomplished. However, it has not been like that. First the web-site was developed and expanded, then, in response to the dearth of relevant international research, partnerships were set up to provide data on the internet habits of young New Zealanders. A Strategic Plan was developed and further projects worked on, including this national symposium, to be followed by an international conference in 2003.

However, it is significant that the up-coming project on revising the Internet Safety Kit and producing a 2002 hard copy version to be sent out to all schools is seen as 'core business' which must over the coming months take precedence.

When we wrote the Kit in 1999, the focus was on risks from paedophiles and child pornography, and the fact that over 20% of those caught trading in child pornography were males of school age, some as young as 13. Before too long, the concern included posting of personal web-sites, heavy activity in unmonitored chatrooms, instant messaging and other ways young people are using the internet to establish relationships with those they do not know. Of equal concern are those who use the internet to harass and/or stalk others and those who infringe copyright. There have also been requests from teachers to include teaching material and good teaching practices. All of this necessitated an updating of the Kit.

It is heartening that the importance of this work in schools has been recognized by the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust (administered by the Department of Internal Affairs) in the award it has granted me to travel to the United Kingdom and North America in March/April of this year, to gather information for that updated version of the Kit.

It is also heartening to see the NZ national educational authorities so well represented here at the conference.

5. In conclusion

Wherever else in New Zealand society internet safety is espoused (and this symposium is a wonderful opportunity to work together), if internet safety is not strongly supported in schools, then some of our young people are at risk in a way which is harmful to society at large.