

Protecting your child in cyberspace

Many may spend summer surfing without adult supervision

BY LISA QUEEN
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Two weeks from now, joyous kids will come streaming out of school singing the old refrain "No more pencils, no more books, no more teachers' dirty looks."

It will mark the start of summer vacation, nine weeks of bliss before youngsters head back to the classroom to face another school year of reading, writing and arithmetic.

But while some kids have got their summers mapped out for them — activities with their families and friends, camp or days at the cottage — education experts are worried about the ones with too much unstructured time on their hands.

According to a national study of 5,600 kids' Internet use by the Ottawa-based agency Media Awareness Network (MNet), many children will be surfing in cyberspace this summer without adult supervision.

99 PER CENT USE NET

They may find themselves in any number of inappropriate places while using their computers, including adult chat rooms or websites devoted to pornography, violence or bigotry.

MNet research has found:

- 99 per cent of Canadian kids between the ages of nine and 17 have used the Internet;
 - Almost half of children use the Internet at home for at least an hour a day;
 - Almost three-quarters have at least one e-mail account and many have accounts their parents don't know about;
 - Playing and downloading music is the favourite activity;
 - Hanging out in chat rooms is another top activity, with a third of kids saying they "often" go to adult chat rooms;
 - Although parents believe homework is the primary reason their children go online, kids say that's eighth on the list of reasons why they use the Internet;
 - More than a third of nine and 10-year-olds and 57 per cent of 13 and 14-year-olds are alone "most of the time" when using the Net;
 - Some children report posting hateful comments or material about other kids on the Internet.
- York Regional Police Det. Rob Thomson, with the child abuse unit, said parents need to be aware of risks their children face when



STAFF PHOTO/ROB ALARY

Grade 7 student Brittany Baker believes children are generally far more knowledgeable about computers than their parents, which may explain why they can access websites their parents would prefer they didn't.

using computers unsupervised.

"Child porn (on the Internet) is growing, there's no doubt about it. I've seen anything from six to eight-months-old up to 18 years of age" being sexually abused.

Det. Thomson complained one of the biggest problems with the Internet is its anonymity.

Last year, for example, he said police received a complaint from a Markham man who, while on a chat line, was offered a six-year-old mentally disabled child as a sex toy.

Police were unable to trace the complaint.

"I have two kids. I know my kids are not allowed on without myself or my wife there," Det. Thomson said. "I don't allow my nine-year-old daughter into any chat lines."

Glenn DiPasquale, chief psychologist for York Region's public school board, said, for many parents, sending their children to camp or signing them up for activities all summer is not affordable.

That means thousands of children with working parents will be home alone this summer, although it is illegal to leave youngsters under age 12 home without supervision.

Because many parents are afraid to let their children play outside without adult supervision, many of those youngsters are instructed to remain inside.

"Many, many families face this issue of kids alone all summer. Clearly, the children are going to gravitate to TV, video games and computers," Mr. DiPasquale said.

"We used to refer to them as latchkey children, this issue of kids being home alone, as soon as we got into a cultural lifestyle where two parents work. Some parents leave their children alone because they have no choice and spend all day worrying about them."

"The Internet has allowed us access to the really seamy underbelly of society. It's unbelievable the level of disgust."

While he stressed the Internet is a marvelous tool for kids to research any number of topics from music to sports, he also warned there are many dangers.

"The Internet has allowed us access to the really seamy underbelly of society. It's unbelievable the level of disgust," Mr. DiPasquale said.

Newmarket's Brittany Baker, a 12-year-old Grade 7 student, believes part of the problem stems from the fact children are generally far more knowledgeable about computers than their parents.

"Yeah, usually they are on (the computer) a lot so they learn more than their parents would learn," said Brittany, who acknowledged she and some of her friends have inadvertently gotten on to inappropriate websites.

She's concerned about the pitfalls kids face while surfing on computers.

"It worries me because I have a little brother and I don't want him to see things he shouldn't."

Mr. DiPasquale agreed.

"It's a world that's evolving so quickly technology-speaking. Kids are on the leading edge and parents aren't in many cases."

Todd Wright, the school board's curriculum co-ordinator for information technology, said parents' concern about the media in which their children are exposed has been around for decades.

But the Internet has exacerbated that level of worry, especially since it is so easy for computer users of any age to lose track of the time they are spending in front of the screen.

"Our world was once contained to a certain community. TV took us to a very large world and we found we didn't like everything that went on in that larger world. And now we have the Internet. That brings the world into a child's bedroom," Mr. Wright said.

Mr. Wright and Mr. DiPasquale pointed out there is software available to block children from accessing certain websites.

But filter software isn't a cure-all by any means. For example, "pornappers" can take a previously legitimate website whose owners have let their licence lapse and turn it into something seedy. What used to be a site devoted to cars could

SAFE SURFING

Glenn DiPasquale, chief psychologist for York Region's public school board, and Todd Wright, school board curriculum co-ordinator for information technology, offered suggestions for parents concerned about their children's use of computers, including:

- Make sure the computer is in a high-traffic area of the house where adults can keep an eye on what is viewed.
- Ensure you communicate with your children about what you feel is inappropriate use of technology. "They will develop that level of discomfort about what is wrong," Mr. Wright said.
- Purchase filter software but don't rely exclusively on it.
- Learn where the history button on your Internet browser program is so you can visit websites your children have used. Get your computer-savvy kids to teach you how to do this. If they're reluctant, that may be your first clue they are trying to hide their computer use from you.
- Make sure you know all of your children's e-mail accounts.
- Don't limit your concern to the computer. What TV shows, movies and music do your children enjoy?
- Set a timer so kids' (and adults') time is limited to an hour or 90 minutes.
- Lead by example so your children don't see you accessing websites, chat rooms or e-mail that is questionable.
- Teach your child to turn off the computer and walk away if they get into a "loop" of inappropriate material they can't exit.
- Teach kids information posted on websites and in e-mails is opinion or advertising, not fact. It's like learning to be an intelligent consumer when watching TV commercials or looking at print ads.

become a white supremacist site.

"The (renowned Canadian white supremacist) Ernst Zundels of the world have been given the vehicle to bring that into my home," Mr. Wright said.

The key to protecting children, according to Mr. Wright and Mr. DiPasquale, is for parents to communicate with their children about appropriate use of TV, video games and computers.

At the same time, parents need to do some homework of their own so they can check what sites their children have been on and monitor e-mail accounts.

"There is a certain amount of policing parents have to do and they have to be a bit savvy to do it. Parents have a responsibility to become a little bit computer literate," Mr. DiPasquale said.

"These are hard issues. There are no easy answers. It's the price we pay for falling head-long into the technology of the future."

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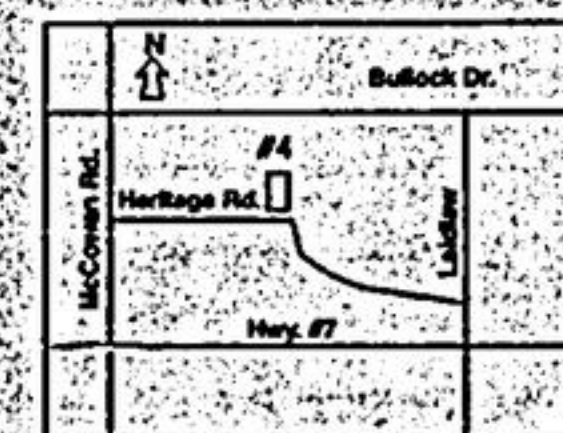
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