Chapter 18
Identifying the Risks Associated with Primary School Children Using the Internet

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ABSTRACT

The Internet is becoming widely available and increasingly important in the modern world. Because of this, it is very important that children start to familiarize themselves with the Internet at a young age. As technology is becoming increasingly part of our daily lives, computers and the Internet have been adopted into schools. The sea of information and learning activities available on the Internet has the potential to greatly help in the development of young minds. However, the question remains as to how safe an environment the Internet is for young children. Children might not see any dangers beyond the physical environment where they live. Therefore, the Internet can be an unsafe place for them to venture into. Children can be targeted by a wide number of Internet risks. For these reasons, the problem of how to keep children who are using the Internet safe must be solved. This paper identifies the potential risks associated with primary school children using the Internet. This paper evaluates the level of understanding of Internet safety that children have. This paper identifies what children use the Internet for and what information that they are willing to reveal while online. The findings of this paper are based on analysis of a survey carried out on 645 Irish primary school children in February 2007.

BACKGROUND

There is much concern among parents, educators and policy makers regarding the dangers that Internet usage poses to children. The aim of this paper is to identify the actual risks that are associated with primary school children using the Internet. It is important that research be undertaken in this area to allow the various stake-holders the opportunity to separate the actual and perceived risks that exist from children using the Internet. In the absence of scientific research, the information void is being filled by the popular press (Carrington, 2008, pp., p7), who tend to produce inaccurate and overly

negative accounts of the risks that Internet usage poses to young children. Carrington (2008) states that *"there is a clear positioning of children as innocent and gullible and the construction of a gulf between adult and child in terms of awareness of risk and victim–predator status"* (p. 156). Carrington (2008) reports that this knowledge gap is causing many adults to take a negative approach toward technology and *"the huge issue that teachers, parents, politicians and school administrators make about digital technology is for their own benefit"* (p. 163). Hope, too, believes that the Internet risk debate is being manipulated by certain lobbies. Hope (2006) reports that many older people struggle with the new technologies that children tend to be very comfortable with. Cizek (1999) agrees, stating that *"many teachers feel that their pupils know more about the technology than they do and, as a result, feel threatened by the technology"* (p. 406). Cizek (1999) states that teachers who feel threatened by technology *"are reluctant to adopt and use the technology"* (p. 406). Valentine (2001) states that adult fears about Internet content *"are fears about knowledge rather than violence"* (p. 72). Carrington (2008) states that *"as the technological gap between some adults and children continues to open, there will be increasing amounts of discomfort over young people's use of technologies and the public spaces they make accessible"* (p. 157).

The need for research into the risks that primary school children face while using the Internet has been identified by other researchers. Hope (2006) states that there has only been *"some limited discussion of the issue of children and Internet risks"* and that *"risk arising from school Internet use is a largely neglected issue that needs urgent attention"* (p. 312).

This paper limits itself to the study of the Internet usage behavior of children in the senior four years of primary education. Too many other published studies, such as (NCTE, 2006), attempt to treat children of all ages as being the same. The large range of age groups surveyed in these other

studies (the NCTE study deals with children in the age range of nine to 16 inclusive) makes it difficult to draw generalizations from the data. Lawson (2000) argues that discussions about school Internet risks must be age appropriate. Hope (2006) agrees with Lawson, noting that there is a tendency in current research to use the term 'children' in a generic sense, *"treating the group as homogeneous whilst ignoring the issue of different age groups"* (p. 308).

Context

As technology is becoming increasingly available and progressively more important in our daily lives, the Internet is being increasingly adopted into schools. Condie (2007) states that *"the evidence gathered has shown a steady increase in the number of computers and other technologies"* being used in schools (p. 3). Reflecting upon the importance of computer and Internet usage skills, Carrington (2008) states that the increased usage of computers and the Internet requires *"a concerted effort to ensure that all children in our school systems are provided with opportunities to engage in these new forms of textual and social practice"* (p. 165).

It is very important that children start to familiarize themselves with the Internet from a young age. Carrington (2008) states that *"because young people are born into a world saturated in digital technologies they require literacy practices and skills oriented to multimodality"* and *"to focus on print as an a priori requirement is increasingly a disservice, particularly to those pupils most at risk of poor outcomes from schooling"* (p. 165).

The sea of information and learning activities available on the Internet has the potential to greatly help in the development of young minds. Venezky (2004) states that *"by giving all schools access to an expanding world of resources, both teaching and learning can be advanced to a new level of effectiveness and social importance"* (p. 3). Haugland (1999), citing earlier research, suggests

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