

III. Helping Children Navigate the Internet Safely

There are few simple answers to the problems and challenges created by the presence of hate on the Internet. Because of the probability that children may at some time encounter such material, children need opportunities to develop skills that include the following:

- ability to think critically, in order to discern fact, opinion, and misinformation
- ability and tools to assess the reliability and credibility of online sources of information
- response strategies to use if they encounter individuals or groups online that promote hate

The development of these skills requires an ongoing process that includes open discussion of concerns and opportunities to develop and practice skills.

Children’s Growing Use of the Internet

As use of the Internet increasingly permeates almost every realm of human endeavor, educators have begun to consider the uses of World Wide Web to enrich and revitalize the formal learning process in schools. By 1999, the U.S. Department of Education was describing technology as the “future of educational reform,” a central element in contemporary education, crucial to preparing the next generation for future economies and job markets. The Department embarked on a strategic review and revision of its national educational technology plan, resulting in five new national goals for technology in education (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Technology, 2000):

25

- Goal 1** ▶ All students and teachers will have access to information technology in their classrooms, schools, communities and homes.
- Goal 2** ▶ All teachers will use technology effectively to help students achieve high academic standards.
- Goal 3** ▶ All students will have technology and information literacy skills.
- Goal 4** ▶ Research and evaluation will improve the next generation of technology applications for teaching and learning.
- Goal 5** ▶ Digital content and networked applications will transform teaching and learning.

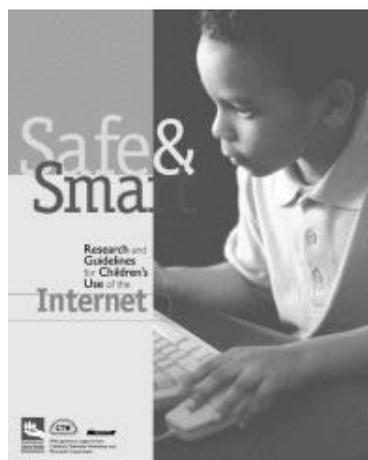
Students are currently expected to use the Internet for schoolwork, research, communication, and class work. Teachers are expected to be computer savvy. In order to monitor children's progress, parents and other adult family members now need to understand the basics of computer use and navigation of the Internet.

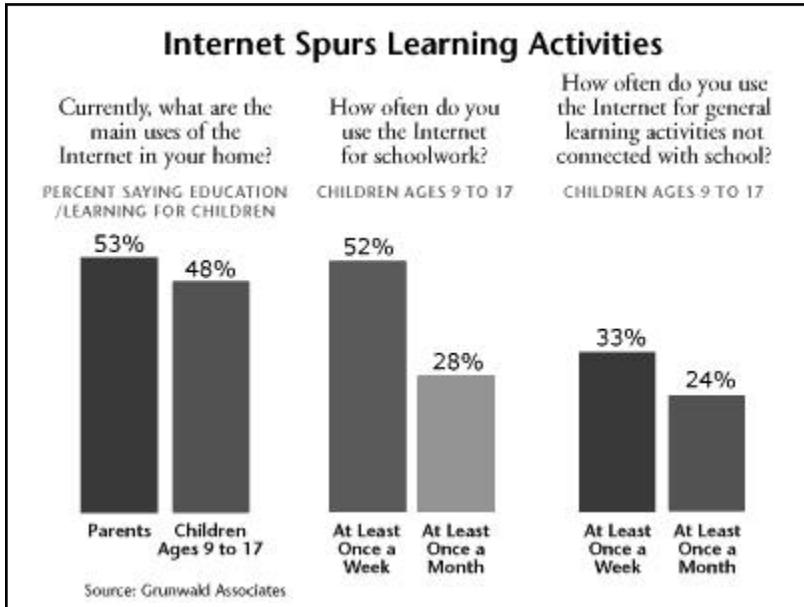
The Internet is quickly becoming a primary source of information for students. Computer availability in schools, libraries, and many homes has made an almost endless supply of information readily available to students. By typing a few key words from a research topic into a search engine, users are provided with extensive lists of potential Web sites and are able to link up with specific sites in seconds. For example, the key words "internet advantage," when typed into a common search engine (google.com), yields a result of 2,050,000 potential Web sites in a few seconds. As an expansive digital library available around the clock worldwide, the World Wide Web enables students to engage in extensive research on any topic, at any time, from any location that provides Internet access.

Internet usage has continued to soar within an environment largely lacking in information about the online behavior of children and youth. In order to develop strategies to assist students in safely navigating the Internet, educators and families need information about where children are currently accessing the Internet, how long they are spending online, what types of sites they are visiting, and what needs they have for guidance and supervision. The National School Boards Foundation (NSBF) partnered with Grunwald Associates in a project that gathered and analyzed high-quality data, which explored some of these questions, and developed guidelines for parents and educators to inform their decision making.

26

In 2000, the NSBF released *Safe & Smart*, a report that detailed the findings of an extensive survey of parents and children about children's use of the Internet (*Children, Families, and the Internet 2000*, Grunwald Associates). Realizing that educators still face challenges to improve student achievement with the use of technology, NSBF later released a survey on school technology decision-makers in 2002 entitled *Are We There Yet?* This survey was based on a market research report of school administrators with technology decision-making responsibilities in 811 school districts (*Schools and the Internet*, Grunwald Associates). While these studies confirm that educators, parents, and children alike view the Internet as a positive and beneficial force in children's lives, the reports also highlight the existence of persistent concerns about online safety of children.





Safe & Smart reports that more than half of all students use the Internet for schoolwork at least once a week. Although the most common reason parents purchase computers with Internet access is for educational purposes, according to *Safe & Smart*, less than 50-percent of youth actually use home computers for that purpose. For many youth, the majority of their online time at home is devoted to chat rooms, e-mail, instant messaging, and games. Monitoring children's online interactions can be a challenging activity for parents. Merely being in the same room, or occasionally glancing over a child's shoulder at the computer screen may discourage children from accessing sexually explicit or pornographic sites, but is less effective in monitoring chat room, e-mail, or instant messaging communications. Many youth quickly learn and use a system of online shorthand to alert one another to the presence of a parent or sibling. The use of codes, such as POS (parent over shoulder), P911 (parents here) and, when parents have left the room, 55 (it's clear now), allow young people to guard the nature of their communications while a parent or other adult is close by.

The desire to respect children's privacy in the absence of credible concern often makes many adult family members reluctant to monitor their children's online activity closely. This is problematic however, because children are unaware of the true identity of those they are communicating with online. The ability of members of hate groups and other adults with questionable motives to masquerade as peers adds gravity to concerns about children's online safety. Thus, it is vital that parental guidance and monitoring be combined with opportunities for young people to develop skills for responsible online decision-making and for assessing the credibility and reliability of online acquaintances and sources of information.

Survey data from the NSBF's second national study (*Are We There Yet?*, 2002) indicates that school leaders view online learning as a significant trend in education with the potential to substantially expand its role as an instructional tool in the future. Nine out of ten school leaders, however, indicated they are concerned about students' online safety. Schools have instituted a number of positive strategies to monitor students' online activities, including filtering software, teacher supervision, and school policies and honor codes. While these preventative strategies are important safeguards, they are not infallible. The Web site content of some hate groups is designed to be able to permeate filtering software, and adults with supervision responsibilities may lack the necessary computer competence to effectively monitor students' online activities.

Protecting Children Online

Extremists have historically used a variety of print materials, including books, posters, pamphlets, flyers, magazines and catalogues, to communicate their messages of hate to new audiences. In recent years, they have increasingly used video and telecommunication resources, such as movies, recorded audio and videotapes, and public access programming, to spread their beliefs. As the presence of online technology has increased in the classroom and community, extremists have taken their messages of hate to the Internet, enabling them to reach millions of people at little or no cost. From the privacy of their own homes, many members of extremist groups have developed the technological savvy to maintain sophisticated Web sites, orchestrate e-commerce, and direct conversations in chat rooms and listserves. At the same time the U.S. Department of Education was developing recommendations and policies for schools to monitor online education, the first extremist Web site was being developed by Don Black, a self-proclaimed "White Nationalist" and creator of the racist Web site *Stormfront*. Proponents of hate, such as William Pierce and Matthew Hale, were already using the Internet to actively recruit new members, spread hateful philosophy, and accrue revenue by selling products online. In his memoir, *My Awakening*, David Duke wrote, "How many millions of dollars would it cost me to have a radio station that could broadcast my radio programs to the entire globe, 24 hours a day? Through the Internet, I do it RIGHT NOW and [at] a fraction of the cost."

28

A False Sense of Anonymity

Because children and adults typically engage in online activity from the privacy of their own homes, most feel that their online communication and activity is largely anonymous. By assuming seemingly unthreatening personae, purveyors of hate are able to make children feel a false sense of safety which encourages engaging in more open and unrestrained communication than would be likely in

a face-to-face situation. Members of extremist groups attempt to use such opportunities to promote their philosophies, to form alliances with alienated youth, and to encourage involvement and interest in the group's ideas and activities.

Presenting Beliefs as Truth

Many extremist sites masquerade as sources of legitimate information, presenting propaganda and half-truths as fact. Determining the credibility of particular groups and organizations hosting Web sites can be difficult and challenging. As Web development tools have become increasingly user-friendly, extremist groups have been able to create professional-looking sites that visually resemble those of reputable organizations.

Internet Filters

Concerns have increased significantly over the ease with which young people encounter and access inappropriate online content, including extremist sites. The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) reported that in 1999, one in five children was frequently being misled by predators online (Finkelhor et al, 2000). As a result, many adults and organizations that serve youth are beginning to initiate the use of software programs that limit children's access to that particular Web content. These programs, known as *filters*, are designed to act as gatekeepers, protecting children by blocking access to Web sites of individuals or groups that advocate hatred, bigotry, violence, or inappropriate sexual content. Many filtering programs, however, do not block these sites or censor their content. Internet filters are primarily tools to assist adults in becoming aware of what sites children are viewing on the Web. In light of the constantly changing nature of the Internet, however, these filters cannot guarantee accuracy or thoroughness in identifying objectionable sites. Occasionally, these filters may block legitimate sites that offer some educational content, while failing to block the offensive sites they were designed to exclude. Filters can be useful tools, but they do not guarantee absolute protection from hate on the Internet for children. According to a recent report on filtering software conducted by *Consumer Reports* (2001), "Filtering software is no substitute for parental supervision. Most of the products we tested failed to block one objectionable site in five."

Sample Internet Filtering Software Packages

Crayon Crawler: Crayon filters provides parents with the ability to block children's access to hate content, inappropriate language, and from giving out personal information. A child-safe Web browser is also included. (Free download available at www.crayoncrawler.com.)

Cybersitter: Cybersitter attacks offensive Internet content in newsgroups, chat rooms, and e-mail through a combination of highly tailored filtering capacity and recognition of a wide variety of questionable content on individual sites. (Available for \$39.95 at www.cybersitter.com.)

HateFilter: The Anti-Defamation League's HateFilter® is a free software product designed to protect children by blocking access to Web sites of individuals or groups that, in the judgment of the Anti-Defamation League, advocate hatred, bigotry or even violence towards Jews or other groups on the basis of their religion, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation or other immutable characteristics. (Free download available at www.adl.org/hatefilter/hatefilter_important.asp.)

We-Blocker Software: We-Blocker enables parents to effectively restrict children's access to Web sites that contain hate speech directed towards a particular group based on race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation or social status, including sites by individuals and militant extremist groups. (Free download available at www.we-blocker.com/index.php.)

30

Critical Thinking: The Best Tool Against Hate

Critical thinking skills, described by John Dewey as “active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusion to which it tends,” (Dewey, 1938) are one of the most effective tools to provide young people with protection against hate on the Internet.

In the absence of critical thinking skills, children remain vulnerable to extremism and the other dangerous anti-social influences that permeate our culture. To develop critical thinking skills, educators must raise issues that create dissonance and refrain from expressing their own bias, thus allowing students to debate and resolve problems. This process requires patience, skill, and commitment on the part of educators (Tama, 1989).

There are five general steps that outline the process of critical thinking. The following brief description of the critical thinking process underscores the value of these skills in assessing information obtained through the Internet (Guffey, 1996):

1. **Identifying and clarifying the issue.** Clearly articulating the main question that is being considered, as well as the secondary questions that are implied by the topic; seeking and generating additional questions relating to the issue.
2. **Gathering information.** Learning more about the issue and context in which the issue is presented; researching the history surrounding the issue; accessing different sources of information to collect a balanced perspective.
3. **Evaluating evidence.** Unwillingness to accept information gathered at face value; consideration of the sources of information and their accuracy; questioning whether information is fact or opinion and whether the source has biases or ulterior motives that might prevent complete objectivity.
4. **Considering alternatives and implications.** Analyzing and synthesizing information and drawing conclusions from the evidence gathered; listing potential solutions or perspectives and weighing the advantages and disadvantages of each.
5. **Creative thinking.** Achieving distance from information or material and striving to develop unique and original perspectives.

Parents also have an important role to play in encouraging critical thinking skills in children. Children quite naturally form categories to help them understand the differences they perceive around them; it is the responsibility of parents and teachers to help children better understand those differences and to not form value judgments about them. Parents and families have a unique role to play as the first source of information children use to begin building not only their own sense of identity but also their ideas and beliefs about issues related to bias and prejudice. Giving children clear, accurate, and age-appropriate information when they encounter these issues, helps them to begin processing the information in nonjudgmental and meaningful ways (Wotorson, 2001).

31

Skills to Assess Web Site Content

Critical thinking skills have been long recognized as core competencies for students in all disciplines of learning. Simple educational strategies can be used at home and school to educate young people to use critical thinking to assess the accuracy of information and to learn how to respond when they encounter individuals or Web sites that promote hatred and bigotry. The University of North Texas has developed a process to promote and reinforce the use of critical

thinking to evaluate information on the Web (www.library.unt.edu/classes/education/snep.htm):

EVALUATING WEB SITES is a S.N.A.P.!

- S = Source** – Somebody created this site. Who?
- N = Nature** – Why does this site exist? Purpose?
- A = Appearance/Accessibility** – Does this site function efficiently?
- P = Page Content** – Is the information accurate and reliable?

© 1999 by Jo Monahan, M.S., Coordinator of Electronic Information Services, University of North Texas. All rights reserved. Permission to reprint granted.

This process is useful for younger school-aged children (grades K-6), beginning to use the Internet. Developmentally, elementary school children do not typically question online content, but rather uncritically accept as truthful information they access on the Web. Once children understand the need to evaluate the accuracy of online content and have learned a simple process to do so, they will be more likely to become actively engaged in their own online learning. As critical thinking skills improve, students can be encouraged to engage in an in-depth evaluation of online content and can begin to develop responsive strategies to protect themselves against online purveyors of hate.

32

Beginning in the upper elementary years, children will benefit from opportunities to develop advanced skills to assess the accuracy of Web site content. For example, students using the Internet for research can learn how to read the headers and footers of Web pages, which often provide information about the author, sources of the information, and applicable copyright restrictions. Search engines may also provide additional information about Web authors and sources. If concerns about the credibility of a Web author or site sponsor arise during the evaluation process, information on the site should be disregarded.

*Note: The next section, **Practical Tools for Educators and Families**, includes a sample Web Site Evaluation Form, created by the Anti-Defamation League. Partners Against Hate recommends this or similar forms as effective tools to assist middle and high school students in assessing Web content.*

While critical thinking skills are among the most useful tools for promoting safe navigation of the Internet, the Internet itself provides rich resources for teaching these skills to children. According to Mark Ivey and Elizabeth Kemper (Ivey and Kemper, 2000):

“In a world overflowing with information, it’s no wonder that kids often struggle to put it all into context in a way that will translate into real

knowledge and understanding. That's where critical thinking comes in – the ability to anticipate consequences, to wade through the hype to find truth, to conduct logical analysis and so on. As we move more toward an information-based society, these skills take on even more importance. The personal computer can help your child develop these thinking skills, with your help. And although the computer isn't a cure-all, appropriately applied it can go a long way towards boosting a child's critical thinking."

