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Assessing Middle School Students' Knowledge of Conduct/Consequences and Their Behaviors Regarding the Use of Social Networking Sites[1]

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> Indeed, one of the biggest risks of these digital technologies is not the ways that they allow teens to escape adult control, but rather the permanent traces left behind of their transgressive conduct. Teens used to worry about what teachers and administrators might put on their permanent records since this would impact how they were treated in the future. Yet, we are increasingly discovering that everything we do online becomes part of our public and permanent record, easily recoverable by anyone who knows how to Google, and that there is no longer any statute of limitation on our youthful indiscretions. (Jenkins & Boyd, 2006 as cited in Shariff, 2008 p.117)

Cyberbullying, social networking sites (such as myspace and facebook), and instant messaging programs are initiating numerous problems for school administrators on a national level (McKenna, 2007). Franek (2005) defines a cyber bully as "anyone who repeatedly misuses technology to harass, intimidate, bully, or terrorize another person" (p.36). Students utilize cell phones, personal digital assistants, home computers, and laptop computers to access the internet and communicate with friends almost instantly.

Cyberbullying

The typical schoolyard bully, whose torment of students would stop when the end of day bell rang, now has two new forums to carry out this behavior. Instant messaging is the first of these forums. The schoolyard bully, now turned cyberbully, has almost limitless time to continue to harass, degrade, and assert control over his/her victims. When students leave the school and log on at home, the cyber bully pops up on their instant messenger and engages them in the same hurtful conversations and torment as they did earlier in the day. McKenna (2007) writes:

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> Cyberbullying and the always on culture of the internet can have a detrimental effect on the victim. One reason is the sheer number of people who can view something that is posted online. It would be bad enough to be cyber-bullied by a kid and nobody else knew about it, but a video seen by hundreds or thousands of your peers could be devastating. (p.42)

Engaging the digital age bully poses many problems. One such problem is the removal of social cues. With the school-yard bully, both the bully and the victim are reading each others' social cues such as body posture, speaking volume, facial expressions, and level of engagement. Instances of cyberbullying remove all of the social cues that are learned through face-to-face interactions. Conversely, with cyberbullying, the bully and victim are left with caustic words being exchanged without any other interactions. Additionally, students who have been bullied online are more likely to turn into cyberbullies themselves (Franek, 2005).

Social Networking Sites

Social networking sites such as myspace.com and facebook.com certainly are not new ideas. Similar sites began shortly after the internet boom of the mid 1990's. America Online and Yahoo had sections of their websites where people could connect with old friends, post pictures, and write descriptions of recent activities. At that time, posting an email or instant messenger screen name on such sites was not popular because people (even teenage students) thought it wasn't a good idea to have that type of information posted online. Not even a decade later, students of all ages are posting personal information, conversation threads, blogs, and inappropriate pictures which can sometimes include illegal activity like alcohol and narcotics use. In some areas of the country, gangs are utilizing social networking sites to recruit members, post messages in code, and conduct other gang-related activity. There is no doubt that these online "teen hangouts" are having a huge influence on how adolescents today are creatively thinking and behaving. The challenge for school educators is to keep pace with how students are using these tools in positive ways and consider how they might incorporate this technology into the school setting (Bryant, 2007).

Access to the internet doesn't always mean trouble for students. The internet is a vast resource for many purposes. Proper education and supervision would allow school administrators to work in conjunction with parents and the school community to teach their students about the dangers of social networking sites, cyberbullying, and instant messaging.

Methodology

Sample

A total of N=588 grade 7-8 male and female students from an urban (n=185) and a suburban (n=403) school responded to the Student Survey during a regularly scheduled school activity period.

Instrumentation

Dimension/Item Content. The pilot version of the Student Survey contained 33 items. Following the item analysis and reliability of the data assessment, the findings to be reported in the next section are based on 28 of the original 33 items. The first set of 7 items investigated the views and experiences of the students with regard to social networking (see Table 1). The remaining items assessed two global dimensions: Knowledge and Behavior. The Knowledge dimension was composed of 16 items describing the students' knowledge of appropriate behavior on social networks and potential risk of internet predators (see Table 2). The Behavior items were categorized into two sub-dimensions: Bulling Behavior and Internet Use. Bullying Behavior was composed of 2 items that directly queried the students on their bullying behaviors on both myspace and instant messenger sites (see Table 3). Finally, Internet Use was composed of 3 items used to assess if the respondents use the internet for instant messaging, e-mail, or myspace on a daily basis (see Table 3).

Response Format. Students responded to each item by selecting Agree, Disagree, or Don't Know. Using a "correct" response grid, each statement received 1 point for the "appropriate" or "correct" response and 0 points for the "incorrect" or Don't Know response.

Validity and Reliability. Content validity of the survey items was supported through the literature (Franek, 2006; McKenna, 2007; Weaver, 2007) and a judgmental review by N = 5 middle school teachers. Cronbach's alpha internal consistency reliabilities of the data from the respective dimensions were as follows: Knowledge, .84; Bullying Behavior, .72; Internet Usage, .78.

Data Analysis

Response percentages for the agree, disagree, and don't know options are presented for all items (see Tables 1-3). For the Knowledge, Bullying Behaviors and Internet Use dimensions the overall percent "correct" for the set of items defining the respective dimension is also presented

in Tables 2 and 3. Items were also be ranked within each category based on the percent “correct” to identify the high and low knowledge or behavior areas.

Results and Discussion

Social Networking Experiences and Opinions

Table 1 contains the response percentages for the students’ ratings of their social networking experiences and opinions. Inspection of the data for some key items indicates that only 10% of the students have been bullied by another student at home while online (Item 1). While the majority of students were not sure if their friends’ parents know what they do on line, 70% of the students felt that their parents knew about their social networking sites (item 7). According to 74% of the students, their friends use social networking sites like myspace or facebook. While half (51%) of the students disagreed that adding friends to their Instant Messaging account would make them more popular, only 17% agreed, and 32% did not know if this was the case.

Knowledge

Table 2 contains the ranked response percentages for students’ knowledge of appropriate behaviors and risk of internet predators. The “correct” or “appropriate” response percentages are boxed in the table. The behaviors associated with the boxed “disagree” percents exceeding 60% at the lower section of the table are positive findings, since appropriate student behaviors are indicated. Of particular concern are the five items (i.e., 24, 17, 20, 21, and 32) with boxed bold “agree” percents at the top of the table. The behaviors described by these items reflect two areas of concern: knowing how easily predators can contact students and willingness to inform a parent or adult about a possibly inappropriate internet contact. Regarding contact, only 29% of the students felt that a predator would make contact with them based on the information they have posted online (item 24), and only 37% felt it would be easy for a predator to contact them based on the contact information they put in their myspace or facebook (item 17). Likewise, 39% felt it would be possible for an internet predator to locate their home or school using Google Earth or MSN live (item 21). One would hope students think this is the case, because they have not actually listed specific contact information on their site.

Regarding informing a parent or adult of an inappropriate contact, only 40% of the students indicated they would tell an adult if they were contacted by someone they did not know on Instant Messenger (item 20). Further, only 44% indicated they would tell a teacher, parent or

another adult if mean or threatening things were said about them on a site like myspace or facebook (item 32).

Overall, for the set of 16 items defining the Knowledge dimension, only 59% of the students indicated what most educators would consider a “correct” or “appropriate” response. If we are applying any version of our usual educators’ concept of “mastery” in the realm of “knowledge”, it appears we have some serious areas open for discussion with our students.

Behavior

Table 3 contains the ranked response percentages for students’ bullying behavior and internet use. A somewhat positive finding is that 78% of the students indicate that they have not threatened or bullied another student (item 18), and 83% say they have not threatened or bullied a friend (item 22). We are most concerned about the 10% (n=59) of the respondents who indicate that they have engaged in these behaviors. Overall, 81% of the students indicated an “appropriate” response for the set of two Bullying items.

Table 3 also lists the findings for three items describing the frequency of internet use for instant messaging and accessing social networks. Less than half of the students indicated that they frequently engage in these behaviors and overall, 43% responded in what could be considered an “appropriate” response.

Summary, Conclusions and Implications for Educators

Internet predators, cyberbullying and the use of social network sites are major issues to be addressed by school administrators. Some of the key findings from this survey of middle school students were as follows:

Internet Predators. Most students (71%) do not think an internet predator will contact them based on postings online. Furthermore, 63% do not fully understand the potential risk of internet predators (i.e., the ability to track them on the internet). It is clear that more education on the risk of cyber behaviors is needed. Additionally, the education about students’ online behaviors needs to extend to more than just the educational community. Parents and law enforcement groups are crucial players in keeping students safe from online predators.

Only 40% of the students indicated that they would tell an adult if they were contacted by someone they did not know. The fear is, perhaps, that they would not be allowed to continue using the internet if this were to happen. Parents need to keep a closer eye on their child’s behaviors and discuss with them, as they would any important topic, the dangers. This

percentage will be shocking to anyone who is familiar with this type of research. The NASSP (2006) publication News Leader indicated that only 16% of teens and preteens affected by online bullying/predatory behavior would not tell anyone. The finding of 40% for these students is more positive, but still much too low and; therefore, quite significant.

Cyberbulling. Similar to the internet predator finding, only 44% indicated they would tell an adult if they were the victim of cyberbullying. When asked if they were bullied while on-line, 10% agreed with the statement. The NASSP (2006) publication News Leader indicated that 33% of all teens aged 12-17 have had mean, threatening, or embarrassing things said about them online. While our findings of 10% may appear low in light of the national average, there is still a need for concern for this behavior. For our sample of N=588, this indicates that approximately n=59 of the students had been bullied by another student at home while online. Some would conclude that n=1 is too many in this case.

Shariff (2208) reports that an extreme, but real, consequence of this behavior could be suicidal thoughts or action. It is clear that parents need to take a more active role in the development of their child's behaviors, particularly in the digital world. Shariff states the following:

> As human beings, we teach our children how to eat, clean themselves, and communicate, and we protect and nurture them, until they are old enough to go to school. Once they are at school, we suddenly place more emphasis on supervision, discipline, authority, subordination, punishment, and consequences, with less attention to the social survival skills they will need in the contemporary world (p.113).

It is anticipated that the findings presented in this paper will facilitate further understanding of students' awareness, behaviors, and consequences of these issues.

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