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Counselors' Guidelines for the Healthy Development of Youth in the Digital Age

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In today's homes, schools, and public settings, children's access to technology appears to be ageless and limitless. Various forms of technology are introduced to children at a very young age and appear as a natural and appropriate part of their development. Many children today don't recognize a time when access to computers, cell phones, and other networking tools were not easily available. As a result, online technology is now shaping the way humans communicate, socialize, and interact with each other. The Internet is now one of the most widely accessed methods of communication used by children and teenagers. The use of technology in the form of the Internet, e-mail, social networking sites, and instant messaging allows children and teenagers to engage in various experiences that are often beyond the control of their parents and confines of homes and schools (Mishna, McLuckie, & Saini, 2009). When used appropriately, technology has many benefits to society as a whole. The problem arises when it is used inappropriately and has a negative impact on the healthy development of children. Additionally, problems occur through the accessibility and anonymity of electronic media which places children and youth at risk for victimization (Ybarra, 2004). It is the duty and responsibility of counselors to protect and advocate for the healthy development of all children. Because of the widespread popularity and use of technology, it is here to stay; thus, it falls on counselors to teach others the safe use of technology as well as the negative impact of its improper use on children.

Computer/Internet Use

Frequency

Homes and schools all across America contain computers. Due to free Wi-Fi, the Internet can be accessed almost everywhere, including restaurants, hospitals, and airports. This easy accessibility has led to 90% of teens having the ability to access the Internet from almost anywhere, at any time. A large percentage of that 90% reported Internet usage daily and over half report the use of social networking sites (Moreno, VanderStoep, Parks, Zimmerman, Kurth, & Christakis, 2009). According to research conducted by Lenhart and Madden (2007), over half of American youths ages 12-17 utilized social networking sites. The researchers also found that social networking sites were used more by girls than boys. Girls used the site to reinforce established friendships, while boys used it for flirting and making friends. In another study it was found that girls used blogging, whereas boys played online games, watched videos, and visited video-sharing websites such as YouTube (Dowell, Burgess, & Cavanaugh, 2009).

Purposes

The majority of today's youth use the Internet as a healthy setting for socialization, sharing of ideas, artistic creations, photography, school work, online journaling, and blogging (Dowell et al., 2009). A vast majority of children and youth also socialize and communicate through social networking sites. Users of social networking sites create personal profiles that typically contain pictures, text, video, and audio. It has been reported that these sites are important to the social lives of adolescents and serve as a place for identity exploration and interaction with their peers (Moreno et al., 2009). Communication in social networking sites occurs through chat, instant messaging, or posted messages. Users can then limit access to these profiles by setting them to private or by allowing public access (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2008). These communications can lead to many types of social and private interactions that can develop into other types of relationships. In research conducted by Mishna et al., (2009), the majority of the children and youth studied strongly considered the relationships developed online to be as real as relationships in their real lives. Furthermore, the researchers found that the children and youths believed that they were able to form lasting, trusting relationships online. The youth used the Internet as a key component of their romantic and sexual experiences. Their online romances varied from sexually explicit language and exhibiting nudity via webcams, to long term relationships that either remained online or met in person. In addition to that, they reported that cybersex was often used as a precursor to real sex (Mishna et al., 2009).

Negative Impact

Sexual Harassment and Cyber Abuse

Although there are many positive benefits of the computer/Internet to children and youth, it is extremely important that parents, educators, counselors, and other adults be aware of the negative effects of unmonitored, uncensored computer/Internet use by children and youth. This article addresses reasons why counselors must begin to advocate for the awareness of harm that can come from inappropriate use and prevention and

intervention efforts to keep children and youth safe. Thus, a brief discussion of several negative aspects of computer/Internet use will be addressed.

One of the most negative aspects of computer/Internet use is sexual harassment. In a survey conducted by Girl Scouts of the USA (2002), girls ages 13-18 reported that they were frequently sexually harassed online and exposed to pornography. Only 7% of the girls reported these negative encounters to their parents. The girls stated that their parents did not seem concerned about their online behavior including lying, cursing, the type of people they meet online, or the type of information they are able to access. The girls also reported difficulty dealing with online sexual harassment and the information they view online. Online sexual harassment has been linked to emotional distress and psychosocial problems including depressive symptoms and offline victimization (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2008).

Another negative aspect of computer/Internet use is cyber abuse. According to research by Mishna et al. (2009), many children and youth reported experiencing cyber abuse through bullying, stalking, and sexual solicitation. They experienced feelings of depression, guilt, shame, self harm, and withdrawal from family and friends as a result of cyber abuse. They coped with cyber abuse through avoidance and denial, rarely reporting the incidents to adults.

Internet Initiated Risky Behaviors

An additional negative component of computer/Internet use is Internet initiated risky behaviors. Many children and youth are participating in risky behaviors online and it is a major concern for the health and safety of young people. Risky online behavior includes posting personal information, socializing online with unknown persons, online initiated harassment, online initiated sex sites, and overriding Internet filters or blocks. Research suggests that when youth participate in one online risky behavior, they are more likely to engage in additional online risky behaviors (Dowell et al., 2009). The consequences of these behaviors are typically detrimental to their development. A major danger is that the combined risk behaviors increase early adolescents' potential for solicitation from online predators who will exploit the youth who correspond online with unknown people about sex or engage in patterns of risky off or online behavior, including meeting with them in person. Online initiated harassment includes behaviors such as playing jokes, making rude comments, intentionally bullying, or embarrassing someone online. Students have even begun to post pictures and web videos to assist in the intensification of the harassment of other children. Researchers found that youth who harassed others online also reported skipping school as well as received detentions or suspensions at school (Dowell et al., 2009). Youth who post personal information online also included posting and exchanging inappropriate or sexualized photos of themselves or others through email and cell phones. In some parts of the United States, sending and receiving sexually explicit pictures of youth is considered possessing child pornography and is a crime. Also, sexually explicit pictures may prevent youth from obtaining jobs or gaining acceptance to college (Dowell et al., 2009).

Exposure to Pornography

In addition to children and youth sending sexually explicit photos of themselves, children and youth also access online pornography websites. According to research

conducted by Mishna et al. (2009), boys and girls as young as 12 reported logging on to online pornography regularly due to curiosity and for sexual gratification. Many of the children and youth reported being addicted to these websites. Some children and youth reported being unknowingly directed to pornography websites and feeling shocked. The children and youth knew that viewing pornography was illegal and against their parents' rules. The majority of them agreed that children should be protected against pornography. Many of them had conflicting moral beliefs about their viewing pornography. Some felt that they needed to masturbate to become men and others felt that masturbation was wrong and wanted to stop. All of the children and youth felt that they should hide their accessing pornography from their parents and knew of ways to hide their online tracks.

Family Time

Families are an integral component of the growth and development of children and youth. One very critical negative component of computer/Internet use is the diminishing of the quantity and quality of time families spend together. The wide spread accessibility of computers and the Internet, coupled with the vast forms of technology, makes the Internet accessible anywhere. Thus, computers and the Internet minimize the amount of time families spend together even when they are in the same room or car. In a study conducted by Lenhart, Rainie, and Lewis (2001), almost 2/3 of children ages 12-17 reported that Internet use diminishes their family time as well as their time doing other age appropriate behaviors.

Counselors' Guidelines

Prevention

The literature on the negative effects of computers/Internet on children and youth serves as a call to counselors to advocate for the safe use of technology. Counselors can advocate in several ways including the passage of legislation that protects children and youth while online and educating parents, school administrators, other health care professionals, and the community as a whole on the dangers of unmonitored Internet and computer use. Additionally, counselors can educate others on methods of prevention and intervention. Most importantly, counselors must begin to educate children and adolescents on the affects that the Internet can have on them, as well as others. Specific prevention methods for parents can include the following (Feinberg & Robey, 2009):

- Parents may monitor their children's online activity to ensure their safety including who they are talking to online, what information they are disclosing, and to make sure they are accessing appropriate websites.
- Parents may allow children and youth to use the Internet/computer based on the age and maturity level of the child.
- Parents, in some cases, may find it necessary to install filters and/or tracking programs on the computer their children use.
- To assist young people in understanding the potential dangers and consequences of irresponsible Internet/computer use, it would be helpful if parents themselves educate their children on appropriate online behaviors and Internet etiquette including language to use, not posting inappropriate pictures, and not posting personal information, never meeting online persons

in person, not harassing, tricking, or being mean or malicious to others, and not talking about sex to strangers online.

- It will also be advantageous if parents set clear expectations for responsible online behavior and make clear consequences of violating Internet etiquette.
- It is extremely important for children and youths' safety for parents to explain the importance of reporting inappropriate online communications to them or another adult.
- To increase Internet/computer safety, it may be helpful for parents to place computers/laptops in common areas and alert them that they will check on their usage on a regular basis.

In school settings, school counselors are in a unique position to advocate for the appropriate use of technology. School counselors are able to use a variety of methods to educate the entire school on the negative aspects of technology and the appropriate, safe use of technology. Their strategies are as follows:

- Promoting positive use of technology
- Providing district wide school personnel training as well as student training on the dangers of inappropriate computer/Internet use
- Inviting law enforcement officers to talk with students about reporting inappropriate online solicitations and harassment, as well as educating them on the consequences of inappropriate online behaviors
- Involving the parent teacher association in these prevention efforts and utilizing it as another avenue to educate parents
- Hosting safe technology programs and rallies
- Assisting the district in developing policies that address appropriate computer/Internet use and consequences of inappropriate use at school
- Designing online lessons that model appropriate computer/Internet use
- Providing information about out of school support
- Advocating for time limitations of computer use and promoting the inclusion of physical activity into students' daily lives

Intervention

Counselors can also intervene on behalf of children and youth when necessary. They are in a prime position to educate parents, school administrators, other healthcare professionals, and the community on intervention methods. Thus, it is imperative to already have intervention plans established. These methods include the following:

- Informing educators, parents, and students on how to report inappropriate Internet incidents to police or other officials
- Training parents and students on how to ignore or block negative communications
- Modeling appropriate discipline techniques; for example, if it becomes necessary to take computers from children or youth, parents and teachers often need to be educated on the use of effective discipline techniques

- Instructing children and youth on ways to close social website pages, limit giving personal information, and the importance of monitoring their own safety
- Advising parents to place computers in common areas in the home and explaining why the computers should be kept in these safe zones
- Offering referral information for those who may seek counseling service as a result of computer addictions, cyberbullying, or other detrimental effects that may occur as a result of involvement with technology

School counselors are also in a position to institute intervention methods in the school, which is an excellent way to reach a large amount of students. Many times children feel that adults do not understand and often do not explain why there are certain restrictions on computer use. Also, children sometimes have problems communicating with their parents when negative incidents on the computer occur, fearing that they will be banned or restricted from computer use. Counselors should be the ones students can feel comfortable talking to when issues arise. Counselors should not only have an open door policy and offer a safe environment and listening ear, but should also educate children on the realistic dangers that are connected with social media and Internet use. The counselor can also serve as a mediator for those students and parents who have problems communicating with each other. The counselor can offer assistance to parents by offering training, as well as modeling to students through role playing and discussion.

Many children are often victimized by predators as well as other students when interacting on these sites. Counselors should offer forums for students to talk about these difficult topics. As mentioned earlier, the research reflects that many of these students have been inappropriately approached with sexually related content or other negative materials. Peers and others can serve as mentors to younger students who may experience such problems. Victims can also provide their real testimonials on how dangerous these experiences can be. Counselors can also be very instrumental in promoting social skills needed for healthy relationships and also in providing coping strategies to use in difficult situations.

Recommendations and Conclusion

In conclusion, counselors can play a very important role in the healthy development of children and youth in an age in which many young people are consumed with technology. Many detrimental effects of the Internet occur because adults are not aware of what is going on and what experiences their children have when they are exposed to ongoing use of the computer/Internet. Many adults believe that computers and the Internet are educational and are helping to educate children and youth. Although many great things are happening that aid in the learning and creativity of children through the use of computers, it is also important to remember the realities of the negative impacts as well. For these reasons, we believe that if we educate parents, school personnel, other healthcare professionals, and the community about the detrimental effects the Internet may cause to children and youth, many of the negative occurrences can be prevented. Therefore, we will advocate and educate others on this important issue to the healthy development of children and youth. Our recommendation is that counselors in the school and the community advocate for the safe use of the Internet by educating

others on the negative effects of inappropriate computer/Internet use, modeling appropriate use, and teaching prevention and intervention methods. In conclusion, counselors can tackle this growing problem that continues to impact children in the digital age with awareness and education.

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