SHOULD WE BE AFRAID OF THE WORLD WIDE WEB?

In the past two years, several surveys among US youths who go online were published to determine background information on child safety on the Internet. Here are the highlights of these studies:

- Ybarra M, Mitchell K, Wolak J, Finkelhor D. Examining characteristics and associated distress related to Internet harassment: findings from the Second Youth Internet Safety Survey. *Pediatrics.* 2006;118(4) : e1169-e1177
  - Nine percent of the youths who used the Internet were targets of online harassment with 32% of the targets reported chronic harassment (ie, harassment ≥3 times in the previous year).
  - Almost half (45%) knew the harasser in person before the incident. Half of the harassers (50%) were reportedly male, and half (51%) were adolescents.
  - One in 4 targets reported an aggressive offline contact (eg, the harasser telephoned, came to the youth's home, or sent gifts); 2 in 3 disclosed the incident to another person.
  - Among otherwise similar youth, the odds of being a target of Internet harassment were higher for those youth who harassed others online, reported borderline/clinically significant social problems, and were victimized in other contexts.

- Mitchell KJ, Finkelhor D, Wolak J. Online requests for sexual pictures from youth: risk factors and incident characteristics. *J Adolesc Health.* 2007;41(2):196 –203
  - One in 25 youth who use the Internet got a request to transmit a sexual picture of themselves during the course of the year.
  - The concerning finding from the study was that a group at particularly high risk to receive such requests for pictures were victims of previous physical and sexual abuse. "Because of emotional problems, these youth may be particularly vulnerable to such requests," Mitchell said.

- Wolak J, Mitchell K, and Finkelhor D. Unwanted and Wanted Exposure to Online Pornography in a National Sample of Youth Internet Users. *Pediatrics.* 2007: 119(2): 247-257
  - Among the 1500 youths surveyed, 42% were exposed to online pornography and 66% reported that these were unwanted exposure.
  - Unwanted exposure was related to only 1 Internet activity, namely, using

file-sharing programs to download images.

- Filtering and blocking software reduced the risk of unwanted exposure, as did attending an Internet safety presentation by law enforcement personnel.
- Unwanted exposure rates were higher for teens, youth who reported being harassed or sexually solicited online or interpersonally victimized offline.
- Wanted exposure rates were higher for teens, boys, and youth who used file-sharing programs to download images, talked online to unknown persons about sex, used the Internet at friends' homes, or scored in the borderline or clinically significant range on the Child Behavior Checklist subscale for rule-breaking.
- Depression also could be a risk factor for some youth. Youth who used filtering and blocking software had lower odds of wanted exposure.

Wolak, J, Finkelhor, D and Mitchell, K. Online "Predators" and Their Victims: Myths, Realities, and Implications for Prevention and Treatment, *American Psychologist.* 2008: 63 (2): 111-128.

- Internet offenders pretended to be teenagers in only 5 percent of the crimes studied by researchers.
- Nearly 75 percent of victims who met offenders face-to-face did so more than once.
- Online sex offenders are seldom violent, and cases involving stalking or abduction are very rare.
- Youth who engaged in four or more risky online behaviors were much more likely to report receiving online sexual solicitations. The online risky behaviors included maintaining buddy lists that included strangers, discussing sex online with people they did not know in person and being rude or nasty online.
- Boys who are gay or are questioning their sexuality may be more susceptible to Internet-initiated sex crimes than other populations. Researchers found boys were the victims in nearly one-quarter of criminal cases, and most cases included facts that suggested victims were gay or questioning their sexuality.

In conclusion, the studies show that technology itself does not pose an increase likelihood of unwanted sexual solicitation or Internet harassment or even bullying as compared to the real world. A child's psychosocial profile and general online behavior (e.g., harassing others, meeting people in multiple different ways online, and talking with people known only online about sex) is influential in explaining the likelihood of online interpersonal victimization.

As in the real world, parents should be aware of with whom, where, and about what topics their children are talking online.

When it comes to advocacy, pediatricians, parents and agencies engaged in child protection should focus on areas of prevention that would use the Internet concentrating on online youth outreach programs, school anti-bullying programs, and online mental health services. Youths can be informed via websites on what to do if they are exposed to sexual harassment, unwanted sexual solicitation or harassment.

CHILD PROTECTION UNIT NETWORK
Phone: (632) 404-3954 Fax: (632) 404-3955
Mobile Hotline: 0917-8900445
E-mail: info@cpu-net.org.ph
URL: www.childprotection.org.ph
www.cpu-net.org.ph

WE WELCOME SUGGESTIONS FOR TOPICS TO COVER.

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Upcoming Events

NATIONAL STRATEGIC PLANNING
May 13 to 14, 2008
St. Paul University HRM Training Center
Malate, Manila

ANNUAL CONFERENCE
November 12 and 13, 2008