

Casting a safety Net



Keeping children from the dark side of the Internet is a task that has to be handled tactfully and intelligently says Dr Sangeet Bhullar (pic), the founder of WISE KIDS, a non-profit organisation in Britain involved in Internet awareness, education and safety. HOOI YOU CHING has the report.



ON THE PULSE OF THE NET: Parents are advised to familiarise themselves with the Internet so that they can supervise surfing habits and share online safety concerns. — APpic

NEVER talk to strangers, children are often told. But in this era of digital technology, how do you warn kids about danger lurking in the online environment?

No doubt, the Internet has had a glowing reputation since the 1990s, but it has a dark side too.

Paedophiles lurk within virtual playgrounds by frequenting chat rooms in the hope of luring potential victims.

These online predators, who operate under false identities, often use a method called "grooming" to befriend children, who are then exploited for sexual purposes.

The anonymous nature of the Internet has also provided a safe haven for sexual perverts searching for child pornography.

According to Dr Sangeet Bhullar, Internet safety is an area of concern that is often overlooked.

"A developing country like Malaysia, keen on making the transition towards a knowledge-based society, tends to emphasise on the promotion of Internet literacy and proficiency. But online safety issues are equally important too.

"Whether we like it or not, technology is firmly entrenched in our daily lives. From the way we communicate, learn and do business, the Internet has proven to be an empowering tool. Sadly, in the wrong hands, it can also be exploited for unlawful purposes.

"For example, images depicting child sex abuse are being posted on websites, and cyber bullying and exposure to adult content deemed inappropriate for children have also become widespread," explains Bhullar, a Malaysian who currently lives in Wales.

A recent survey commissioned by British-based children's charity NCH and Tesco Telecoms showed that one-third of children use blogs and social networking sites at least two or three times a week, yet two-thirds of parents don't even know what a blog is. Eight out of 10 chil-

NET SAFETY TIPS:

- Treat people you don't know on the Internet as strangers
- Do not give out personal information such as full names, address, phone/mobile numbers
- Never agree to meet someone in person whom you've met on the Internet. Seek your parent's permission first, and if they agree, never go alone.
- Do not fill out forms online without consulting your parents or teachers
- Do not open an e-mail from someone you don't know as you may download a virus
- Never send pictures of yourself or personal info without telling your parents
- If someone is sending threatening messages, inform your parents/ teachers. And save a copy of the message.

Source: www.wisekids.org.uk

dren said they use instant messaging (IM) regularly to communicate with anyone online, but only a third of parents understand what IM is.

These, plus the fact that most parents rarely monitor their children's online activities and that two-thirds of parents admit they know less about mobile phone technologies than their kids, is certainly cause for concern.

"Children these days may be more Net-savvy compared to their parents, but they lack the experience and knowledge of living skills. As a result, they are vulnerable to online predators.

"For example, paedophiles can easily gain the trust of minors by pretending to be someone else, like another 10-year-old kid with the same hobbies and favourite music band. Unknowingly, that child might divulge personal information or even exchange photos on the Internet."

She believes that parents play an important role in protecting their offspring from harmful elements they may encounter while surfing the Net.

"Parents can teach their children to be street smart on the informa-

tion superhighway the same way they teach their kids how to cross the street and never to talk to strangers," says Bhullar, who is the founder and executive director of WISE KIDS, a not-for-profit organisation in Britain which is involved in Internet awareness, education and safety.

Blogs and social networking sites like MySpace, Bebo and Friendster have drawn teenagers like bees to honey. Blogs are online journals that allow persons to post opinions, personal data and upload photos.

Given the personal nature of blogs, it can be easy to abuse this medium. For example, paedophiles can send e-mails to young bloggers with the purpose of soliciting sexual favours in exchange for gifts or cash incentives.

Take the case of Justin Berry, an American teenager who posted nude images of himself and performed sexual acts via his webcam in front of a paying online audience. Berry's secret life as an Internet porn star lasted for five years until a *New York Times* reporter wrote an expose in 2005.

Also, the convergence of the Internet and mobile phone technologies

have made it easier for digital content, good or bad, to reach young minds. These days, anyone with a 3G-cell phone can download, view and send video images.

Two months ago in Miri, an assault case involving secondary schoolgirls was captured on a camera phone and posted on the Internet.

Bhullar says: "Children are not necessarily aware of the responsibilities or dangers of online interaction. They sign up for free websites by including their personal data without realising that anybody with an Internet connection can view those web pages."

Bhullar, who has three young children, understands that many parents struggle with technological concepts.

"Most parents are intimidated by the PC but parental guidance is the first line of defence in safeguarding children from online risks.

"Parents should familiarise themselves with the Internet so that they can get more involved in their children's online activities. That way, parents can supervise surfing habits and share online safety concerns.

"My kids use Yahoo! Messenger to keep in touch with their cousins in Johor Baru. They know they have to get my permission first before registering with any websites. I tell them what personal information they can or cannot put in their profiles and the reasons behind these rules.

For instance, I always tell them that people in their "buddy list" must be persons they know in real life. Don't preach to your kids;

instead, have an open discussion with them."

Nevertheless, Bhullar feels that the push for Internet safety awareness requires a concerted effort among government agencies, educators, Internet service providers (ISPs), NGOs and relevant industries.

"For example, some ISPs have family packages that filter out websites which contain improper material. Two years ago, mobile operators in Britain were required to adhere to a code of practice whereby factory settings, by default, require user subscription to receive certain services and content."

In Britain, an organisation called CEOP (child exploitation and online protection) Centre combines law enforcement and various parties such as children's charities and youth groups to tackle child sex abuse.

The Internet Watch Foundation is a free British hotline for reporting illegal material such as sexually obscene, criminal or racist content.

Despite the bad press, the Internet has nevertheless revolutionised the way we live, work and play in a positive way.

"What we want for our children is to have a healthy online experience, not impose censorship of the Internet.

"We need to show them how to use available tools effectively and constructively, whether it's buying and selling online, setting up your own businesses online, or networking. After all, these children will grow up to be adults one day," she says.