

RSA 2007: Protecting Kids Online Through Education and Technology

February 16, 2007

When it comes to children's online safety, the policy debate is often framed by those who demonize the Internet and advocate for greater federal regulation, which often does little to actually protect children while also placing significant burdens on free expression. But a keynote panel entitled "Padora's Box: Youth and the Internet" that I attended last week at the [2007 RSA Conference in San Francisco](#) [1] was a breath of fresh air because the participants largely emphasized education, including Internet "literacy," as well as the use of technological tools to protect children and track the bad guys. The panelists included [Dr. Sharon Cooper](#) [2], a pediatrician who treats victims of child abuse and who is also an instructor at the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) where she focuses on Internet crimes against children; Drew Oosterbaan, who prosecutes child exploitation and obscenity cases for the Justice Department; Kevin Poulsen, a senior editor at Wired News; and Chris Kelly, the Chief Privacy Officer for [Facebook](#) [3], a popular social networking site. Mr. Oosterbaan of DOJ made the sobering point that the Internet's unique ability to allow people to quickly and cheaply communicate has allowed pedophiles to create an online community that reinforces their reprehensible tendencies; whereas would-be child predators in the past were much more insular and perhaps less likely to act out. He also stated that the Internet has encouraged the creating and sharing of photos and videos among pedophiles, and children whose abuse has been recorded are especially ashamed and are more likely to deny what happened. Thus an argument can be made that the Internet has exacerbated child sexual abuse. Yet this does not mean that the solution is to hamper the Internet's ability to be an amazing resource for education, communication, entertainment and commerce - for children and adults alike. Although he made the above statements, Mr. Oosterbaan was also quick to point out that children are at the greatest risk of being sexually abused by people they *already know* and people they interact with *offline*. Thus child predation is not suddenly a problem unique to the Internet. General education is important here, and education is something that CDT constantly stresses. Whether on- or offline, children must be encouraged not to talk to strangers, and also to question the authority of those they know; not to be afraid to remove themselves from an inappropriate, uncomfortable or awkward situation; and not to be afraid to report an inappropriate conversation or incident. In fact, [a 2006 study](#) [4] found that, compared to a similar study conducted nearly six years earlier, there was a decline in the proportion of youth Internet users (ages 10 to 17) who communicated online with people they did not know in person - a finding that might be attributed to children being better educated and more savvy when it comes to their online activities. Children must also be educated about sex and encouraged to make positive decisions for themselves. The same 2006 study found that 13% of children who use the Internet have received unwanted sexual solicitations online. But 90% of children who *were solicited* were ages 13 to 17; and 43% of the *solicitors* were under age 18, while 30% were between ages 18 and 25. These statistics suggest that teenage/young adult curiosity about sex is as much at play as is adult pedophilia. Mr. Kelly of Facebook stressed that schools should be key players in educating children about how to be safe online so that they can enjoy the benefits of the Internet without putting themselves at risk. It is also critical that parents and caregivers be educated and engaged. The panel emphasized the prevention of child sexual abuse as well as the detection of signs after it has occurred. Dr. Cooper of NCMEC stated that parents should be highly involved in their children's lives and not be afraid of invading their children's privacy. With teens and pre-teens seeking greater independence from their parents, Dr. Cooper stated that parents should tell their children that the intention is to protect and not control them. When it comes to the Internet and social networking sites in particular, Dr. Cooper encouraged parents to ask their children to share the contents of their online profiles and to discuss the implications or risks of posting certain information. As for dealing with abuse after-the-fact, Mr. Oosterbaan stated that high school counselors are often "clueless" and that both parents and school officials must be involved enough to know when something is amiss with their children, as abused kids often remain silent. Technology is also an important tool. Parents, schools and libraries can install software that blocks access to certain content or certain websites. Some parents also use keystroke loggers to monitor their children's online activities. Mr. Kelly explained that Facebook's staff voluntarily monitors rejected "friend requests" to determine if inappropriate solicitation is going on. Mr. Poulsen of Wired News agreed that some kind of routine

monitoring of social networking sites would be beneficial. He stated that if an older man has an online profile that is suspicious - for example, he has lots of kids as "friends" or is even sending sexual messages to children - then that might warrant further investigation. In fact, Mr. Poulsen found a convicted sex offender's profile on MySpace with the tag line "Love Knows No Age." Mr. Oosterbaan stated that image search technology would make finding online child pornography easier and more efficient. And Dr. Cooper pondered whether it might someday be possible to retrieve or block live "webcam" broadcasts between adults and children; but she noted that child sexual abuse is to some extent moving beyond the Internet to cell phone cameras, for example. Mr. Kelly likened the use of such technologies as putting "lights in parks." Thus education and technology can go a long way to protect kids on- and offline, and to thwart those who would do them harm.

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