



BEST PRACTICES

An Internet industry task force maps out the path to online safety and literacy for families. by Frank Gallagher

The rise of the Internet—and its many ramifications for social interaction, interpersonal communication, and behavioral development—has raised concerns about the impact of this and other new communications technologies on children, families, and society at large. Whether protecting children from the actions of others or from their own activities, a general consensus exists that, however proficient children are in using new technologies and devices, they do not have the experience and judgment to fully understand the dangers or the consequences of thoughtless or reckless behaviors.

It would be nice if there were a single action parents or teachers could take, a “one size fits all” strategy that would protect kids in these new digital spaces. Unfortunately, no single thing will do that. The issue is too big for a simple approach, one tool, or for a single group to solve. Children’s online safety is, in reality, a shared responsibility in which all parts of society have important roles to play.

This became clear when, in June 2008, representatives from technology companies, child advocacy and parents’ groups, educators, health researchers, and policymakers gathered for a summit in Washington, D.C., to better understand the risks to children on the Internet and to share best practices for keeping them safe and smart online. Convened by the Internet Keep Safe Coalition and Common Sense Media in partnership with Cable in the Classroom (CIC) and the National Cable & Telecommunications Association (NCTA), the PointSmart.ClickSafe Summit was a component of the cable industry’s PointSmart.ClickSafe online safety and media literacy initiative.

The summit made clear the contributions each segment of society concerned with online safety can make, but also the limitations each confronts in trying to provide a safe and productive experience for children in the digital age. In addition, participants in the summit pointed out a balance must be struck between the need for greater online safety on the one hand and free speech and the unfettered availability of information on the other. However, acting in concert, all of these sectors can make major strides towards a safe and secure Internet experience for kids.

Following the summit, several members of the Internet industry agreed that additional work

should be done to develop a set of best-practice recommendations that could be implemented by the providers of online content, applications, and connectivity/access. To that end, a diverse group of key stakeholders was convened as the PointSmart.ClickSafe Task Force. Operating under the leadership of iKeepSafe, Common Sense Media, CIC, and the NCTA, this group—which included Internet providers, content providers, and other technology companies, as well as child advocates, educators, and representatives of parents’ groups and public health communities—has worked to identify practices that could be recommended to and ultimately implemented by the Internet industry. While the resulting best-practice recommendations would only apply to the Internet industry, all of these stakeholders in children’s online safety could help by identifying which practices are apt to be most useful and by supporting the effective implementation and widespread consumer awareness of the resulting best practices.

THE CHALLENGE

To be sure, identifying best practices for online safety is no easy task, and some of the challenges recognized by the task force include the global

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nature of the Internet and its infrastructure; the accelerating pace of technological change that is constantly introducing new products, services, and risks; and the nature of this communications infrastructure as a global ecology in which the online “virtual” world overlaps the physical “real” world, and vice versa.

By their very nature, solutions and strategies for children’s online safety are frequently suggested and considered in silos that are effective in addressing only one part of the challenge. But just as it has become impossible to totally restrict a child’s access to mass media and the Internet, it also is overly optimistic to expect to control elements of the Internet from a single state, city, or town, however well intentioned jurisdictional efforts may be. Neither can schools nor families, acting by themselves, address the entire landscape of children’s digital lives. And filters and other technology tools, though improving, are imperfect.

The nature of online safety also transcends the work of law-making and enforcement. This conviction is rooted in the knowledge that prevention, punishment, and justice address only some of the manifestations of the new Internet society. Voluntary efforts by industry and all stakeholders in the Internet ecosystem are vitally necessary to build a safe foundation for activities in cyberspace, promote education and awareness about online-safety issues, and encourage collaborative activity among those responsible for children’s safety.

In considering these challenges, the task force first recognized that the responsibility for children’s online safety is equally shared across a wide ecosystem of interlocking and overlapping groups. Parents, teachers, child advocates, health professionals, providers of Internet access and content, law enforcement officials, and other concerned citizens all have a shared responsibility to ensure that a child’s use of digital technology, and particularly the Internet, is as safe and enriching an experience as we can make it. Furthermore, the task force recognized that each of these groups must act on its responsibility so a good outcome can be achieved.

With this in mind, the task force focused on the role and accountability of industry in ensuring online safety and Internet literacy and worked to develop a set of voluntary best-operating practices that can be adopted, implemented, and emulated

by the companies that comprise the Internet industry. These measures have been suggested as a way of raising standards for all companies engaged in serving Internet users and of helping achieve better harmony in online safety efforts.

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NO ‘SILVER BULLET’

To determine which practices are needed in this dynamic digital environment, the task force participants adopted a child-centered perspective to address three separate, but overlapping, categories of children’s online experience: before they go online, during their online activities, and when problems arise.

At the same time, the task force determined that it should be easy for parents and others to find clear and simple explanations of what information and safety elements exist, how they function, and what a user can do in various circumstances. Therefore, best-operating practices should use clear and common language, be consistent and transparent, and provide information and tools that can vary by a user’s age.

And these best practices should be crafted so that they can be modified for a specific service or application (e.g. ISP, blog, chat, social network, etc.), scaled based on the number of intended or actual users, designed and created as part of the product development cycle, and continuously updated to reflect growth and change in the application or service.

Ensuring children’s online safety is a difficult and complex task that calls for input from and action by a wide variety of stakeholders. There is no “silver bullet”—no single technology or approach that has proven effective. Rather, what is required is a combination of different technolo-

gies, continuing education of parents and children, and active participation by all concerned companies, groups, and individuals.

Similarly, a singular focus on safety is insufficient. Children must learn to minimize risks, to be sure, but they also must learn appropriate and ethical behaviors in the digital world. In addition, they need an understanding of media literacy in order to be able to think critically about the content they consume and increasingly create. Therefore, all best practices must be part of a larger effort to provide an entertaining, educational, and safe experience for children.

In preparing its best-practice recommendations, the task force drew on previous work done by the UK Home Office and, in particular, the Byron Review; from the work of the Berkman Center at Harvard University; and from a variety of other studies, reports and recommendations, some of which are listed below.

While the final report of the task force was not complete at press time, the general outline of its recommendations was clear. The box on page 11 presents some key elements that a parent or caregiver might look for when evaluating a website, service, or product for their children’s use. ■■

Frank Gallagher is Director of Education and Media Literacy for Cable in the Classroom.

RELATED RESOURCES

Byron Review, “Safer Children in a Digital World”
www.dcsf.gov.uk/byronreview

Berkman Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University, “Enhancing Child Safety and Online Technologies”
cyber.law.harvard.edu/pubrelease/isttf

UK Home Office, “Good Practice Guidance for the Providers of Social Networking and Other User Interactive Services 2008”
police.homeoffice.gov.uk/publications/operational-policing/social-networking-guidance/

Family Online Safety Institute, “Making Wise Choices Online”
www.fosi.org/cms/downloads/mwco/make-wise-choices-121008.pdf

Wolak, J., Mitchell, K., and Finkelhor, D. (2006). “Online victimization of youth: Five years later.” National Center for Missing & Exploited Children Bulletin #07-06-025
www.unh.edu/ccrc/pdf/CV138.pdf