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Singapore Computer Society Roundtable

Managing kids on the Internet

Keeping your children safe in cyberspace has never been more challenging. Experts fill CHAN CHI-LOONG in on the principles of online safety

'I'm trying my best to delay giving my kids mobile phones and Facebook accounts. But we can't keep them away from it forever.'

Oo Gin Lee, deputy editor of Digital Life, who is concerned about keeping his children away from the dangers of the Internet



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KEEPING your kids from going on the Internet is like fighting a losing game because of today's wired lifestyles.

However, regulating Internet usage in a draconian fashion will not do either.

The best way, said experts at a panel discussion on Internet And Children, is to teach them the principles of online safety.

Held on Feb 5, the group of technology and education professionals - all parents themselves - met an audience keen to pick up parenting tips and learn about privacy issues and Internet addiction.

The event was hosted by the Singapore Computer Society and Digital Life.

The only thing that everybody agreed on was that blocking kids from the Internet is going to be increasingly difficult.

'I'm trying my best to delay giving my kids mobile phones and Facebook accounts,' said Oo Gin Lee, deputy editor of Digital Life, who is concerned about keeping them away from the dangers of the Internet.

'But we can't keep them away from it forever.'

Fact supports intuition.

According to the 2008 annual survey by the Infocomm Development Authority (IDA) of Singapore, 96 per cent of children aged 7 to 14 have accessed the Internet at least once in 12 months, and 76 per cent of Singapore households have access to the Internet. The trend of more children accessing the Internet seems unstoppable. Both numbers have been growing every year since 2003 when IDA started the survey.

Thomas Chong, director of the Early Child Institute, PAP Community Foundation, summed up the need to manage and not run from this issue: 'The Internet is a double-edged sword. It can either be a good servant or a terrible master.'

Below are four tips from the panel's discussion.

1 Get your feet wet

This is the best way to defuse fear.

'If you don't try, you won't know,' said Thomas. Given that cyberspace has made our world smaller, it becomes necessary for parents to learn about the Internet.

One audience member, a professor from the Nanyang Technological University, told an amusing story of how his grandmother, in her 90s, set up a date for him by going to his Facebook profile to get his photograph and e-mail.

2 Earn your kids' trust early

It is best to build up trust when the kids are young, said Angie Chew Monksfield, an adjunct associate professor at the Singapore Management University, who teaches planning and portfolio management in the information systems division.

This way, children will respect the boundaries you have laid even when they are teenagers.

Said Angie: 'You can prevent them from going on the Internet at home but they can always go to a friend's house or a cafe.'

The trick is to give them room to explore, yet remain vigilant of potential dangers.

Said Gin Lee: 'To gain their trust and to be treated like their peer, parents should learn and experience the latest apps with their children.'

3 Inculcate self-discipline

Angeline Khoo, associate professor of psychological studies at the National Institute of Education, noted that kids should learn to have self-discipline and regulate their own Internet use.

This boils down to inculcating the right values. Easier said than done, audience members hotly pointed out.

Go back to basics and start young, said the panellists. They suggested parents could get an older sibling to mentor a younger child on which sites to avoid.

Another way is to place the computers in the living room so that adults can keep an eye on the websites children are visiting.

4 Teach kids to guard their privacy

The line between what is private - and should be kept 'offline' - and what can be said or made public online is blurring, Jonathan Wong, a technology evangelist at Microsoft, said.

The reason: Youth, caught up with living and playing online, do not realise the implications of revealing too much information. For example, when people shoot videos of themselves in various stages of undress and post the clips online.

The clips can come back to haunt them, as in the case of a former Singapore air-stewardess whose video clip of her having sex was posted online and was reported in the media two weeks ago.

Youths should also guard against posting false information of themselves to portray a different persona. Doing so could get them into trouble as they need to spin bigger webs of deceit to keep up with that image, only to have the webs unravel at some point.



PHOTO: JULIAN TAY FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

The panellists
(from left)

- Angeline Khoo, associate professor of psychological studies, National Institute of Education
- Thomas Chong, director of the Early Child Institute, PAP Community Foundation
- Oo Gin Lee, deputy editor, Digital Life
- Angie Chew Monksfield, adjunct associate professor of planning and portfolio management, Information Systems Division, Singapore Management University
- Jonathan Wong, technology evangelist, Microsoft
- Moderator: Grace Chng, editor, Digital Life (not in picture)