

Setting Limits in the Virtual World

Helping Families Develop Acceptable Use Policies

Introduction

An estimated 93 percent of children ages 12 to 17 regularly access the Internet (Macgill, 2007) and the trends indicate that this number will continue to rise, while the child's age at first access to the Internet decreases. The average age of first exposure to pornography online is estimated at 11 years (????), while 34 percent of teens report they have been exposed to unwanted sexual material while on the Internet. The numbers are staggering, but even more frightening!! — is the challenge of how best to protect our children in the online world.

Adults tend to believe sensationalized media reports that the biggest threat to our children on the Internet is the online sexual predator who seeks out children to groom and eventually meet and abuse. While this threat cannot be discounted, it also represents a minimal concern as compared to ways children get themselves into trouble on the Internet. Issues such as cyber-bullying, online gambling, pornography, compulsive spending, compulsive gaming, illegal downloading, etc., place children and their families in a significant amount of risk for developing emotional, psychological, and legal problems.

Over the past several years, an increasing amount of attention has been paid to keeping kids safe on the Internet. A number of curriculums have been developed for school systems to incorporate, many law enforcement agencies now offer free seminars on the topic, and parents are raising their own awareness about the problems associated with kids online. However, even with all the efforts being made, there still is much to teach adults about the pitfalls of kids and teens on the Internet. For example, many families believe that installing blocking/filtering software provides a failsafe way of protecting their children while online in their home. What they forget is that such software is not 100 percent effective, nor is their home the only place where their children are using the Internet. The best prevention strategy to help keep families safe online is based on a foundation of honest and open discussions, including clear limits and rules about technology use. This is where the helping professional can assist families in opening the dialogue and establishing clearly communicated rules and consequences.

Purpose

The purpose of this article is to educate helping professionals (e.g., therapists, clinicians, etc) on how best to assist families on the process of creating acceptable use policies to guide technology use in the home. Regardless of the presenting issues in treatment, there are a number of reasons that technology use and the creation of an acceptable use policy should be discussed with a family. *These include the following:*

- With an increasing number of teens and young adults developing addictions to the Internet and computer, the AUP (Acceptable Use Policy) becomes a first defense by establishing boundaries early on that kids may not have otherwise had. Prevention is always better and easier than intervention.
- Families need to set clear rules and boundaries for their children around technology use. Our culture has not done a good job of establishing such rules for adults and the therapist can be on the front line of preventing future problematic behaviors by working to establish an AUP in the family.
- Parents often can sense the digital divide and spend a great deal of time either trying to understand or avoid it. The AUP puts the issue on the table and forces dialogue in the context of a healthy, mediated environment.
- Children enjoy feeling they know more about something than adults. The development of the AUP gives kids a chance to "teach" their parents and the therapist about technology, which provides a great deal of data about how much the kids know and their thoughts, feelings, attitudes, and behaviors while online.
- The Internet is such an integral part of the teenage lifestyle, that a child's presenting problem in therapy may have an Internet related component that would not have been discovered had it not been for the open dialogue regarding the AUP.
- The development of an AUP becomes an assessment technique for the therapist to learn about the role of technology in each family member's life, and also to assess how well the family works together towards a common goal.

Acceptable Use Policy Components

It is impossible to outline "the" single AUP that will serve all purposes. However, this section will mention the common components of an AUP and these components can then be discussion points for the family as they begin to establish rules for the use of technology.

Preamble

The first step is to work with the family to develop several sentences that answers the question, "Why do we need an agreement about using the Internet?" The family's answer should be developed into the first paragraph of the AUP to outline and remind everyone of the spirit of the document. This way, if behaviors occur in the family that are not explicitly detailed in the AUP, this first paragraph can be consulted to illustrate how the behavior violated the spirit of the agreement, even if there was no specific rule about the behavior.

Time and Place

There are two aspects of "time" that the family should address. The first is what will be the acceptable times of day that computer/Internet use will be permitted. You may want to separate computer

use from Internet use, but specific times should be established and enforced. The second aspect of time is related to how many minutes/hours per day should a family member be permitted to use the computer/Internet. These time parameters may differ by user, and there is no absolute right and wrong times. This is where your facilitation as a therapist can help the family explore the needs of each family and assist in negotiating the times, knowing that they can be revised at any time.

The other issue is the location of the computer when being used to access the Internet. Many AUPs direct parents to not allow the use of Internet in a child's bedroom. While this may be appropriate for younger children, it gets more difficult as children get older. Many families also own laptop computers and so the specific location varies depending on the day or time of use. Each family needs to negotiate their "place of use" for the AUP. Some families have result to more general rules such as, "The Internet can only be accessed when someone else is in the same room as the computer being used." Again, this may not work for every family, but is an example of how rules can be developed to meet the need of the family with which you work.

Privacy

Most AUPs will have some direction about providing personal information to others online. As a therapist you will need to verify that each family member understands what "personal information" is so they do not inadvertently break the rule. For example, would the parent consider what city their child lives in to be personal information? What would the eight year old family member think? How about the 16 year old in the family? Helping the family operationalize the AUP is part of the therapists' task, to ensure that everyone is working from the same definitions.

The other common rule in an AUP for the family to discuss is respecting others' privacy. This may be other people online, so the AUP guideline would state not to request personal information about other people while online. The AUP may also address the privacy of the family members themselves. For example, is it acceptable for siblings in the family to logon to one another's account? These are all issues for the family to consider and discuss with you as mediator.

Meeting Others Online and Offline

This is a critical item in the AUP. Part of developing the AUP with the family is to allow the parents to express their concerns regarding their children's online use. This fear usually tops the list, and giving the family the time and place to discuss this rule will help make clear that this is one rule that could have dire consequences outside of the family if it is violated. As with other components, the family needs to develop an AUP rule that clearly communicates their concerns and wishes for its members. Some families simply have an absolute rule to never meet anyone in the real world that you have only met online, while others establish parameters around meeting people. For example, family members can only meet people in the real world that they met online in a public place and they must take along a parent for the first meeting. Your job will be to help the family decide what is in their best interest.

Respectful Communication

There is a term for the way you are to communicate and behave on the Internet, it is called "netiquette." The AUP should include an item which follows discussion about the way you treat others online. Online bullying and harassment is on the rise, and the family

should clearly indicate their attitudes, values, and beliefs about their expectations of its members while online. It is easy to say and do things online that you would not normally say or do, so the family needs to be clear that the same expectations for how to treat others in the real world, applies to the online world. This is also a good rule for younger children. The earlier you can communicate this, the less likely it will be a problem when they are teenagers online.

Blocking/Filtering/Monitoring

If the family plans to use blocking or monitoring software, it is important to disclose this fact in the AUP. As the mediator, you may also have to process this through with the teenage children, but regardless of the outcome, if blocking/monitoring will occur, the family members should be aware of it ahead of time. This may also help prevent curious behaviors that would otherwise have gone unchecked. Blocking software works best with younger children, but each family must decide if, how, and when they will use such software. At a minimum, the AUP should give the parents the right to check the browsing history and other information on any family member's account at any time. Blocking and monitoring software works best when each family member has their own separate account, since the software can be customized by user. In general, it is good practice to have each member establish their own login account for the computer.

Username, Passwords and Buddy Lists

A typical AUP rule is that all usernames and passwords must be disclosed to the parents. This would allow the parents to login to accounts owned by their family members. This item would also include communicating any username/password changes to the parents immediately. Another AUP issue is a family members creation of a new online account. The family should discuss whether prior permission is needed to create such new accounts.

Unacceptable Activities

There may be specific areas of the Internet or other uses of technology that the family wishes to designate as unacceptable. Examples may include restricted use of social networking sites such as MySpace or Facebook, the use of YouTube, text/photo messaging on cell phones, downloading and installing programs without permission, buying or selling items online, etc. Each family will decide these for themselves based on their experiences.

What to do if...

An important section of the AUP should address how family members should respond if the AUP is violated accidentally. For example, if pornography would appear in a popup window, the family member should know what the expectation is for reporting such an even to the parents. The role of the therapist is to help the parent anticipate such events and determine the best way to handle the situation when it occurs. Preparing parents not to overreact when the child does the right thing is important part of this AUP item. A child must feel they have permission to talk to their parent when something online makes them uncomfortable.

Consequences

Even with the best of intentions, the AUP will be violated by family members. The therapist can help parents determine appropriate consequences, but it should be clear in the AUP that consequences will be given if the AUP is violated and they will become increasingly more significant if repetitive violations occur. In determining the consequence, it is important to consider the developmental level of

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the child who violated, which AUP rule was violated, and what would be a natural consequence that would help teach the child to not violate the AUP again in the future. Most teens report they do not tell their parents about things that happen online because they fear losing their Internet access. Taking the computer/Internet access away should be reserved for serious infractions and/or repetitive violations.

Concluding Statements

As you help the family conclude the AUP, several important things should be incorporated and written directly into the AUP. First, the AUP should not just be about accessing the Internet through a home computer, but can be expanded to include other technologies, such as a cell phone, ipod, or other mobile device. Second, the family should be reminded that this is the AUP for the individual and the household. If they are at a friend's house, the AUP applies to them, and if a friend is in the family home, the AUP applies to the friend. The use of technology in a family should be presented as a privilege, not an expectation. Privileges can and should be removed if they are not handled responsibly. Finally, the therapist can remind the family that the AUP is an evolving document and may need to be revisited often, especially early on, as the family learns more about one another's technology use and behavior.

Signature

Once the AUP is developed, it should be signed by the respective parties so that everyone makes it official. As the therapist, you may even want to sign as a witness to the document. After it is agreed on and signed, multiple copies should be made for each party of the agreement. You may also want to encourage the family to post the AUP near the computer, but if not, it should be easily accessible to the family in case it needs reviewed.

Other Considerations

As you help a family consider their Acceptable Use Policy, it will be important to give each member equal time discussing what they like about the Internet and what rules should be included in the AUP. The more everyone is involved, the more invested they will be at following the AUP. Keep in mind, the family may need more than one AUP depending on the developmental levels of the children. No one is too young to be included. The Internet is often introduced to preschoolers. If they can talk and walk, they should be included in the process and develop their own AUP. It may help to give the family an assignment to independently brainstorm some rules that you could discuss in a session. If there are large developmental differences, it may be necessary to hold separate family meetings. You do not want the five year old to listen to the rules about pornography for the teens in the family.

In families with older children, do not forget to highlight that some behaviors online are not just family rules, but are also illegal. Downloading copyrighted songs, harassment/bullying, or sending sexual photos can all be grounds for legal action. The teens need to understand the risk they would take if they were to engage in such behavior.

Finally, adults in the family need to lead by example. An AUP should be developed specifically for the adults. For example, if the adults in the family check email during dinner or family time, perhaps one rule should be to not allow such behavior. It is an opportunity for the adult in the family to demonstrate how setting limits with technology is necessary.

Resources for developing AUPs

- <http://www.safefamilies.techmission.org/> — SafeFamilies. Christian, good resource on developing AUPs, etc.
- <http://www.childnet-int.org/kia/parents/cd/> — Childnet International. Create a Family Agreement step by step.
- <http://www.fosi.org/resources/parents/> — Family Online Safety Institute. List of multiple resources, directory, porn, bullying, addiction, etc.
- <http://www.safekids.com/kidsrules.htm> — Safe Kids. Sample, printable kids rule sheet.
- <http://www.connectsafely.org/> — Connect Safely. Lots of good information on technology in general including cell phone, Internet, etc.
- <http://www.cybersmart.org/> — resources for educators and parents, full downloadable curriculum with worksheets, case scenarios, etc.
- <http://www.filterreview.com/> — resources for finding the best blocking/filtering software to meet your family needs.

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References