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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 will continue to decrease. Wolak, Mitchell and Finkelhor (2007) reported 34 percent of children have been exposed to unwanted online sexual material. Most of these reports were made by children ages 13 – 17, but a sizable number of reports was also made by children ages 10 – 11. In addition to the sexual issues children face online, there are other issues such as cyber-bullying. An estimated 42 percent of children say they have been bullied via technology; many report multiple abuses (iSafe, 2008). All of these numbers are staggering, but even more problematic is how best to protect 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. While this threat cannot be dismissed, ssues such as cyber-bullying, online gambling, pornography, compulsive spending, compulsive gaming, illegal downloading, etc., place children and their families in a significant amount of trouble and risk for developing emotional, social, and legal problems.

Over the past several years, an increasing amount of attention has been paid to keeping children safe on the Internet. Numerous curriculums have been developed for schools; many law enforcement agencies offer free seminars on the topic, and parents are raising their own awareness about the problems associated with children online. However, even with all the efforts being made, there still is much to teach adults and children about the pitfalls of the Internet. For example, many families believe that installing blocking/filtering software provides a failsafe way of protecting their children while online. This software is not 100 percent effective, nor is home the only place where children are using the Internet. The best prevention strategy 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., psychologists, counselors, family therapists, etc) on how best to assist families in 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 the creation of an acceptable use policy (AUP) should be discussed with a family. *These include the following:*

- Increasing numbers of children are developing addictions to the Internet and computer. The AUP becomes a first defense by establishing boundaries early in the child's life. 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 helping professional 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 this divide. 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 children a chance to "teach" their parents and the helping professional about technology. This process also provides a great deal of data about children's thoughts, feelings, attitudes, and behaviors while online.
- The Internet is such an integral part of a child's 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 helping professional to assess both the role of technology in each family member's life as well as the effectiveness of the family's ability to work together towards a common goal.

Acceptable Use Policy Components

It is impossible to outline "the" single AUP that will serve all purposes. Hodges and Worona (1996) proposed the AUP should have six basic components: (1) *a statement to explain the reason for the policy*, (2) *a statement about what the policy covers*, (3) *a list of the family members covered by the policy*, (4) *specific examples of inappropriate behavior*, (5) *instructions on how to report a violation*, and (6) *information regarding potential consequences for violations*. The following section will explore the common components of an AUP. These components can then provide discussion points for the helping professional and family as they begin to establish rules regarding the use of technology.

Preamble

Developing an AUP preamble includes working with the family to develop several sentences that answers the question, "Why do we need an agreement about using the Internet?" Their answer should be developed into the first paragraph of the AUP to outline and remind everyone of the spirit of the document. 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" the family should address. The first is what will be the acceptable times of day that computer/Internet use will be permitted. Families may want to separate computer use from Internet use, but specific times should be established and enforced for both. 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 are no absolute right and wrong times. This is where your facilitation as a helping professional can assist the family in exploring the needs of each family member and negotiate the times, knowing they can be revised in a future meeting.

The other issue is the location of the computer. Many AUPs forbid the use of the Internet in a child's bedroom. While this may be appropriate for younger children, it becomes 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. For example, some families incorporate general rules such as, "The Internet can only be accessed when someone else is in the same room as the computer being used." This may not work for every family.

Privacy

Most AUPs will have some direction about providing personal information to others online. As a helping professional you will need to verify that each family member understands what "personal information" is to prevent them from inadvertently breaking the rule. For example, would the parent consider what city their child lives in to be personal information? What would the eight-year-old or the 16-year-old family member think? Helping the family define the terminology used in the AUP is part of the process to ensure that everyone is working from the same understanding.

The AUP should also have rules in regard to other's online privacy. This may be defined in terms of not requesting personal information from others while online, or related to the privacy of the family members themselves. For example, is it acceptable for siblings in the family to log on to each other's accounts? These are all issues for the family to consider and discuss with the helping professional as mediator.

Meeting Others Online and Offline

A child arranging to meet people offline through the Internet 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. The fear that a child will arrange to meet a stranger they only know from the Internet is usually at the top of the list. Giving the family the time and place to discuss this rule will help clarify the fears and potential consequences associated with meeting unknown people from the Internet. As with other components, the family needs to develop an AUP rule that clearly communicates their concerns and wishes for each member. Some families 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. The role of the helping professional will be to help the family decide what is in the family's best interest.

Respectful Communication

"Netiquette" is a term for the way you are supposed to communicate and behave on the Internet. The AUP should include "netiquette" behavior. Online bullying and harassment is on the rise, and the family should clearly indicate their attitudes, values, beliefs, and expectations of its members while online. It is easy to say and do things online that you would not say or do offline. The family needs to clarify that the manners and respect given to others in the offline world are also expectations in the online world. Communicating these things to younger children will help prevent inappropriate behaviors as they grow older and use the Internet as a teenager.

Blocking/Filtering/Monitoring

If the family plans to use blocking or monitoring software, it is important to disclose this in the AUP. As the mediator, the helping professional may need to process this decision through with older children in the family, since they may find this rule intrusive or childish. Regardless of the outcome, if blocking/monitoring will occur, all family members should be aware of it ahead of time.

Blocking/monitoring does 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 users can customize the software.

Usernames, 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 any family member. This item would also include communicating any username/password changes to the parents immediately. The family should also discuss whether prior permission is needed to create such new online accounts.

Unacceptable Activities

There may be specific areas of the Internet or other uses of technology 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. Again it is the helping professional's job to assist the family in deciding what online behaviors are considered unacceptable.

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 event to the parents. The helping professional can help the family 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" when faced with a violation is an important part of the AUP. Parents should convey they are open to discuss various encounters online, even if it is something that makes the child or adult uncomfortable.

Consequences

Even with the best of intentions, family members will violate the AUP, and the helping professional can help parents determine appropriate consequences. It should be clear in the AUP that consequences will be given if the AUP is violated and that they will become increasingly more significant if repetitive violations occur.

In determining the consequence, it is important to consider: (a) *the developmental level of the child*, (b) *which AUP rule was violated*, and (c) *what would be a natural consequence that would help the child understand the seriousness of the violation*. Most children 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 for extended periods of time should be reserved for serious infractions and/or repetitive violations.

Concluding Statements

As the family concludes 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 family should remember 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 and agreed on, the respective parties should sign it so that everyone makes it official. The helping professional may even want to sign as a witness to the document. Multiple copies should be made for each party of the agreement. The family should also post the AUP near the computer, and have extra copies available in case it needs to be reviewed.

Other Considerations

When helping a family create their Acceptable Use Policy, it is 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. A family may also 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. Large developmental differences may necessitate separate family meetings.

For families with older children, helping professionals should 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. Children need to understand the consequences they may face 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 and applies to all family members.

Conclusions

Technology use among children requires clinicians to approach families from a new paradigm — one that acknowledges how technologies can create, escalate, and exacerbate difficulties in the family. Typically, technology related issues are not addressed in treatment unless they are part of the family's presenting problem. However, given the omnipresence of technology in families, a more proactive and preventive approach, even for families who do not present with technology related issues, is a necessity.▼

Resources for developing AUPs

- SafeFamilies: http://www.safefamilies.techmission.org — A Christian based website with good information for all groups on developing an AUP and other information relevant to keeping kids safe online.

- Childnet International: http://www.childnet-int.org/kia/parents/cd — Includes a link to allow parents to create and customize an AUP step by step by answering a series of questions.

- Family Online Safety Institute: http://www.fosi.org/resources/parents — A directory of resources related to online pornography, bullying, online addiction, and other problems facing families who are online.

- SafeKids: http://www.safekids.com/kidsrules.htm — A variety of kid safety tips, including a sample AUP to print out.

- Connect Safely: http://www.connectsafely.org — Information on general technology uses, including the cell phone, Internet, etc. and how to help kids connect safely.

- CyberSMART: http://www.cybersmart.org — A full curriculum for educators and parents to help educate kids about Safety, Manners, Advertising, Research, and Technology. Free and includes case vignettes and downloadable worksheets.

- FilterReview: http://www.filterreview.com — Information and user ratings for many of the popular Internet blocking and filtering software.

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