The Need To Protect Young Children On Internet

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INTRODUCTORY NOTE

Moderator,
Colleague Panellists,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today, I would like to share with you, a research study conducted by my organisation, in Mauritius, on the need to protect young children on Internet.

ABOUT MAURITIUS

Before starting I would like to give a brief overview about Mauritius.

The Republic of Mauritius is a group of islands in the South West of the Indian Ocean, consisting of the main island of Mauritius, Rodrigues and several outer islands. The total land area is around 2000 square kilometers.

Economic and social change has been rapid and transformed the society from a mono crop agricultural society to a modern economy where information technology is expected to be a very dominant feature. The vision of the country is to transform Mauritius into a cyber island and knowledge hub in the region.

Information technology involving the use of computers is a feature of contemporary modern societies. The Millennium Development Goals which provide the blue print for the development of a better world targets at making available new technologies to the population specially information and communication technology.

THE ORGANISATION

Internet Child Safety Foundation (ICSF) is an organ which looks after the safety of children on the Internet. ICSF is a subsidiary organ of Halley Movement which is a Non Governmental Organization working to promote child and family welfare in Mauritius. Of key concern to both organizations is the issue of children's well being while they are surfing the Internet.

CHILDREN IN MAURITIUS

There exists an enormous amount of web sites for children of all ages. It is not always easy to find its way on the Internet amongst the hundreds of thousands of websites, especially for a child. The proliferation of computer technology has obviously enhanced our lives in many ways, such as enabling improved productivity and efficiency at work, school, and home. Anyone with access to a computer and modem or a broadband connection has unparalleled recreational and educational opportunities. Many services for citizens can be accessed through the Internet saving time and displacement costs.

THE INTERNET AND ITS USE BY THE YOUNG POPULATION

With respect to children, the Internet can be very enhancing for the development of children as it is able to open up vast realms of knowledge and information. The Internet offers a rich resource of learning and recreation for children, providing opportunities to pursue interests, solve problems, communicate with peers from around the world, and discover new and detailed information as the

websites are constantly revised for improvements. Computer aided learning in schools is also beneficial for creativity in children.

INAPPRORIATE CONTENT ON INTERNET

However, not all information made available through the Internet is child and youth friendly and serving the interest of the child.

1. First, there is so much information and children may not be able to manage and interpret correctly in the absence of guidelines and support.

2. Secondly, there are also concerns about the content of material as children may innocently come across, or deliberately download unsuitable or even dangerous material such as pornographic items and violent material.

3. Even more worrying is the fact that criminals too are using modern technology to prey on victims and children being a very vulnerable group are at greater risks. Computers and Internet have made the predator's job easier.

Historically, child predators usually approached their victims in public places where children tend to gather such as schoolyards, playgrounds, and similar public places.

Today, with so many children online, the Internet provides predators a new place – cyberspace - to target children for criminal activities and exploitation. Therefore, as the ICT sector develops, proactive action should urgently be devised and incorporated for protection of consumers, particularly vulnerable ones like our children.

DANGER ONLINE

Having access to a wide range of information on the Internet, children may be exposed to inappropriate content including pornography, violence, and language. This may come in the form of pictures and text. Another source of trouble is harassment. Other young people or adults may send offending material, lots of junk mail or just be a nuisance.

Harmful and inappropriate material can come from anywhere on the Internet examples can be in the form of an e-mail or instant message, in chat rooms, bulletin boards, or news groups.

SHOWCASE OF INTERNET CHILD SAFETY FOUNDATION EXPERIENCE

The study conducted by ICSF attempted to learn about how children and young persons are using the Internet and the benefits as well as the risks the Internet presents to young Internet users.

Children in all regions of Mauritius are using ICT and accessing the Internet. The Research shows that the surveyed population enjoyed a considerable amount of privacy in the use of Internet at home. This situation constitutes a risk when children are permitted access to the Internet without any guidance and controls from parents and teachers.

The use of home computers by children is going to increase significantly in the light of the social and economic development of Mauritius. More children in the future are expected to have access to personal computers at home with Internet access. With the availability of easy loan facilities provided by the Government, we can expect more home owners to possess a personal computer with internet access.

As children are likely to have an upper hand in the knowledge of new technologies compared to the parents, proactive measures are called for to prevent the harm to children and young Internet users through both parental education and controlled-access software.

The findings from this research affirm that 29.6% of respondents had a computer located in the bedroom. If parents allow their children to have the computer in their bedroom or private area, and with the increasing use of laptop computers, it can be predicted that many more children are going to have considerable privacy while using the Internet. This will make it more and more difficult for parents to monitor their children while the latter are accessing the internet.

Those with Internet access spend considerable time on the Internet. The Report shows that the time range spent on Internet varied from three hours to five hours daily. Spending three to five hours a day on the Internet reduces the time for socialization and communication between parents and children. In absence of policy guidelines to advise parents on how much time their children may use the Internet, children are browsing the Internet at their free will without any limitation on hours to be spent.

Parents can only intervene if they are made aware of the risks their children are exposed to and without any skill of Internet, children are using the Internet without any control. This finding can be used as a basis to do further research and develop guidelines for parents.

Children are using the Internet for entertainment which includes games, movies and music. However, as the Internet is not a universal household item, limited number of children has recourse to such kind of entertainment. There is a danger in over reliance on the Internet which can produce sedentary lifestyle and present health risks.

The research shows that the favourite Internet activity of young internet users interviewed relates to downloading music and games. It has therefore been shown the Internet is used by children both for educational and recreational purposes. As a result, cyber criminals are aware of those sites which children visit frequently and consequently they develop strategies to entice them through recreational programs.

The findings have revealed that most users had adequate skills for accessing computers and Internet. However, the younger users had less skills compared to the grown up. It can therefore be concluded that the younger children are more exposed to risks and should be better protected by their parents and teachers. In consequence, those parents and teachers should themselves be educated on the risks and precautionary measures.

Around 45% of children and young people stated that they informed their parents about their activity online and friends they made through the Internet. Even if there is a slight parent involvement in their kids interest on the Internet, this is not enough as a proactive measures compared to the kind of information and websites available.

OUTCOME, SUCCESSES AND CONSTRAINTS OF CIVIL SOCIETY'S PROGRAMS

Child victimization through the Internet is complex. The full impact of such victimization on children is not fully understood. Children cannot easily comprehend legal and safety issues. A child's ability to acknowledge and accept the crime can be linked to family values, peer pressure, and feelings of guilt, shame, and embarrassment. Denial and recantation can be common among children who unwittingly participated in the crime. Given these realities, it is a challenge for law enforcement and victim service professionals to identify the victims, protect privacy and provide intervention to reduce harm and prevent further victimization.

Until more knowledge is gathered about Internet crime and its effects on victims, law enforcement and victim service professionals will continue working on Internet child exploitation using the tactics and standard approaches that have proved effective for working with other types of child victims.
The Internet will remain a positive force in our society to the extent that people use this technology in responsible ways. Being responsible about Internet means that a user will not allow the cyberworld to steal their time and energies away from other more critical aspects of life including family interaction and obligations, marriages and other committed relationships, health maintenance activities, commitments related to work and education.

THE WAY FORWARD

The examination and analysis of the data collected during the survey, has indeed revealed that Internet has an impact on our children. Should we allow our children to surf the internet without supervision and guidelines, the internet will no doubt have more adverse bearing on them. Internet Child Safety Foundation therefore comes up with the following policies.

1. Prevent the risk from manifesting by creating awareness through information

The findings from the Research have affirmed that the Internet in Mauritius does present risks for the child and young persons. Children need to be protected. Awareness of these risks needs to be understood in the first instance. The ICT companies selling computers and the computer software companies do not provide any information at all on the risks present on the Internet to internet users especially children. It is desirable that the companies should show social responsibility and provide adequate information to buyers or subscribers of Internet Service at point of purchase.

This will ensure, to some extent that parents are made aware of the dangers that can be found online and inform them of the assistance the ISP's or ICT companies can provide to this end. Another possibility is that Internet Child Safety Foundation and other stakeholders provide brochures which would be distributed to individuals for every purchase of a computer and subscription to Internet service. Given that Internet Child Safety Foundation has already devised posters informing about hazards online and providing basic guidelines to those faced with risks, a copy of the poster may be easily be made available to each home owners having a personal computer connected to the Internet.

2. Support services for parents and guardians.

Guided use of computers should form part of parental education programs. Parents need to be educated on the types of sites that are harmful to children. Parents are to be made informed of the various strategies used by cybercrime organizations to lure victims. ICT and software development companies have a duty to society to prevent harm. Hotline services can also be initiated which will provide parents and children with assistance via the phone on how to cope with dangers they met online. This allows children to contact experts and cyber guides without the need to worry about identity.

3. Code of ethics on the use of Internet.

The International Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) requires public policy to uphold and ensure that the best interest of the child are upheld at all times. Clearly granting unlimited freedom to Internet companies and software program developers overlooks this principle. The Internet must also be rendered as a space that is child and youth friendly and safe for young persons. The Internet is not a safe place for the child without parental supervision. Internet service providers need to come up with family and child friendly features. Usually these are not provided or where it is provided, it requires technical skill to use them and are provided at additional costs to the consumer. In Mauritius, the general public is not familiar with such services or features. A policy directing such requirements will serve for the way forward for action in this context.

4. Strengthen research

The ICT sector is fast expanding and increasingly children are accessing the services from various locations and at times from their mobile phones. Collecting information and data on children's use of the Internet is essential in order to identify the patterns and behaviours of children. Civil Society organizations and researchers should strengthen similar and more extensive research like this one that can be used as evidence for policy development and set the ground for a legal framework.

5. Building partnerships for child safety online

The risk of harm to children through the Internet requires a collaborative approach with multiple sector partners. Service providers, civil society organizations, and the community have to work together to develop a strong partnership to report, monitor and initiate action against harm and risks to children.

CONCLUSION

The call for protection of children online necessitates realistic programmes, policies and implementation measures at the national level.