



Techno Nasties

- What are children being exposed to on the Internet?
 - And how do they feel about it?



1. Child Abuse through Technology

On 1 and 2 June 2008, the National Symposium on preventing the Sexual Abuse and Child Exploitation through Combating Child Pornography was held at Gallagher Estate in Midrand. The theme of the Symposium was ***Cyberwise: Creating a child safe Information Communication Technology environment (ICT)***.

This Symposium sought to highlight a serious issue facing youth everywhere, namely sexual abuse. The dreadful case of Sheldean Human, a 7-year-old girl who was raped and murdered in Pretoria, has recently cast the spotlight in South Africa on sexual abuse of children. However, very little attention has been paid to another form of child sexual abuse, namely non-contact sexual abuse. This involves exposing children (either deliberately or inadvertently) to sexually-explicit materials. And the Internet is clearly a danger area as far as this is concerned.

Even inadvertent exposure to adult-oriented material is an unacceptable invasion of a child's right to childhood innocence, especially since the impact of this sort of exposure on a child is likely to be the same regardless of whether the exposure was deliberate or inadvertent.

It's not just about pornographic pop-ups either: sexual predators can make more direct approaches on children through the media of chat rooms and cellphone, where seemingly sympathetic friends "groom" children and obtain their trust.

2. Are SA youth at risk of non-contact sexual abuse? (BratTrax® 2007/8)

Yes, they are, for the following reasons:

- *Razor Wire Culture*: a prevailing atmosphere of fear and insecurity, because of the high levels of crime in South Africa, means that South African children are being found increasingly in indoor "safe zones." This fosters sedentary as opposed to physical activity, and many of these sedentary activities centre around information communication technology – cellphones and Internet.
- The 7-15 year-old child in South Africa is in the middle of a *media, technology and telecommunications explosion*, and these factors have a significant impact on young people. The BratTrax® 2007/8 study shows that young people are interacting with the media, technology and telecommunications to a greater extent than previously.
- Technology is the domain of the youth, and many have an insatiable desire to be "*connected all the time*", as well as to be informed up-to-the-minute about their favourite celebrities. Tweens and teens often report feeling lost without their technological items, particularly cellphones.
- *Lots of time is being spent online*: BratTrax ® 2007/8 has shown that on average, 7-15 year-old PC users spend approximately 91 minutes on the PC per visit, while Internet users spend around 79 minutes online per visit. Although Internet penetration at present is more prevalent in LSM 8-10 (32%) than in LSM 5-7 (7%), it is likely to increase as more and more cellphone handsets enable Internet access.



3. What is the situation?

In 2007/8, Youth Dynamix, in conjunction with the Film and Publications Board, conducted a study into tweens and early teens' (10-15 year-olds) access to communication technology, with a focus on the incidence and impact of exposure to non-contact sexual abuse of children. The study also explored parents' knowledge of their children's use of communication technology, as well as general awareness of both children and parents regarding the procedures to follow after exposure.

The study found that:

- **Internet:**
 - 22% of the Internet users reported having seen something on the internet that had upset them or made them feel uncomfortable.
 - More girls and 10-12 year-olds reported having seen something upsetting online.
 - Upsetting content mostly involved sexual content (31%), and nudity (28%).
- **Chat rooms:**
 - 14% of the chat room users had been exposed to upsetting content in a chat room, including 22% of the girls who were chat room users.
 - This mostly involved an unwanted approach of a sexual nature (62%).
- **Email:**
 - 7% of the Internet users had viewed upsetting content in an email.
 - The content in question was mostly violent (21%) or sexual (18%).
- **Cellphone:**
 - 12% of the cellphone users had seen distressing content on a cellphone.
 - This mostly comprised unwanted sexual approaches (33%) and foul language (14%).



What cannot be ignored is that the number of children reporting exposure to upsetting content is not necessarily an indication of the total number who had been exposed to sexual content or solicitation. Many others may have experienced similar exposure but did not report finding the material upsetting; however, it has been shown that exposure to pornography actually has serious implications for a child's socio-emotional wellbeing and sexual adjustment.

The children who participated in this study reported that exposure to sexual content, nudity and unwanted sexual approaches resulted in feelings of discomfort, sadness, revulsion, fear, shock, anger and embarrassment. The effects of exposure were shown to linger long after the exposure, and there was much fear of social censure, particularly from adults and peers.

64% of the sample felt that the use of the Internet by children of their age should be regulated or controlled, while 60% of the sample felt the same way about the use of cellphones.

It was very noteworthy that children whose exposure to upsetting sexual content had occurred while they were alone, had more difficulty in understanding and coming to terms with what they had seen. The violation of their personal space through a medium viewed as a personal friend was also particularly distressing to the children.

4. What can be done?

There are organisations that specialise in helping people through trauma; contact these as soon as possible and encourage your children to do the same if they are not comfortable talking to you about this very sensitive subject matter.

1. Film & Publications Board Hotline (0800 148 148)
2. Childline (08000 55 555)
3. South African Police Service (10111)

- **Set up your home Internet to block pop-ups**
- **If possible, accompany your child when they are online**
- **Speak to your children and empower them to reject unwanted approaches and sexual content**
- **Tell your children they can inform you about disturbing Internet or cellphone content without you becoming upset with them**
- **If your child has been exposed to distressing content online, particularly sexual content, DO NOT blame the child – he/she is already feeling traumatized by something he/she was not ready to deal with**