

Education

Online risks balanced by opportunities

Young people need help to recognise the dangers themselves and avoid coming to harm

Joanne Phyfer & Patrick Burton

For many parents, young people's enthusiastic use of technologies such as cell-phones and the internet is a worry. South African youth, even those who live in underprivileged circumstances, are keen users of information and communications technologies (ICTs) but the risks attached to chatting online, or maintaining a social presence online, are commonly recognised.

These can include a loss of innocence through exposure to disturbing, distressing or pornographic content, meeting strangers with potentially dubious motives, being bullied or harassed by peers and a loss of privacy or worse through

"sexting" romantic partners.

At times, taking such risks can have serious, often unanticipated, consequences. For example, under current legislation young people can be found guilty of distributing child pornography simply by sending a revealing picture to a girlfriend or boyfriend. Similarly, strangers met online could be sexual or violent predators.

Many parents wish to limit these risks and attempt to control young people's use of ICTs. But there is growing evidence that attempting to prevent children's exposure to risks and to control their activities online may not be the best approach. Emerging international and local research shows that it is only in a very small percentage of cases that these risks translate into



Looking and learning: The online world provides young people with unprecedented levels of autonomy and independence at a time in their lives when they have limited measures of both. Photo: Alain Jocard/AFP

actual harm. A far more frequent consequence of these online risks is psychological trauma.

Nevertheless, there are not just risks but also opportunities to be found online. And these technologies give young people a completely unique, private and autonomous space to explore these opportunities.

Negotiating the complicated tasks of shedding childhood identity and cultivating an adult one is an important developmental stage. The online world provides young people with an array of opportunities for develop-

ing this identity and navigating their difficult teen years. Connected Dot Com, a recent national study conducted by the Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention, with Unicef SA, found that connecting with others socially was the most common motivation for young people to spend time online.

For some young people, especially isolated youngsters, this may mean meeting new people online and developing a community of online friends, which works to boost the individual's self-esteem and allows them to escape their offline context.

With the rise of social networking sites, young people also frequently maintain and enhance offline friendships online: school friends, friends who live far away, friends who don't go to the same school and family members.

Importantly, online spaces allow children to connect socially in a way that is now often precluded offline, largely because of the much greater time constraints on them and concerns for their safety when they meet socially in public spaces.

In brief, online engagement provides young people with increased opportunities to foster a sense of belonging and wellbeing, and boosts their self-esteem — and it also offers opportunities for them to improve their offline social life.

Indeed, there is an increasingly false distinction between the online and offline worlds, with children crossing from one to the other and back again seamlessly.

This expanded social interaction may be crucial for the maintenance of a healthy self-esteem and the development of an adaptive adult identity; and by not getting involved in this online interaction, young people are excluded from an increasingly important social arena.

Along with developing a healthy social life, the online world also provides young people with increased opportunities for experimenting with identity and expanding their knowledge base. For those who do not "fit in", it is an opportunity to explore other forms of identity.

Most crucially, spending time using ICTs provides adolescents with invaluable skills and knowledge of technologies that will be indispensa-

ble in future employment contexts as well as in everyday life.

There is no doubt that in exploring these possibilities young people must navigate risky situations — but this is not a bad thing. Navigating risks and opportunities adaptively is essential later in life, and in managing their social lives and identity online young people are learning and practising these crucial skills.

This does not mean that children are inherently safe online or that parents and caregivers shouldn't keep one eye on an adolescent's behaviour and mood at all times, as indicators of negative online experiences. Rather, it suggests that preventing young people from being active online for safety reasons may cause them to miss out on crucial learning opportunities.

The online world provides young people with unprecedented levels of autonomy and independence at a time in their lives when they have limited measures of both. It provides young people with an opportunity to develop a unique sense of identity when they are used to being defined by their families.

Being provided with the freedom and privacy to develop their social skills and identity by the online world as well as being exposed to the broader world through this medium allows young people to learn to take responsibility for themselves in a way they may not yet have had to offline.

It follows that the key is not to avoid risk but harm itself. Instead of teaching young people to avoid all risk and stay offline, the way to deal with online risks is to engage with young people to build their capacity to act responsibly online and to respond to risks when encountered.

In this way, young people will be able to recognise risks themselves and manage them appropriately to avoid being harmed. The Connected Dot Com research (in full at cjcp.org.za), along with other international research, found that young people seem to be aware of risks and the appropriate ways to avoid them. Although there is much harm out there, young people seem to be capable of learning to avoid it and, in so doing, benefit greatly from the opportunities the online world affords them.

During Child Protection Week, we should consider how we work to protect children online — not by shielding them, but by helping them to develop the capacity to deal with risks they might encounter.

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