Effect of Internet on Child Development

Tumla Shrestha, MN
Maharajgunj Nursing Campus

Abstract

Internet is a source of information and new means of communication which empower individuals to share limitless amounts of information to a wide audience almost instantly and provide means for social interaction with people. Study (CWIN, 2008) shows that children also are the consumers of internet. Although internet has created information revolution especially in urban areas, its easy access may have lead to some risks to children like exposure to inappropriate information, child pornography, cyber bullying etc. In one hand, children and adolescents are misusing or abusing it rapidly, many parents may not be fully aware of the situation. The legislative provision of child cyber safety by government are inadequate and public are not much aware about it. It is still not being late to protect the children and adolescents from risk of internet and there are various measures to protect the children from it. This article aims to provide information to concerned personnel about the internet, its positive and negative effects, and how to promote the children and adolescents' proper utilization of internet.

Introduction

Internet in itself is a neutral medium that provides access to enormous amounts of information and many new forms of communication which empower individuals to share limitless amounts of material to a wide audience almost instantly and provide means for people to create places within which they socially interact. Now internet is making its entrée into daily life of (urban) Nepal. According to a study conducted by CWIN in 2008, 82.8% of 1,500 respondents, who were school children in Kathmandu Valley, used the Internet. Among the children using internet, 74% were girls and 91% were boys. Similarly, 94.7% students from private schools and 58.3% from public schools used the internet (CWIN, 2010). The possibilities for Nepali children to reach into cyberspace will increase significantly also through the use of mobile phones.

Effects

There are positive as well as negative effects of internet in children.

Positive Effects

Childhood is the period of exploration. The computer and the Internet offer children a powerful device that, if used appropriately, can enhance the development of the child's physical, cognitive, and social skills. The Internet is a powerful tool that is revolutionizing children's learning, communication and play.

Physical Development

Regular Internet usage would naturally enhance a child's eye-hand coordination and fine motor skills due to keyboard and mouse usage.

Cognitive Development

Children who use the Internet show gains in cognitive abilities such as memory, spatial and logical problem solving, critical thinking, concentration, abstraction and comprehension. The Internet exposes children to information to improve the quality of learning that they can transform into knowledge.

Social Development

The Internet cannot and should not replace human interaction or relationships, nor take the place of activities such as sharing verbal conversations with our children or reading

together. However, if properly used, the Internet can serve as a medium for acceptable social interaction. The Internet allows children to socialize with other children through the use of email, chat rooms, and instant messaging, increasing the development of communication and social skills.

Often the use of Internet in classrooms allows the children to work together, encouraging the sharing of ideas and cooperative learning. Students that find conventional methods of learning difficult will frequently find learning via the Internet.

Besides being used as an educational tool, the Internet also provides entertainment. Children can use it to find inspiration stimulate the imagination, explore the world, meet others and gain new experiences. The process is known as play. Play has its own pursuit of amusement, competition, and companionship - all which can be fulfilled on the Internet. Though it cannot replace physical social play, the Internet offers unique alternatives, which are especially important for those that are physically disabled and unable to engage in physical play.

When children are online, they're reading, thinking, analyzing, criticizing and authenticating - composing their thoughts. They use the technology to play, learn, communicate and form relationships as children always have.

Negative Effects
Easy access of internet has made children vulnerable to different risks. Experts warn that increasing Internet use by children in urban centers of Nepal has increased the danger of their abuse through this new medium. It is the time to consider the consequences of growing internet access for children and adolescents. While most industrialized western countries woke up to recognize the possible dangers for children only after severe damage was done, we might be able to protect Nepali children better, if we act right now and learn from the experience of those countries.

Besides the countless benefits we are experiencing, Internet is also a place where children can be seriously harmed due to several factors. *Firstly*, Internet is to a large extent, used also by people who exploit children, like pornographers and child traffickers. Because children make unsupervised use of the net, it is easier for the exploiters to reach children. *Secondly*, there is little to no ethical control on the internet content, which makes it possible for children to encounter all kind of images/ messages that are inappropriate or thoroughly harmful for them. *Thirdly*, the social interactions in virtual settings often differ from those in the real world, especially with lower moral standards, and can have a profound impact on forming children's and young people's attitudes and personalities.

Children and young people adapt to rapid change in the world of Internet much faster than adults, which makes it difficult for parents and teachers to monitor online activities of children. As well as, due to the newness of Internet in Nepal, the majority of Nepali adults know nothing or very little about the possible risks for children online. While parents imagine their children are safe at home, in reality they are thrown into the virtual world completely unprotected. The laws and ethical standards that govern our daily behaviour often do not apply to the virtual world and, as a consequence, every child's right can be violated. It calls for great individual, corporate, and government responsibility to keep children safe. Otherwise Internet may cause an unimaginable slide of norms and values.

What are the risks?
1. Images of child sexual abuse (child pornography)
The Internet with all of its benefits has also significantly increased the availability of images of sexual abuse of children (pornography). The children in these images are being degraded, abused and humiliated. The huge consumption of these materials worldwide has increased sexual abuse of children.

2. Exposure to inappropriate materials
As children explore the Internet, they can come

across images and information not appropriate for them, like pornography, violence etc. They find these materials by accident or seek them out deliberately. The finding of the study done by CWIN in 2008 shows that 67% experienced abusive language 62.2% reported improper behavior on the internet (CWIN, 2010).

3. Cyber bullying

New technologies like Internet and mobile phones are increasingly used by bullies to torture by harassing, and threatening them, ranging from name-calling and physical threats to spreading rumors or sending out inappropriate images of their victims. The study done by CWIN among children in 2008 shows that 67% encountered abusive language, 67.8 percent experienced bullying and harassment (CWIN 2010). The victims of cyber bullying can feel embarrassed, upset, depressed or afraid, and as a result, their psychological wellbeing and self esteem can be seriously damaged.

4. Invasion of privacy and online fraud

Children may (innocently) share personal information (like phone number, address etc) or photographs of themselves or their family on social networking sites, when chatting or playing games or by filling registration forms. Giving out this information can put children and their family members at risk from child predators or Internet thieves.

5. File sharing abuse

Downloading and sharing files (e.g. music or videos) online can be risky. Especially the use of file sharing networks (peer to peer) might expose children to pornography and other inappropriate content or put the computer at risk of viruses.

According to Findings of the focus group discussions with Nepali children by CWIN, Save the Children and UNICEF reveals that sharing of personal details (name, age, sex, address, phone number etc) without hesitation with strangers is common among them. Pornographic images are viewed by many who use Internet (both intentionally and accidentally). Young age boys with no internet experience have viewed pornographic images in mobile phones and pen drives of friends/ brothers. Sexual advances and use of foul language are encountered by many. Parents are usually not informed about their children's online friends and experiences (CWIN, 2012).

What Are the Signs that the Child Might be at Risk of On-line?

- The child spends large amounts of time on-line, especially at night.
- Pornography is found in child's computer.
- Child turns the computer monitor off or quickly changes the screen on the monitor when somebody comes into the room.
- Child becomes withdrawn from the family.

Grounds that Call for Immediate Action in Nepal

Nepal has ratified not only the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), but also the Optional Protocol on Child Prostitution and Child Pornography.

- Information in Nepal about child safety issues in Cyberspace is inadequate and research on these issues is insufficient.
- There is very little or insignificant public or governmental awareness about the risks for children in cyberspace.
- Mechanisms adapted to protect children in cyberspace are inadequate.
- There is lack of legislation regarding this issue.

Increasing vulnerability of children is also due to the generation gap in IT knowledge and the increasing Internet connectivity.

What to Do?

The welfare and protection of children is a common responsibility for society as a whole. This includes children, adult individuals as well

as governmental, nongovernmental and commercial organizations. Therefore, all concerned stakeholders should work together in a joined effort to ensure children's right to be protected online, by investigating appropriate and timely measures.

By Children
Personal Information
Don't give out personal information (last name, home address, school name, or telephone number.

Screen Name:
When creating screen name, do not include personal information like last name or date of birth etc.

Passwords:
Don't share password with anyone except with parents. When using a public computer make sure logout of the accounts before leave.

Downloading:
Attachments sometimes contain viruses. Never open an attachment from unknown source.
Bullying:
Don't send or respond to insulting messages. If something happens online that makes feel uncomfortable, talk to parents or to a teacher at school.

Social Networking:
Many social networking websites e.g. Face book, Twitter websites have minimum age requirements to signup. These requirements are there to protect children.

Awareness and Education

- Public awareness campaigns, targeting children, parents and teachers as well as cybercafés and telecenters, both offline and online.
- Children should be educated of the safety measures and made empowered to protect themselves from online risks.
- Integration of online safety information into the educational system e.g. including safety information in the computer training at school and in the education of teachers.
- Government should initiate and encourage child friendly contents for Nepali kids.

Advocacy and collaboration

- Raise concerns and build knowledge among concerned stakeholders through continuous information, advocacy and lobbying.
- Establishment of interrelation and collaboration bodies in order to initiate and facilitate (joint) child protection measures by IT industry, telecom sector and government
- Work with the law enforcing agencies, especially the Police Office in Kathmandu, which has started Cyber Cell by providing them with orientation and technical knowledge on the issue.
- Work towards establishment and implementation of a code of conduct for cyber cafés regarding child safety

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