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PARENTS PERCEPTIONS OF THE INTERNET AND ITS EFFECTS ON THEIR
CHILDREN

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Departmental Honors Thesis
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Abstract

The Internet is a vast database filled with education, fun, and danger. Parents have a difficult time protecting their children against the dangers they can face on the Internet (e.g., cyberbullying, sexual victimization, addiction, unwanted pornography). This study's purpose was to better understand how parents perceived the Internet and also see how they understand the effects on their children's behaviors. The study was an online social media survey and had both quantitative and qualitative aspects. This study included 28 parents of children eight and older in the school system. Participant's responses were examined using measures of central tendency and grounded theory analysis. The study had three main themes: caregiver's experiences, perceived level of safety and how parents maintain that level, and community resource and support needs. These findings were discussed and compared to past research. Recommendations for future research studies, policy use, and implementations for social work practice are described and discussed.

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Literature Review

Introduction

Current school age children, often labeled the “Internet Generation,” are the first to experience a world full of information and communication technology (Valcke, 2010). Parents and children are around technology all day with work, school, and home devices. According to Borca (2015), 95% of schools currently have Internet access; however, Valcke (2010) found that 91% of primary school children do most of their Internet surfing at home. In 2000, more than half the households in the U.S. had a home computer and 40% had access to the Internet and 50% of families with children have home Internet access (Lee, 2007). Other studies, related to Internet access found that 95% of students have personal computers at home, and 66% of those students surf the Internet every day (Borca, 2015). Children have access to the Internet almost everywhere they go and use it almost every day (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010). For example, there are multiple public buildings or businesses with free Wi-Fi, and almost all schools have Internet access. Although schools may limit the sites that can be accessed by students and teachers on school Internet servers (Tennessee Department of Education, n.d.), this does not keep peers from spreading risky sites used outside of the school environment or prevent other types of risks.

Due to rapid changes in technology, parents often fall behind their children in knowledge related to the Internet. Ninety-two percent of children, compared to 62% of parents, are comfortable using the Internet (Valcke, 2010). The perception of a child’s Internet knowledge can affect parent’s view of the Internet. Valcke (2010) states that the “home guru” of the Internet is often the child. Sixty-one percent of female parents versus

38% of male parents perceive that their children are able to work the Internet completely on their own (Valcke, 2010). Sixty-six percent of parents agreed with their children (64%) that the child knows more about the Internet than the parent (Wang, 2005).

Because children often know more about the Internet than their parents, they are often at a higher risk of learning problematic Internet behaviors (e.g. visiting pornographic sites or giving out too much personal information on the Internet) or becoming victims of cyberbullying, addiction, or sexual solicitation (Guan & Subrahmanyam, 2009). The government cannot regulate the Internet due to its enormity, which leaves it up to parents to regulate their children's Internet use (Livingstone, 2008). Although there has been an increasing amount of research documenting strategies that parents could use to keep their child safe (Livingstone, 2008), there is a lack of research regarding parents' perceptions and needs of the Internet. This is especially important as technology changes regularly and becomes increasingly more complex.

Parental Monitoring and the Internet

There have been some advancements in understanding parental monitoring of the Internet and the different strategies parents use to monitor their children. Livingstone (2008) defines three broad strategies in Internet protection: (1) *namely active* is when a parent talks to their child about media content while the child engages in it; (2) *restrictive* is when a parent sets rules that restrict things like time spent or location of use; and (3) *co-viewing* is when a parent is present while the child uses the internet (Livingstone, 2008). Valcke (2010) posits that parents must adopt both maternal and symbolic roles in order to raise children as responsible "cyber citizens". Maternal roles allow parents to let their children access the Internet and devices, but do not regulate their usage (e.g.

placement of home computers: common area vs. bedrooms). Symbolic roles include establishing home Internet use rules and restrictions to create a responsible “cyber citizen” (e.g. education of the Internet through co-viewing restrictions, and Internet protection software; Valcke, 2010).

In Valcke’s (2010) study, parents reported that 37% remain present during child’s Internet surfing and 56% using filter software. On the other hand, 86% of the children of these parents recounted being free to access the Internet autonomously and 13% reported that they received Internet guidelines from parents. Wang (2005) found that 61% of parents reported monitoring their children, whereas 38% of children reported being monitored. There is a common factor that children perceive they are less monitored than parents report monitoring. However, there are reasons children feel this way. For example, children might not be aware of their parent’s oversight or children might not notice monitoring software. Warren (2002) reported that 19% of parents reported using Internet filters, two thirds reported only having computers in common rooms, one third reported using restrictions, and one fifth reported co-surfing with their children. According to the San Diego District Attorney (2015), parental monitoring tends to slow down around the age of fourteen; however, 72% of Internet-related missing child cases include youth who are age fifteen or older.

Internet Risks

Forty-five million children ages ten to 17 use the Internet (San Diego District Attorney, 2015). Of these children, one in five have been sexually solicited, one in four have encountered unwanted pornography, and 60% have been messaged by strangers (San Diego District Attorney, 2015). Most Internet risks occur in the home where

children are apt to have less supervision and structure than in other environments (Guan & Subrahmanyam, 2009). Two-thirds of parents and teenagers say that they do things on the Internet that they do not want their parents to know about (Lenhart, 2005). This issue amplifies the possible risks of the Internet. Specifically, cyberbullying, addiction, or sexual solicitation are relevant problems that children are often exposed to (Guan & Subrahmanyam, 2009). Valcke (2010) reports more statistics on the Internet by stating that 86% of children report unsafe Internet usage, and 42% of children are victims of cyberbullying/stalking.

Some risks parents associate with the Internet include, but are not limited to, inappropriate social relationships, social isolation, and the potential of becoming a victim of sexual assault (Warren, 2002). Liao (2008) says that parents tend to underestimate the number of inappropriate websites that their child views (e.g., pornographic sites) and the number or type of risky Internet behaviors their child engages in (e.g., meeting face-to-face with people from online). The Internet can have potentially harmful effects on children's social relationships and physical health as well. Warren (2002) states that the Internet can lead children to become socially isolated. Due to social media and texting, children and adults no longer have as much social interaction face-to-face because they see it as easier to say what they want behind a computer screen (Livingstone, 2008). Wang (2005) also reports that children's Internet use can lead to physical inactivity, which is associated with obesity, a huge issue in America today.

Demographic Factors and the Internet

According to Valcke (2010), education, age, and minority status are demographic characteristics that relate to Internet access in homes. These demographic characteristics

are also linked to the number and type of Internet restrictions that parents employ. Education is an important demographic factor in Internet access and restriction. Valcke (2010) found an association between parental education levels and Internet restrictions. Higher education levels were associated with more Internet restrictions and lower education levels were associated with fewer Internet restrictions (Valcke, 2010). Age is a relevant factor for both parents and children. First, younger parents often have more knowledge about the Internet and therefore use more Internet restrictions (Valcke, 2010). The opposite is true for older parents who tend to have less knowledge of the Internet and more lenient Internet restrictions (Valcke, 2010). Second, the age of the child is important when it comes to Internet restrictions. Younger children tend to have more restrictions than older children because it is expected that children become more responsible with age (Valcke, 2010). Lee (2013) also states that the parents often implement more diverse restrictive strategies on the younger child (e.g. limiting time spent online, restricting website access).

People of color and immigrant families are less likely to have Internet access in their homes (Valcke, 2010). Because minorities are more likely fall into a low socio-economic category than White families, this could also impact their Internet access and knowledge. Perrin (2015) found that minority status, living within a rural area, and being from a lower income is related to less Internet use and access. Lower use of Internet access may also relate to a lower rate of Internet knowledge, which means that parents may be less likely to regulate or monitor their child's Internet use outside the home (Valcke, 2010). There is a digital generation gap between parents and children in economically disadvantaged families, meaning that children who are exposed to the

Internet and technology at school often know more than their parents about the Internet (Clark, 2009).

Theoretical Perspective

Behavioral learning theory and ecological theory offer helpful lenses in understanding child Internet use and parent perceptions. The behavioral learning theory states that behavior is almost entirely determined through learning that takes place as a result of reinforcement of our behaviors by others or as a result of our observation of behaviors modeled by others (Skinner, 2011). Key factors in behavioral learning theory are “positive” and “negative” reinforcement (e.g. rewarding good behaviors and punishing bad; Weiler, 2005). This perspective offers insight into how children learn good Internet behaviors. Parents and adults need to reinforce positive Internet use, and in turn, stop problematic behaviors, such as through the punishment of inappropriate Internet use. For example, if a child was playing games on an educational website, the parents could allow the child more time to be on the Internet. However, if the child was playing a violent game that displayed crude scenes and nudity, the parents could take away Internet privileges for a certain amount of time.

Ecological theory views the child as having an “interlocking system” with the family, school, and government as reflected in social and economic policies (Schriver, 2011). This theory focuses on social connections between the individual and the community they are involved in (Berkes, 2008). Individuals are part of an interlocking or nested system that encompasses the microsystem, mesosystem, ecosystem, and macro system (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The family system involves their influence on Internet behaviors (e.g., good or bad), what restrictions they have in place for the child, and

conversations they have with the child about what is seen on the Internet. The school level involves what the school does to protect their students on the Internet, what rules they set, and what policies they advocate for. The government level involves larger, societal level policies put into place related to safe Internet usage, education on dangers, and protection from predators. Ecological theory also provides a framework for understanding adaptation to an environment, such as if a child were around other children that were messaging unknown people on a social media website, the child is likely to adapt their behaviors to prove that they fit into the group (Berkes, 2008). This is an important factor because children's environments often revolve around their peer group, which can highly influence their Internet behaviors.

Purpose

The purpose of this research was to explore parent's views of their child's Internet behaviors, knowledge of the Internet, attitudes toward the Internet, strategies for monitoring their children's Internet behaviors, and perceptions of support from schools and/or the community for curbing risky or problematic Internet use. The specific research questions include: (1) what have been caregivers' experiences with their child using the Internet (i.e., positive or negative experiences; concerns or problem situations; cyberbullying; etc.); (2) what level of safety does the caregiver perceive their child has and what strategies maintain or improve this level?; and (3) what resources, supports, or needs do parents have in keeping their child safe when using the Internet?

Methodology

Sample and Recruitment

Parents in Tennessee were the primary unit of analysis for the research study, and this study included 28 participants. The sample consisted primarily of females ($n = 23$; 82.1%), with an average age of 38 (range: 27-50). Other demographic characteristics are described in Table 1.

Table 1. *Demographic table (N=28)*

Variable	<i>n</i> (%)	Mean (SD)	Min	Max
Gender				
Male	5(7.9%)			
Female	23(82.1%)			
Age		38.86(5.42)	27	50
Race/Ethnicity				
White	27(96.4%)			
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	1(3.6%)			
Marital Status				
Married	24(85.7%)			
Widowed	1(3.6%)			
Divorced	2(7.1%)			
Single	1(3.6%)			
Partner/Spouse Gender				
Male	21(77.8%)			
Female	5(18.5%)			
Transgender	1(3.7%)			
Number of Children				
Employment Status				
Employed Part-time	2(7.1%)			
Employed Full-time	24(85.7%)			
Unemployed	2(7.1%)			
Household Income				
< 20,000	2(7.4%)			
20,001-40,000	3(11.1%)			
40,001-60,000	3(11.1%)			
60,001-80,000	4(14.8%)			
80,001-100,000	6(22.2%)			
>100,000	9(33.3%)			

Table 1. Continued

Variable	<i>n</i> (%)	Mean (SD)	Min	Max
Education Level				
Some College	6(21.4%)			
Associates Degree	2(7.1%)			
Bachelors Degree	4(14.3%)			
Masters Degree	13(46.4%)			
Doctorate	1(3.6%)			
Other	2(7.1%)			

Participants had to have at least one child age eight or older in the school system in order to participate in this study. Non-Tennessee residents were excluded from this study because school systems vary from state to state and the Internet rules and availability might differ, which could have created different Internet experiences or behaviors that are specific to geographic areas. The sample was purposive and word-of-mouth. Participants were recruited via Facebook and through flyers that were distributed at local churches, YMCAs, and community centers.

Data Collection

Before any data was collected, IRB approval was obtained from the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga Institutional Review Board. This was a cross-sectional, mixed-methods survey. Data was collected over approximately three months using an online survey hosted through Qualtrics. An online survey was the only format made available.

Measures

Quantitative questions. In order to explore parents' experiences and perceptions, the following closed-ended questions were asked: (1) are you comfortable using the Internet? (yes/no); (2) do you have internet access in your home? (yes/no); (3) how many hours is your child on the Internet at home?; (4) how many hours is your child on the Internet at school?; (5) how many hours are you on the Internet daily?; (6) do you have Internet

rules for your children? (yes/no); (7) does your child have access to social media?; and (8) do you feel your child is safe using the Internet? (yes/no). These questions were developed based upon previous research, as well as through consultation with the thesis advisor.

Open-ended questions. This research included open-ended questions to gain a more in-depth understanding of parent's experiences and perceptions. The open-ended research questions were developed by reviewing relevant research studies and in consultation with the thesis advisor. Questions included:

- (1) What have been your experiences with your child using the Internet (i.e., positive or negative experiences, specific scenarios, etc.)? Please include as many details as you feel comfortable sharing.
- (2) What are your main concerns about your child's Internet use (e.g., sexual victimization, viewing pornography, cyberbullying, etc.)? Please describe.
- (3) How would you describe your child's level of knowledge regarding Internet use (e.g., beginning or experienced, basic knowledge or advanced knowledge, etc.)?
- (4) Do you feel your child has more internet knowledge than you? Why do you feel that way?
- (5) What strategies do you use to keep your child safe when using the Internet? (E.g., co-viewing/co-surfing, filter/monitoring software, only allowing computers in common areas, etc.)
- (6) What are your personal views or attitudes of the Internet?
- (7) What types of support do you need from schools or the community to better protect your child?

(8) Do you have Internet rules for you children? If Yes (please describe).

(9) Does your child use social media? If yes, do you check your child's social media?

If so, what types of activity do you look for?

(10) Please describe your experiences with your children seeing inappropriate things on the internet.

(11) Why do you feel your child is safe/unsafe using the Internet?

Demographic characteristics. The following demographic characteristics were asked of each participant: gender (i.e., male, female), age, race/ethnicity (i.e., White, Black or African America, Asian, American Indian or Alaskan Native, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, or Hispanic or Latino), marital status (i.e., married, widowed, divorced, separated, or single), employment status (i.e., part-time employed, full-time employed, seasonally employed, or unemployed), household income (i.e., less than 20,000, 20,001-40,000, 40,001-60,000, 60,001-80,000, 80,001-100,000, or more than 100,000), and level of education (i.e., high school diploma, some college, Bachelors degree, Masters degree, Doctorate, or other).

Data analysis

Quantitative data (e.g., questions about level of comfort, Internet access, hour spent per day, Internet rules, inappropriate experiences, level of safety, social media access and regulation, and level of knowledge) was analyzed using descriptive statistics and measures of central tendency, specifically mean and standard deviation. Open-ended data was analyzed using grounded theory analysis to address the specific research questions about caregiver's experiences, safety levels and strategies to maintain them, and resources or supports the community can offer. Grounded theory was derived from

the study of the information it represents and was used as the method of analysis for this study (Strauss, 1990). Grounded theory begins with a relevant area of study and while analyzing the data, elements that were the most relevant emerge and become the main focus (Strauss, 1990).

Open, axial, and selective coding were the stages used in grounded theory analysis to examine the themes that emerge from the data. Open coding was the process of analyzing words, phrases, and sentences to break down, examine, compare, conceptualize, and categorize data (Strauss, 1990). This was where the researcher looked for common themes and began labeling individual phenomena that emerged from the data. Open coding used basic questions like who, when, where, what, how, how much, and why, and it also used temporal questions which are about frequency, duration, timing, and rate (Strauss, 1990). Axial coding specified the properties and dimensions of a category (Charmaz, 2006). Categories were created through common themes among the data. Selective coding was the process of selecting the core category and then relating it to the other subcategories to validate the relationships among the main categories (Strauss, 1990). The grounded theory coding process allows for organization of the analysis and created and refined theoretical links that allowed for comparisons among categories (Charmaz, 2006). One independent coder conducted the analysis; however, data and themes were discussed with the thesis advisor to decrease researcher bias. The results were mostly aligned with the questions, which made for a more clear or simple analysis.

Results

This study focused on parents perceived experiences, effects of the Internet, safety levels, and possible community supports needed. The results were analyzed through descriptive statistics, measures of central tendencies, and grounded theory analysis. Grounded theory uses the open, axial, and selecting coding to analyze participant's responses and code them into themes and sub-themes used to better understand the data (Strauss, 1990). The results also use participant examples to verify the results and are shown by having "P #'" after the example to significant which participant the quote emanates from.

Preliminary Descriptive Analyses

Participants were asked what level of comfort they had with using the Internet. The general consensus was comfortable because 22 (78.6%) participants said they were extremely comfortable, five (17.9%) were moderately comfortable, and only four (3.6%) were slightly uncomfortable. Nearly all participants had Internet access in their home (i.e., 27 [96.4%] out of 28 [3.6%] participants). Participants were asked about their child's daily Internet use for home and school. Participants allowed a mean of 2.79 ($SD = 1.23$) for at home Internet usage. For hours of Internet used at school hours, 16 (67%) participants stated they knew an approximate number of hours and eight (33%) participants reported that they did not know. The mean number was 2.96 ($SD = 1.67$). Participants were also asked about their own Internet usage. Parents reported a mean of 2.62 ($SD = .94$). When asked if participants had Internet rules for their children, 23 (82%) of the 28 said yes. Participants were also asked if they allowed their children access to social media, 19 (82.1%) said yes. When asked how often participants perceived their

children were experiencing inappropriate things on the Internet, three (10.7%) participants answered very often, three (10.7%) participants answered often, 12 (42.9%) participants reported sometimes, and ten (35.7%) reported seldom. Finally, participants were asked if they felt their child was safe using the Internet and answered 19 (67.9%) felt moderately safe, five (17.9%) reported feeling neither safe or unsafe, and four (14.3%) identified moderately unsafe.

Table 2 *Quantitative Table (e.g., comfort level, access, hours spent per day, Social Media, internet rules, knowledge levels) (N=28)*

Variable	N (%)	Mean(SD)	Min	Max
Parent Comfort Level		1.32(.819)	1	5
Extremely Comfortable	0(0%)			
Moderately Comfortable	22(78.6%)			
Slightly Comfortable	5(17.9)			
Neither Comfortable or Uncomfortable	0(0)			
Slightly Uncomfortable	1(3.6%)			
Moderately Uncomfortable	0(0%)			
Extremely Uncomfortable	0(0%)			
Internet Access in Home				
Yes	27(96.4%)			
No	1(3.6%)			
Hours Per Day-Child Home		2.70(1.23)	1	5
>1	4(14.8%)			
1-2	10(37%)			
2-3	6(22.2%)			
3>	4(14.8%)			
Unknown	3(0%)			
Hours Per Day- Child School		2.92(1.67)	1	5
>1	6(25%)			
1-2	7(29.2%)			
2-3	2(8.3%)			
3>	1(4.2)			
Unknown	8(33.3%)			
Hours Per Day –Parent		2.62(.94)	1	5
>1	3(11.5%)			
1-2	8(30.8%)			
2-3	12(46.2%)			
3>	2(7.7%)			
Unknown	1(3.8%)			

Table 2 Continued

Variable	N (%)	Mean(SD)	Min	Max
Internet Rules				
Yes	23(82%)			
No	5(17.9%)			
Social Media Access				
Yes	19(70.4%)			
No	8(29.6%)			
Experiences Inappropriate Viewings				
Very Often	3.(10.7%)	1.54(.647)	1	3
Often	3(10.7%)			
Sometimes	12(42.9%)			
Seldom	10(35.7%)			
Never	0(0%)			
Level of Safety				
Very Safe	0(0%)	1.12(.33)	1	3
Moderately Safe	19(67.9%)			
Neither Safe or Unsafe	5(17.9%)			
Moderately Unsafe	4(14.3%)			
Very Safe	0(0%)			
Knowledge (parent vs. child)				
Parent knows more	18(66.7%)			
Parent knows less	6(22.2%)			
Equal knowledge	3(11.1%)			
Child's Knowledge Level				
Beginning/Basic	13(53.7%)			
Advanced/Experienced	10(38.5%)			
Moderate	2(7.7%)			
Parents Check Child's Social Media				
Yes	15(88.2%)			
No	2(11.6%)			

Qualitative Analyses

Participants in this study discussed many perceptions and experiences of protecting their child and establishing workable practices and routines regarding Internet use. The grounded theory analysis identified three main themes to better understand this issue. Parents reported (1) a range of experiences in navigating the complexities of

parenting and the Internet, (2) a lack of complete safety, and (3) the parent's responsibility in keeping children safe as opposed to community resources and supports.

A range of experiences navigating the complexities of parenting and the Internet. A major observation was that parents often had a range of experiences, not just positive or negative, in navigating the complexities of parenting and technology. Despite negative experiences, there was a general consensus among respondents that they had positive experiences with the Internet. Positive experiences parents had, were with educational and informational usage, and experiences with monitoring and placing limits on the Internet. Numerous participants stated that the Internet was great for educational use with their children. Many participants identified that it was “easier for them [their children] to do research papers, homework, and other school assignments” (P 26). Other participants talked about how they personally use the Internet to look up information to better explain educational content to their child. For example, one parent explained: “when there is a topic I am unfamiliar with, we search [the Internet for] that topic so I am better able to help explain it” (P 1). Other themes talked about the Internet being convenient, providing educational advantages to their child, and access to the world. Specifically, participants had common positive answers like the Internet was a “great tool when used properly” (P 2), provided “great advantage to children's education” (P 2), or was, in general, an “invaluable resource” (P 8). Several participants also stated that monitoring or setting limits on Internet use helped create positive experiences. One parent explained that they “limit use of the Internet only for school projects and homework” (P 15). Other participants identified that “maintaining an eye on content makes it better” (P 11) to navigate the complex world of parenting and technology. Other

respondents talked about a positive overall impact on their family, such as the ability to keep in touch with loved ones or create a family event calendar.

Although participant's experiences with the Internet included many positive statements, their views and attitude towards the Internet seemed more negative overall. Negative experiences included subthemes such as easy trouble, addiction, predators, and declining social skills and attitude changes. Specifically, parents reported feelings of uncertainty or feeling their child was unsafe, needed more boundaries and restrictions, that the Internet decreases intelligence and increases laziness, and that it was addicting or abusive. Many participants stated that it is easier for children to get into trouble because of wandering, unsupervised access, or troubles with "drinking, drugs, and sex" (P 26). Another major concern shared by a number of participants was addiction and dependence on the Internet. Participants expressed concerns their child was "becoming 'attached' to the Internet" (P 1), or participants were seeing a "dependency for entertainment" (P 21). Several participants also mentioned worries of declining social skills. For example, one parent felt that "the use of social media takes away from social skills" (P 10).

Another reported a concern about their child's habits when the stated that children were "more computer literate than my generation, but also more sedentary and less attentive to their surroundings" (P 9). A change in their child's attitude was another relevant subtheme that demonstrated a negative experience with navigating parenting and technology. A number of parents reported similar statements to this: "I feel my child's attitude is different after exposure to Internet/electronics" (P 20). Another parent noted "my child had a much happier, relaxed, and less stressed attitude when they had limited access to the Internet" (P 26). In addition, although parents noted that the Internet was

fun (e.g., games, videos, etc.) and social media was popular, they noticed negative changes (e.g., negative reactions due to of social media use, declining social skills, or addiction to social media websites).

One participant called the Internet “handy [and] convenient but extremely dangerous” (IFP 3). Dangers of the Internet can be interpreted in many ways. One respondent described a concern that “kids are [becoming] less intelligent due to the Internet and it [the Internet] has caused a lazy generation” (P 7). Others worried about the danger of children developing “a false sense of anonymity” (P 16), which in turn causes them to give out too much private information or say things that cannot be taken back. Parents also reported the Internet being a source of tension between them and their children. Some parents mentioned concerns about Internet or social media addiction and the impact that it had on their children. Participants reported the Internet to “be addictive to the point nothing else seems to matter” (P 16).

Lastly, one of the predominant concerns and dangers of the Internet is inappropriate content. Common examples reported by participants included their child viewing age-inappropriate or sexual content (e.g., inappropriate dress, nudity, videos, pictures, etc.), searches that elicit unintended content, pop-up advertisements with inappropriate messages or pictures, the influence of peers viewing explicit content, or being unaware of what their children are viewing or experiencing. One parent described specific instance seeing “women not being dressed appropriately” (P 1). Others discussed how it is “hard to keep inappropriate videos or pictures from [children] when it is shared on Facebook or other social media sites when the filters you set up do not apply to these sites” (P 10). Other types of inappropriate content included adult themes or television

shows that are seen on primetime TV or commercials. However, others reported seeing pop-ups on what many parents considered to be “innocent sites” for escort services and pornographic websites. Some parents reported that they had caught their children purposefully looking up porn or that peers were a negative influence. According to one participant, “I found our older child were showing [my child] porn when they were at her house” (P 13). Despite these risks, a contrary theme with participants was using negative experiences to teach life lessons to their children. For example, one parent stated that it “gives us the opportunity to discuss why they are not appropriate and how we can learn from it” (P 14). This theme shows how parents are dealing with inappropriate content in a way that teaches and produces better outcomes for children.

A lack of complete safety. A primary purpose of this survey was to explore whether participants felt their children were safe using the Internet, identify their main concerns, and what strategies they use to keep them safe. As such, the second overarching theme was the idea that parents never felt that their children were completely safe using the Internet. Reflecting on the quantitative information, when asked what level of safe or unsafe participants perceived, most viewed the Internet as moderately safe, and a few viewed it as neither safe or unsafe or moderately unsafe. Common subthemes that supported why children are safe using the Internet were parental safeguards, child’s knowledge of right and wrong, and a child’s age (i.e., assuming that children become more mature as they age). Some participants monitored their child’s Internet use directly, as exemplified by the statement, “I feel they are safe right now because my husband and I monitor them so closely” (P 2). Other parents believed that children became more safe as they developed more knowledge of the Internet and became more mature. For example,

one parent said, “now that our child is older, they are somewhat safer using the Internet” (P 22). On the other hand, there was some opposition, for example one respondent stated the opposite, “as she gets older it will be more difficult to monitor and she will be more likely to break the rules” (P 21).

Common subthemes of why participant’s felt a lack of complete safety included predators, and pop-up advertisements, and unfiltered sites. These things were particularly concerning because children tend to be curious but are also more vulnerable. Because children are still developing cognitively or socially, parents were concerned that children are more susceptible to fake or inappropriate online relationships or that children are more at risk of becoming unsociable or isolated from their peers and family. A few participants were confident their monitoring was up to par, but they worried about predators on the Internet calling them “sneaky and unpredictable” (P 17). Another participant stated, “I am aware of what he is looking at, however, we definitely don't know who's watching us” (P 2). Many participants also discussed how sites have pop-ups and those can contain pornographic or other explicit information that may be alluring to their child or that peaks their child’s curiosity. Several participants expressed experiences with “searching for something that has nothing to do with pornography but that [content] comes up” (P 3). Other participants talked about how they knew their child “wasn’t selecting to view” (P 19) inappropriate pop-ups, but it worried them that they were available with such ease. Another participant expressed seeing “sexual advertising on innocent websites” (P 11) as a major concern.

A number of participants had specific fears that ranged in intensity or severity, such as sexual victimization and sexual exploitation, cyberbullying, unacceptable

behaviors like hiding information from parents, and addiction. Despite having rules or discussions about safety with their children, parents were concerned their children might be “tricked by strangers into giving away personal info or meeting in person” (P 22). Cyberbullying was also a prevalent subtheme among participants. One statement that depicts a shared feeling across multiple participants includes, “the internet allows children (all people) to view, watch videos, make comments, and say things to others that are not acceptable” (P 2). Participants also said “negative comments can [have] a big impact on any child” (P 12). Participants also addressed concerns that social media is a tool used by children to hide things from parents that need to be addressed openly. For example, parents shared a concern that “websites are not as they seem” (P 5) and because children are “curious or naïve, [they] will take a look and learn more than they needed to know” (P 19). One participant stated, “I worry that they will not realize the environment they find themselves in until it is too late” (P 17), putting them at risk for multiple negative outcomes (e.g., victimization, cyberbullying, or mental health problems). The last major concern for participants was information overload. A concern that children might become “addicted to false relationships” (P 21), “isolate herself [or himself] from the real world” (P 14), or become addicted to gaming and social media sites was prevalent. Parents were particularly concerned about a child’s “ability to access the Internet in a multitude of formats” and understand how to maintain “actual control over their exposure” to unhealthy, inappropriate, or negative content (P 15).

The parent’s responsibility in keeping children safe as opposed to community resources and supports. A third overarching theme related to parent’s responsibility for keeping children safe as opposed to community resources and supports. When asked about resources and supports the community could provide, many participants viewed it as part of “parent responsibility” stating “I truly feel like this is the parent’s responsibility to protect and monitor my children” (P 2) or “support for children should start at home” (P 6). Participants also stated, “it’s our responsibility as a parent and not that of the community” (P 14). A few participants felt that increasing the access to parental control software or providing suggestions for monitoring could be a possible resource from the community or school system. Specific to schools, one parent identified an interest in seeing “lessons on Internet safety in schools” (P 12), which could be provided to parents and children. Another participant supported a desire to see the community do more to “educate students on dangers, [and] teach students reputable sites” for obtaining needed information (P 14). Other participant’s suggested that a training from school officials or law enforcement about what cyberbullying is and what the repercussions are for cyberbullying would be beneficial. Several participants stated they were “unsure” or “didn’t know” how communities could help them protect their children, suggesting that they would be open to any available options.

Safety Strategies and Rules

Because of parent’s knowledge of the Internet and also protection against it, parents had common safety strategies to protect their child’s Internet use. Parents use monitoring software and self-monitoring (e.g., checking history, social media), co-viewing and talking about content, and common area viewing or nightly device check-ins

as safety features. Because mobile devices can be challenging to parents, parents not only had parental controls set up on mobile devices, but they also made children “hand over their devices when they go to bed so we can go through them” (P 2). Parents also have Internet rules in place for their children. Common themes among participant’s rules were preapproved websites, social media, apps, videos, and music; restrictions and time limits; asking permissions and knowledge of which sites are deemed appropriate, no personal information posted or talking to unknown people; and usage can only be after homework and chores are finished. Fifteen out of 17 parents who allowed their children to access social media sites also reported more rules and safety measure in place. Participants named checking and approving followers; must follow parents; checking all posts, likes, comments, and messages; viewing restrictions in place (e.g. privacy policies); and checking for sexual advances or bullying.

Discussion

The findings of this research identified three main themes that emerged from parents’ responses: (1) a range of experiences in navigating the complexities of parenting and the Internet, (2) a lack of complete safety, and (3) the parent’s responsibility in keeping children safe as opposed to community resources and supports. The study found caregivers generally had positive experiences but also reported a lot of negative experiences or worries about their children. The study also found most parents viewed their children as moderately safe using the Internet, but this did not assuage their concerns about specific issues such as sexual victimization, cyberbullying, and Internet addiction or dependence. Most parents also had Internet rules or some kind of monitoring system in place to keep their children safe on the Internet, but responses indicated that

there are mixed opinions about whether children need more or less monitoring as they age. Finally, the study also addresses what community resources or supports parents would benefit from. However, many parents viewed it as primarily the parent's responsibility.

In this study the first major theme was about a range of experiences in navigating the complexities of parenting and the Internet. This research study found that parents typically had a positive experience with the Internet, but not a positive attitude towards the Internet. This factor has not been addressed in other studies and would be a good topic for further research. Some specific positive experiences were with the educational and informational aspects of the Internet and participants monitoring experiences. Participants also expressed a few negative experiences as well, and in general, had more negative attitudes towards the Internet. This study identified specific concerns and found overlap with Warren's (2010) study. Warren (2010) found that parents worried about the negative effects the Internet could have on children's social relationships, social isolation, and sexual assault. A large number of parents in this research study felt the Internet needed more boundaries to protect children from these areas of concern. Warren (2010) also found that parents with negative attitudes are more likely to regulate their children.

This research study found that 82% (23) of parents had Internet rules for their children, while Wang (2005) reported only 61% of parents monitoring their children. This discrepancy could be due to the evolution of the Internet and parent's knowledge, as more than a decade later, parents are likely more knowledgeable and aware of Internet dangers. Livingstone (2008) stated that parents often assume that the Internet affects other children but not their own. Participants in this study seemed to be aware of the

dangers and effects of the Internet. Participants talked about experiencing their children seeing inappropriate materials such as videos and pictures. They also discussed how pop-ups and searches have been problematic and turned up inappropriate content when using the Internet. Wang (2005) found that one-fourth (25%) of children aged 10-17 have been exposed to unwanted sexual materials on the Internet. This research study found that 100% of parents have experienced inappropriate materials on the Internet with their children. Within a ten-year span, the chances of viewing inappropriate materials have increased by over half the original number. This could be due to the increase in Internet use or an increase in the availability of unwanted sexual content.

The second major theme was that parents reported a lack of complete safety. Most participants viewed their children as being moderately safe while using the Internet because their children had Internet safe guards, knowledge of right and wrong, and because of their age (e.g., too young to do differently, old enough to know). However, they were extremely concerned about the multiple threats that exist to their children. In Wang's (2005) study, 66% of parents reported that their children knew more about the Internet than they did. In this study, 18 out of 27 (66.7%) parents viewed they had more Internet knowledge than their child. This suggests that parent knowledge of the Internet has become more advanced. However, it is uncertain whether this is actually true or whether this is just the perception of the parent. Although many parents feel they do have more knowledge of the Internet than their children, they still have concerns about predators, sexual victimization or exploitation, addiction or dependence, building false relationships, and becoming socially isolated.

Guan and Subrahmanyam (2009) stated that children who know more about the Internet are at a higher risk for problematic Internet behaviors. In this study, 56% of parents viewed their children as having beginning or basic knowledge of the Internet and 44% of parents viewed their child's knowledge as advanced. This could suggest that almost half the children in this study are at a higher risk for problematic Internet behaviors. In regards to rules, 82% of participants in this study had Internet rules for their children. Livingstone (2008) stated that namely active, restrictive, and co-viewing were the three main strategies of monitoring for parents. In the namely active category, we had several parents who keep an eye on their children's Internet use, but also discussed what their children are seeing with them and explained why items are good or bad. In the restrictive category, this study showed parents were using monitoring software, were self-monitoring (e.g., checking history and social media), having a common viewing area, and also having device check-ins. The co-viewing category is strictly what it is co-viewing where the parents actively view what their children are viewing. Participants in this study use a variety of these methods and generally do not rely on one monitoring method.

The final theme was the parent's responsibility in keeping children safe as opposed to community resources and supports, many parents responded that it was primarily the parent's responsibility to make sure their child was safe, not the responsibility of the community. In some ways, this feeling is supported by previous research. According to Livingstone (2008), the government cannot regulate the Internet because it is too vast, which leaves regulation up to parents. The Tennessee Department of Education (n.d.) also supports that although the school does a good job monitoring, peers can still spread risky sites to each other, which puts the responsibility on parents.

Community supports and resources is an area lacking in research for how it effects children's safety and benefits or doesn't benefit parent's ability to protect their children. Livingstone (2008) mentions that children did identify churches and social workers as important sources for safety and awareness of Internet threats. Parents in this research study also described trainings from schools or law enforcement as possibly being helpful in safety.

Limitations

Although this study contributes to the understanding of parents' perceptions of the Internet and how it affects their children, it is not without limitations. The survey was a non-random Internet survey sent out through social media, word-of-mouth, and through organizations such as YMCA's, churches, and community centers. Although the survey was sent out through social media, the sample retained was from a small portion of Tennessee. A larger sample size and sampling area would benefit this research and also allow for a higher level of generalizability. Also, because this is an Internet survey rather than face-to-face, researchers were unable to probe for more information on questions or ask for clarification on answers given.

Since the survey was an online survey, it was not representative of all parents or families that do not have Internet access at home. Another limitation is the lack of diversity in the sample. The study found most of the participants were female, which may provide a different perspective of what male parents experience or perceive. The mainly female demographic also poses the question of who is doing most of the Internet monitoring in the home (e.g., mother or father). The demographic characteristics are also limited in that 27 of 28 participants were White, which may not reflect the experiences of

families of color. Additionally, most of the participants were married, which means that these findings may not represent the experiences of single parents or divorced parents. Overall, a larger sample, covering a larger demographic area and multiple family types would produce results that could be applicable to a larger population.

Recommendations

Research implications. Future researchers should work to develop studies that include more diverse populations to determine whether male parents, families of color, single parents, or divorced families have different experiences or challenges. Another underrepresented aspect of research is how parents monitor computers versus mobile devices (e.g., tablets, E-readers, mobile phones) and how they perceive different types of devices affecting their children's behaviors. Because cell phones are becoming more popular and they are portable, they are likely more difficult to monitor. Research should also look into the ages that children are first allowed to have their own mobile devices along with what restrictions are placed. Parents in this study reported differences in opinions about whether older children needed more or less monitoring, and it would be helpful to determine whether older or younger children are more at risk (e.g., sexual victimization/solicitation, cyberbullying, pornography, addiction, etc.). Lastly, a study that examines children's experiences and perceptions versus parent's experiences of the Internet and specific types of risk would also add to current research.

Practice implications. Social workers could use data from this and similar studies to better understand child behaviors and risks that children and families are experiencing. Since, research shows that regulation is often up to the parents, social workers need to be knowledgeable about Internet access in multiple locations (e.g.,

schools, libraries, or places that children are less supervised), monitoring software, and other techniques that parents can use to keep children safe. In addition, social workers who work with children and families should consider developing trainings for children and parents about dangers of the Internet, ways to keep children safe, specific trends like cyberbullying or sex trafficking, and repercussions for predators. In addition, social workers need to become more familiar with the Internet themselves to stay informed of dangers, best software, appropriate educational websites, good gaming or fun websites, and general training videos that can be shared with families.

Policy implications. This research can also be used in creating policies at the local, state, and national levels. Policies would need to protect against online predators and develop appropriate punishment for the various dangers that exist. The state of Tennessee has a policy called “Internet Acceptable Use Policy”. This policy is for students and employees in Tennessee Schools, and the policy prohibits inappropriate use, provides measures to prevent harm or harassment, filters pornography, provides measures to hold users accountable for online activity, provides Internet safety instruction, and encourages parent involvement in the digital citizen process (State of Tennessee, 2008). The Internet Acceptable Use Policy is a good example of the type of policies needed to safeguard children, but we also need policies outside of the school system to keep children safe. The government should consider creating a policy with similar characteristics for public Internet use for places such as public libraries or government buildings. This would be a start to keeping children safe as they use the Internet outside of the school or home.

Conclusion

This study highlights the experiences parents and their children have with the Internet, and the preventative measures needed from parents and communities need to keep children safe while using the Internet. Although parents described mostly positive experiences, they still have negative attitudes toward the Internet, mainly because of predators and unwanted inappropriate content. This study identified strategies used to maintain a level of safety for children and prevent unwanted content, while also highlighting the need for more systemic support or involvement. Although parents are primarily responsible for their children's Internet use, the Internet is too large and complex for families to manage without assistance.

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