Whose job is it to raise young people’s awareness of appropriate and safe behavior when using Internet communications?

Is it parents’ responsibility? Teachers’? Lawmakers’?

Yes, yes, yes: all of the above. But surely we technically-competent professionals – practically anyone reading this column – can contribute to the awareness and knowledge of our fellow community members in our areas of expertise. For over 20 years, I have been speaking in schools, libraries, and social organizations about information security topics with a special focus on protecting young people and older folk against dangers of inappropriate and unsafe uses of the Internet. Not only is it any good thing to do simply from the standpoint of social responsibility, it’s enormous fun. I hope that readers will try it!

Lately, I have been leading discussion groups at the Brown Public Library<http://www.brownpubliclibrary.org/> in Northfield<http://www.northfield-ct.gov/>, Vermont,<http://www.vermont.gov/portal/> and giving the participants one-page crib sheets to take home with them. If you decide to organize similar discussions in your family get-togethers, church/synagogue/mosque/temple, scout troop, or other organization, feel free to use and modify any of the following notes. You don’t need to bother with attribution or references – I really don’t care as long as you don’t sell what I give away for free.

Before I print the notes for the first of the four discussion sessions – socializing safely through the Internet – I’ll mention one of the issues that arose in that discussion and that stimulated a great deal of interest. It seems to me that technological changes typically take around three generations to be integrated thoroughly into our moral frameworks. For example, when telephones were widely introduced, kids used to phone people at random and ask stupid questions (e.g., upon calling a tobacco store, they’d ask, “Do you have Prince Albert [a brand of tobacco] in a can?” and upon the answer, “Yes,” they’d giggle, “Well, LET HIM OUT!!!!” and hang up. Mostly kids don’t use the phone for random pranks any more – they use their cell phones for texting instead or send hoaxes via e-mail. But why the shift?

One possibility is that the people of parenting age when a technology comes into vogue don’t actually know much about the unexpected uses to which their children put the technology, so their instructions on appropriate use are incomplete. The second generation of users eventually do understand the value of imposing restrictions on off-the-wall, inappropriate uses of the now-not-so-new technology and they teach their kids from the earliest age to be better users than they were.

We are now at the stage where people who were born into the digital age will be starting to have children; I think that we might see their kids growing up with the same attitude to, say, talking to strangers on the Internet as older people developed to talking to strangers on the street. In other words, the Internet will gradually make its way into common sense over the next decade or so. For example, it will seem unbelievable to young people in a few years that anyone could have
believed that they won a European lottery that they did not enter or that the daughter of an
African dictator would actually share millions of dollars of ill-gotten gains with them in return
for their bank account number. “How could anyone be so STUPID?” they will ask scornfully.

In the meantime, as a contribution to making Internet safety part of common sense, in my next
column, I’ll publish the notes I distributed a few weeks ago about safe socializing via the
Internet.

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Readers interested in more discussion of technology and social norms may enjoy the paper
“Totem and Taboo in Cyberspace: Integrating Technology into our Moral Universe” <
http://www.mekabay.com/ethics/totem_taboo_cyber.pdf> which I originally wrote for the 17th

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