

METRO PLUS

## Better safe than sorry



**S. RAVI**

JULY 02, 2016 00:00 IST

UPDATED: JULY 02, 2016 02:03 IST

### Instead of morphing Internet into a monster, parents need to guide their children through the labyrinthine digital world

The ubiquitous internet makes its presence felt 24x7 in our life but so do its attendant fallouts. Just this week witnessed suicide by a 21-year-old college student in Salem. Not because she failed in exams or was jilted in love but because of the shock of seeing her morphed obscene images on the Facebook. It is not an exception. In the past, a 17-year-old Kolkata girl killed herself because of morphed pictures on social media while a Mumbai-based girl took her life because of cyber stalking.

Long considered as an aspiration tool for knowledge, the Internet simultaneously exposes users to many hazards. Adolescents become easy victims because of their inquisitiveness and immaturity. Awareness about the pitfalls is low while the perpetrators of these crimes are far ahead in cyber technology.

Interestingly, the dangers are the virtual versions of what we face in real life. Cyber bullying denotes acts directed at harassing or harming a teenager's psychology, confidence or morale by making unwarranted comments or pokes and posts. India is ranked third in the world in cyber bullying. Unfiltered search result with even innocent key words can make a child encounter age inappropriate sites. There are predators who entice the young into sexual activity. Sexting entails using SMS or web services to send obscene messages or video clips while sextortion is extortion after posting morphed pictures. The list also includes cyber stalking, addiction to gambling and drugs. Yet, Internet cannot be wished away. Cyber law expert and author of "Protection of Children on Internet", (Universal Law Publishing) Karnika Seth says, "We can no longer segregate our life from digital technology, especially the urban populace." Agrees Parry Aftab, Internet safety expert and founder of WiredSafety, "Our children need it for their school homework, career and social life. It is central to our future.

Dr. Vandita Dubey, whose "Parenting In The Age Of Sexposure" (Rupa) recently hit the stands, has a different perspective. "Till about class 9 or 10 I think children do not need internet." What about books, magazines, encyclopaedias and journals. There is enough printed matter on all subjects. Besides there are other appropriate resources like educational DVDs and films on different subjects." Besides exposure to unnecessary dangers, Dubey objects to the deluge of information and misinformation. "The young

do not have the maturity to sieve what they read or see.” Dr. Samir Parikh, Director Department of Mental Health and Behavioural Sciences, Fortis Healthcare cites the case of 15-year-old taking cannabis because he read that it helps to concentrate. “Vulnerable as they are the young believe in everything on the net.”

Besides research, Internet gives access to the social media . Comments, pictures and text are disseminated within seconds. Posting children’s pictures on Facebook is done daily and, at times, on hourly basis. Many fail to realise that these can be misused as has happened in many cases. Seth ascribes this to herd mentality, while Dubey finds it baffling . “The things we don’t do in real life, we end up doing in the virtual world. Probably there is a sense of glamour attached to this.” Kalpana Swamy, a communications professional and mother of a six-year-old Aadyaa, quips, “It is akin to parents of previous generation making children recite poems or dance when visitors came home.”

With grown-ups finding it difficult to negotiate Internet’s ill-effects, the children and teenagers are easy prey. Seth suggests parents should act as the first line of defence and emphasises the need to inculcate net etiquette among children. Dubey insists, “we need to empower them to make sound decisions even when accessing digital media unsupervised.”

The building of trust is vital. “Yes, instead of regimentation, healthy discussion and exchange of ideas and views is required. Parents ought to sit with children while surfing for information and resources. Insist on their differentiating good from bad like you do in the real world. This builds bonding and learning for both,” says Seth. Apart from regular monitoring, putting in place parental controls and set of rules are essential too. Kalpana reveals that Aadyaa is keen to play games on her i-phone. “Now I have deleted all of them.” Having installed proper checks on the computer, she allows her to play castle and cup caking making. “I would rather have her indulging in real activities and don’t mind her dirtying her hands. This will keep her connected to the real world and grounded. She is fond of cooking and on weekends I allow her to make rotis, which I eat with relish.” Though apprehensive about future, Kalpana says, “I will try to ensure that she has the confidence to come to me directly without hesitation rather than go outside.”

Dubey feels a heart-to-heart chat and confidence building is must for healthy relationship. She gives the example of Samar, 15 in Gurgaon who got caught in a pornography trap. “He was fortunate to have parents who discussed the impact of media and gender issues with him.” Condemning the Salem incident, Dubey feels like other sexual offence case victims, cyber-crime affected girls must be counselled immediately. Making a case for recognising the magnitude of the problem, Mohan Ramaswamy, Managing Director of Lexisnexis, which publishes books on hazards of Internet, says, “It is important to create awareness about this issue and inform parents and schools about how to deal with such issues.”

Making an interesting observation, Aftab says that while interacting with teenagers in India and the West, she realised a very small percentage of them would approach their parents when confronted with a problem. “In India they perceive sharing will result in censure and losing internet access. It is incumbent for the parents to make their children come to them otherwise it can cause a lot of trouble. I recommend them not to judge Internet too harshly as it has wonderful benefits coupled with some serious risks. So they need to guide children and not punish them.”

Good intentions on part of parents are not enough as a vast number of parents express their helplessness in monitoring their children’s online activities. Mangesh Yadav, an official in a security company, says “My daughter knows all the functions of i-phone which I am not aware of. Then how can I help her?” Aftab points out that this is not unique to India alone. In fact, she finds here the grown ups are using technology more sophisticatedly than in the West. “Also, Indian parents have a strong relationship with their children and their lack of ability to control digital technology comes across as a challenge to their overall control they exercise in studies and other choices. Yes, one way out is to update oneself. But more importantly parents must realise they have a better understanding of life, values, consequences and costs, cause and effect. This they need to impart and the rest will fall in place Seth insists on lawmakers framing guidelines for social media and amendment to the existing IT Act to keep pace with crimes against children.

Aftab who has been a cybersafety volunteer for two decades feels all the stakeholders need to come together in tackling the problem. “Government can play a major role in bringing together everyone. It is can play and is already doing so.”

### **Preventive measures**

In order to make surfing and browsing safe following filters may be used

#### *Software based filters*

Netnanny for parental monitoring of a child’s internet activities including social media

K9 Web protection filtering unsuitable content for children

Others include AVG family safety, B secured online v6. 16, McAfee and Safe Eyes.

#### *Filters on routers (in schools/homes)*

Open DNS with three parental control options

*Operating system and browsers level filtering*

Microsoft family safety filters

WindowsXP content advisor

Norton Safe Web

McAfee Site Advisor

***Our children need it for their school homework, career and social life. Internet is central to our future***

***Till about class 9 or 10 I think children do not need internet..there is enough printed matter on all subjects***