SAFETY NETS

How can parents protect vulnerable children and young people from pro-suicide sites?

Rebecca Coombes reports

Vulnerable young people can access pro-suicide sites with relative ease, so what can be done about it? Concerned parents can act by installing filtering and monitoring software and appropriate firewalls. However, a six month national study published last month, *Safer Children in a Digital World*, which laid the ground for the first UK strategy for child internet safety, found that many parents were poorly informed about technology (www.dfes.gov.uk/byronreview). "I wouldn't listen to my parents anyway, as they don't know enough," one 17 year old girl told a focus group organised by the study.

Study author Tanya Byron, a child psychologist, recommended tighter regulation of some harmful sites—including those giving graphic details of suicide methods and chatrooms dedicated to the promotion of suicide.

Regulation

In the UK, child pornography, sexual grooming of children, and racism are all illegal and can be dealt with by the Internet Watch Foundation, a self regulatory body. In 1997, when the foundation was set up, 18% of internet child pornography sites accessed in the UK were hosted by the UK network. In 2008, that figure has dropped to less than 1%. But the same crackdown does not apply to suicide sites as they are not illegal in the UK. However, they are outlawed in Australia. Both Japan and Korea have attempted to block sites.

A new UK Council on Internet Safety, to be set up in the wake of the Byron study, will review current legislation. The government is also monitoring the effectiveness of the Australian law that makes pro-suicide sites illegal. Papyrus, a charity campaigning against pro-suicide sites, argues that the UK Suicide Act 1961, enacted long before the internet, needs to be revised. "We are aware of 30 cases in 2001 where pro-suicide sites and pro-suicide chat rooms have been a factor in young people taking their own lives. We know of no successful prosecution of anyone who has used the internet to groom young people to kill themselves," a spokesperson said.

Take control

But as well as the long arm of the law, Dr Byron strongly urged parents to get internet savvy so that they can take the technical steps to

manage online risks to their children and to help them exercise sensible judgment when looking at sites. "At a public swimming pool we have gates, put up signs, and have lifeguards and shallow ends, but we also teach children how to swim," she said.

Although a wide range of parental control software is available, take up is far from universal. France requires all internet service providers to provide customers with filtering software. Only 54% of UK parents of 8-17 year olds surveyed by Ofcom this year used filtering software on their computers (www.ofcom.org.uk/research/telecoms/reports/byron). The same survey found that many parents didn't know how to use the filters properly—some default factory settings were too high and blocked too many sites. Instead of tailoring the filter, some exasperated parents just switch them off.

As children become older, restricting internet sites is no longer appropriate. Instead there is software that monitors and records internet activity—although of course teenagers can disable it.

The quality of filters is also variable. In 2007, a European Union survey looked at

how effective software was in filtering out inappropriate content, including suicide sites (www.sip-bench.org/sipbench.php?page=results2007&lang=en). The results were surprising, with household name AOL coming last in a league table of 30 parental control tools. The top three were Magic Desktop, Live Mark Family, and eScan Internet Security Suite.

Of course, no filter is 100% effective, and young people can easily access the internet on their mobile phone or at friends' houses and internet cafes. Although parents might attempt to block sites containing the word suicide, some sites may provide vulnerable children with space to talk through problems in a supportive atmosphere.

Papyrus (www.papyrus-uk.org) publishes a useful leaflet suggesting what to do if your child is visiting a suicide site. Parents should not avoid the subject of suicide, it says. A readiness to talk shows that the child's concerns are being taken seriously.

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Sources of advice: www.wisekids.org.uk
www.chatdangar.com

Extreme River opposes suicide and gives links to pages offering support as well as a religious perspective