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Panel: Technology alone can't protect kids online

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Panel: Technology alone can't protect kids online
Adult supervision and internet safety education are critical
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A task force charged with assessing technologies for protecting children from unwanted contact online has concluded that no single approach is foolproof and that parent and teacher oversight is vital.

The Harvard-led panel, in a report released Jan. 14, dismissed prospects for age-verification technologies, the approach favored by many law-enforcement officials who had pushed for the creation of the task force.

The yearlong Internet Safety Technical Task Force also played down fears of internet sexual predators who target children on social-networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace. Although citing other dangers such as online bullying, the panel said cases of predators typically involved youths well aware they were meeting an adult for sexual activities.

Technology can be a component in the strategy to protect minors online, but internet companies "should not overly rely upon any single technology or group of technologies as the primary solution," the task force said.

"Parents, teachers, mentors, social services, law enforcement, and minors themselves all have crucial roles to play in ensuring online safety for all minors," the report said.

It added: "The risk profile for the use of different genres of social media depends on the type of risk, common uses by minors, and the psychosocial makeup of minors who use them. Social network sites are not the most common space for solicitation and unwanted exposure to problematic content, but are frequently used in peer-to-peer harassment--most likely because they are broadly adopted by minors and are used primarily to reinforce pre-existing social relations."

And: "Minors are not equally at risk online. Those who are most at risk often engage in risky behaviors and have difficulties in other parts of their lives. The psychosocial makeup of and family dynamics surrounding particular minors are better predictors of risk than the use of specific media or technologies."

The report's findings largely echo the consensus reached by a panel of internet safety experts at the 2008 National Educational Computing Conference: that education is the best tool for keeping kids safe online, and that students who meet with internet predators nearly always seek this kind of sexual activity knowingly. (Editor's note: To watch a nine-minute video news report on the panel's discussion, go to www.eschoolnews.tv and search for the clip titled "Online safety: Dispelling common myths.")

The findings come as little surprise as law enforcement, internet companies, child-safety advocates, and policy makers seek to address fears of internet sexual predators.

Rather, the report serves to synthesize what many researchers and child-safety advocates have been saying. The report also identifies areas in which more studies are needed--on what sex offenders do at social-networking sites, and how minors are approached sexually by other minors.

Connecticut Attorney General Richard Blumenthal, one of the leading forces behind the task force's creation, criticized the report for relying on "outdated and inadequate" research to downplay the threat of predators. Blumenthal said the task force should have made more specific recommendations for implementing and improving technologies.

"The report is a step forward, but it has to be followed by other steps," Blumenthal said in an interview.

Parry Aftab, a child-safety advocate with task-force member WiredSafety.org, said the group produced a report that essentially "we could have done without spending a year. We could have said there isn't enough research out there."

But she said she agreed with its conclusions: Kids are typically at risk because they put themselves at risk rather than because they are tricked, and technology isn't enough to address that.

The task force was headed by internet scholars at Harvard University and grew out of an agreement MySpace reached with most state attorneys general a year ago. Members of the panel include internet service companies and nonprofit groups, including those focused on children's safety.

The panel's recommendations are nonbinding.

John Palfrey, the Harvard law professor who served as task force chairman, said the panel had no funding for new research and saw its role as synthesizing the disparate studies already conducted.

The task force recommended that companies develop best practices and, before implementing any technology, consider how well that technology addresses actual risks minors face online and whether it infringes on users' privacy and other rights.

Hemanshu Nigam, chief security officer at News Corp.'s MySpace, welcomed the task force's findings and said it "identifies key areas on which industry can focus efforts to increase online safety."

Companies that make age-verification technologies were among the leading critics of the task force.

Aristotle International Inc. said in a statement that the task force shifted from its mandate to focus on identity-authentication tools.

"The report is unfocused and addresses far too many non-SNS [social-networking site], non-technical issues," Aristotle said. "Many recommendations are generic, obvious, and redundant."

Link:

[Internet Safety Technical Task Force](#)

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