

# Teaching teens safety in the virtual world

February 13 2012

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A new cyber safety program on the dangers of social networking is being developed by Flinders University, in light of an alarming report which shows children as young as 12 are meeting internet strangers in person, receiving sexually explicit material and being bullied online.

The training program aims to prepare [young people](#) for the social, emotional, legal and economic implications of the [virtual world](#), covering such topics as how to manage Facebook “friends” and the pitfalls of uploading personal information and photos.

Aimed at 12 to 17-year-olds, the pilot course will be available to schools, youth groups and community organisations from May, and will initially

be delivered by youth workers from Marion Youth, based at GP Plus Health Care Centre in Oaklands Park.

An extensive consultation will be carried out across 12 local schools in February to help frame the content of the training program, building upon the findings of an Australia-wide survey of more than 500 young people in late 2010.

The study, conducted by Flinders University's Dr. Mubarak Rahamathulla, revealed:

- 23 per cent of 12 to 17-year-olds have been befriended by a stranger on Facebook;
- 18 per cent have personally met a stranger from Facebook and 11 per cent were planning to;
- 7 per cent have been bullied by a friend and 5 per cent bullied by a stranger;
- 11 per cent have hacked into their friend's Facebook account; and
- 9 per cent have received unexpected sexually explicit material.

Dr. Rahamathulla, a senior lecturer in the School of Social and Policy Studies, said the findings showed young people were taking “enormous risks” on the Internet, highlighting the need for more education and support surrounding [cyber safety](#).

“Unfortunately a lot of kids don't realise that when it comes to the Web, whatever they upload is permanent and nothing is private – a seemingly harmless picture could ruin a reputation for many years to come,” Dr. Rahamathulla said.

“It's quite worrying when you speak to young people who say they check Facebook every 15 minutes, or some who say they have more than 800 friends,” he said.

“This proves they really need to know how to manage those friends and also manage their time because if they’re spending that many hours a day on the internet it must be at a cost of something else, whether it’s study, work or sleep.”

Dr. Rahamathulla said young people needed better support and information about the pros and cons of the web, particularly at school.

“The Education Department requires students to sign an agreement so they don’t use the Internet for personal use while at school but that does not solve the problem,” he said.

“Due to the availability of the Internet on handheld devices such as mobile phones, adolescents are constantly accessing internet and [social networking](#) sites wherever they are – at school or home or at work.

“Because the problem is not solved at school level, these young people are left all alone in the virtual world.

“But it’s important for schools, and parents for that matter, not to wipe their hands of the issue because the Internet can be a very powerful – and wonderful – tool as long as it’s used responsibly.”

The pilot project has been funded through the Southern Knowledge Transfer Partnership, a program which provides funding to projects that benefit the southern area of Adelaide and promote information sharing between Flinders and the wider community.

Provided by Flinders University

Citation: Teaching teens safety in the virtual world (2012, February 13) retrieved 9 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2012-02-teens-safety-virtual-world.html>

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