Resilience, not abstinence, may help teens battle online risk

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Boosting teenagers' ability to cope with online risks, rather than trying to stop them from using the Internet, may be a more practical and effective strategy for keeping them safe, according to a team of researchers.

In a study, more resilient teens were less likely to suffer negative effects even if they were frequently online, said Haiyan Jia, post-doctoral scholar in information sciences and technology.

"Internet exposure does not necessarily lead to negative effects, which means it's okay to go online, but the key seems to be learning how to cope with the stress of the experience and knowing how to reduce the chances of being exposed to online risk," said Jia.

The researchers said that previous research tended to focus on limiting online use as a way to minimize risks of privacy violations and traumatic online experiences, such as becoming the victim of cyber-bullying and viewing unwanted sexual materials. However, with online technologies becoming more ubiquitous and a greater part of teens' social and educational lives, abstinence may actually be less reliable and more harmful.

"Let's assume that teens are going to deal with some online risk," said Pamela Wisniewski, a post-doctoral scholar in information sciences and technology. "If risk is going to be present, we want to make sure to minimize the negative outcomes and make sure the teens are equipped to handle these experiences."

Not allowing teens to use the Internet has its own risks, she added.

"As much as there are negatives associated with online use, there are also a lot of benefits to using online technologies," said Wisniewski. "Parents should be aware that restricting online use completely could hurt their children educationally and socially."

Both parents and technology companies may be able to help teens become more resilient, according to the researchers, who release their findings today (April 23) at the Computer Human Interaction conference in Seoul, South Korea.

Teens who are exposed to minimal risks can, over time, develop coping strategies and be more resilient as new, more risky situations arise.

"For example, let's say a teen girl is surfing online and one of her online friends asks for a nude photo," said Jia. "If a teen doesn't know how to deal with this, she might just succumb to the pressure and send the photo, and then suffer all kinds of stress and anxiety as a result, but if she builds up her resilience, she knows how to deal with the situation, she knows how to say no and prevent exposing herself to this risk."

The researchers suggest that technology companies that create cyber-security software could design software solutions that alert teens to risky behavior in order to avoid relying solely on parental monitoring software that restricts certain websites and social media sites.

"You don't want to parent strictly based on fear, you want to parent based on empowerment," said Wisniewski.

The researchers examined the responses of 75 teens, including 46 girls and 29 boys between 13 and 17 years old, to questions about how they used the Internet and what problems, if any, they encountered. To

determine how excessive exposure to the Internet influenced negative outcomes, they analyzed teens who were at risk of Internet addiction. While there was a significant correlation between Internet addiction and negative effects, more resilient teens were less likely to be suffer negative consequences from extreme online exposure, according to the researchers.

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