

A case study of Childnet's approach- the challenge of CHAT

www.chatdanger.com



If one issue has dominated the work of Childnet in the last year it is the opportunities and dangers presented by interactive Internet services like Chat and Instant Messenger. On the one hand children love the joy of communicating anonymously in real time. However there is the horror that a few adults can use the technology to exploit children. The reality of this came with an e-mail to Childnet in June 2000.

an email to Childnet

“My daughter was contacted, starting in February this year by a paedophile whilst using a Chat room.

He quickly moved to e-mail and shortly afterwards sent her pornography, purporting to be pictures of himself. My daughter was just 12 at this time. After grooming her for some weeks, he made telephone contact and eventually persuaded her to miss school and meet him.

In total, he met her five times and took her back to his flat where she was sexually abused... I have worked in the computer industry for 18 years, latterly with the Internet, and had no idea what went on in these Chat rooms.

Perhaps you can offer some guidance?”

Initial reactions

This e-mail shattered any complacency that dangers in Chat were theoretical.

Childnet staff were shocked and our priority was to support the family and respond to their concerns. They feared other parents were totally unaware of the potential danger in Chat and wanted to put that right. Thankfully the police caught this man before he could abuse another girl he was in touch with by email.

In July and August 2000 we worked with a 16 yr old student to research UK based Internet Chat rooms popular with teenagers. This showed there were no safety standards, few safety messages and much risky behaviour. We passed on this research to an official UK industry/police group already looking at Chat.

A final thought ... Teenagers explore the changes in technology while parents struggle to understand the new tools.

Technology is constantly changing. New interactive services are appearing. The internet services like i-mode for mobile phones is already very popular in Japan. SMS text chat is available in Europe for mobiles. Childnet is committed to garnering international expertise on these issues and seeking to ensure that the positives outweigh any abuses.

Encouraging Positive Chat

Chat is not wrong, nor need it be dangerous.

Chat can be a great way to meet new people and can even be educational. It was therefore essential that the Chatdanger site didn't sensationalize and scare parents but put the dangers in context. We included advice about how to evaluate a good chat room as well as positive examples of how Chat can be used constructively. For example two winning projects from the Childnet awards programme use Chat to link children in different schools to discuss environmental issues and chat with famous children's authors.

Policy

In early October 2000 Childnet wrote to eight leading providers of Chat services

in the UK to advise them of the Green case and suggesting a number of practical ways they could improve safety. This led to detailed discussions with some.

Throughout the case we kept the official Industry/Police group informed of what we were doing and Childnet's research officer, Will Gardner worked with Prof Patrick Parkinson of the University of Sydney to prepare a paper on UK law reform drawing on international experience. Childnet had contacted the family's MP - Paul Burstow - on their behalf, and he wrote to the Prime Minister leading to a meeting with a

Home Office Minister in February 2001. The Minister asked Childnet to submit a paper on law reform and in March the official industry/police group published their "Chatwise Streetwise" report with detailed policy recommendations. This led to the establishment by the Home Secretary of the Task Force on Internet Child Protection, which Nigel Williams was asked to join.

In July the Home Secretary announced a proposed change in the law to criminalise "grooming" - this built on Childnet's original proposal made in February, refined by a Task Force working group.

Advising others

Childnet decided a new web site was needed to provide information about Chat for parents and teenage users.

The family agreed to the website and bravely contributed their story. Childnet sought specialist advice about how this could be done without further damaging the family.

The name www.chatdanger.com was chosen for the name of the site, - it was simple and we knew teenagers and parents alike would respond, - for different reasons!

Stephen Carrick-Davies wrote the content and worked with Web design company Moore Wilson (who sponsored

the design). A number of experts from the UK and around the world reviewed the content. A simple safety message was essential - and one that was focused just on Chat. We came up with the acronym C.H.A.T. and had this designed as a rolling banner to be offered free from the web site. Since October 2000 Childnet has received over 800 e-mails to the Chatdanger site asking for advice about using Chat in a safe way.

Media

Documentaries and TV programmes featured both the case and web site.

Childnet anticipated that the trial of Patrick Green - the perpetrator in this case - would attract much media coverage. The combination of technology, sex, and paedophiles would prove irresistible. However, we believed it essential to get out a positive message and practical advice to parents and Chat users. We therefore decided to launch the Chatdanger site on 24 October to coincide with sentencing. Childnet's chief executive, Nigel Williams, did 30 media interviews in the 72 hours following the sentencing, including the main UK TV news bulletins, radio, and a live Chat session on BBC online. We knew we were getting the message out when someone

registered www.chat-danger.com as a porn site within 24 hours! (subsequently removed). In April 2001 Childnet were contacted by the script writers of the TV soap Coronation Street to advise them on a storyline involving an encounter between a teenage girl and a man arising from contact through Internet Chat.

"I simply had to drop you a note to congratulate you on the simply fantastic coverage for 'chatdanger' ...an absolute classic of its kind, which should go down in charity case-histories as the best way to enhance the profile and address a real, publicly perceived need at the same time."

Martyn Lewis CBE