

Adult Supervision and the Cyber Playground

By Dr. Serena Patterson and Monika Grünberg, RCC

Candace (not her real name) is dragged into therapy by her mother, who has caught the teen spreading a vicious rumour about a classmate on Facebook (or MSN). Scowling, Candace wants to focus the session on “the real problem; my mother’s snooping”. Howard is suspended from school after a webpage dedicated to the sacking of an unpopular teacher is discovered to be his handiwork. He is furious at the school administration for “censoring free speech”. Sadie is mystified by a failing mark on a research project that she completed by cutting and pasting downloaded material from a website. And James, who on a mandated weekend visit investigated his father’s Internet browser’s history, declares triumphantly that his father, “a pervert,” has been looking at pornography online.

The names are made up, but each of these problems has come through our offices repeatedly in recent years. Adults feel one step behind their children in the use of Internet technology, and children run with this advantage, to their own detriment.

Just what is the role of parents in their children’s computer and Internet usage? What is good supervision, and what is ‘invasion of privacy’? What is legitimate research and what is cheating on homework? And do only parents have a right to privacy with regard

to their computer usage, or do those same rights apply equally to every member of the household?

Like TV in the 70’s, the computer is the center of a shared peer culture to which adults are marginal. Unlike TV, however, the computer culture of children is interactive and designed to be beyond the oversight of adults. If TV was a toy, cyberspace is a playground. When adults think about the computer in TV terms, words like ‘censorship’ pop up, with all of their negative connotations of over-protecting children from knowledge itself. But this is not a single piece of culture that children witness, like a book or a play. It is a location for the invention of culture—including new games, tricks, language and rules. It models unique forms of cooperation, creativity, altruism, bullying, theft, and destruction. In this context, “censorship” is a red herring.

If you, dear reader, are old enough to remember playing outdoors, then you know that children resist adult supervision. Doing our best to be out of grown-up sight, we made up complicated versions of role-playing games, from “house” to “army spies”. We pushed our bodies and our courage to their limits climbing things that we weren’t supposed to climb—swing sets, trees, fences, buildings. We spoke “Pig Latin”, certain to baffle the adults, and we passed notes right under their



noses. Sometimes we got away with it; sometimes we didn't. Sometimes we were darned lucky to be caught, like the summer when Serena's siblings and the neighbor children held a club—by candlelight, under the porch of the Methodist parsonage amid the straw bales used for insulation in the winter.

It would be oversimplification to idealize those times as innocent. Bad things happened, and the pain of physical and psychic injuries inflicted during play forms a large part of our business. But much worse would have happened had we been successful in fully neutralizing all of the adult involvement, seen and unseen, that shaped our play. Because they had been children themselves once, the adults knew the territory of our exploits; they knew where to look for us and how to tell, by the unnatural quiet, that we were up to something forbidden. Even when we thought we were unobserved, we weren't. Deep down, we knew that, and that knowledge that there would be hell to pay if we got caught helped to keep us thinking about actions and their consequences. We could insist that our games were "none of their business", that our tree forts were "private property—keep out" and that our rooms were strictly off-limits to parents until the cows came home, but the privacy of children wasn't much respected back then, nor should it have been otherwise. It was our job to protest adult supervision, and it was their job to give it anyway.

If we think of cyber-space as a playground, then we aren't very far behind our kids. We know about bullying, cheating, stealing and spying—we probably tried it all ourselves. And we know that "it's none of your business" is a big red herring; of course it is adult business to steer kids toward their better selves until after they've left home (and maybe even later).

Here are some tried-and-true lines for when kids insist on "privacy" to cover up their cyberspace misdeeds.

Kid: But all of my friends have computers with Internet in their bedrooms, why can't I?

Adult (brace yourself): If all of your friends jumped off a cliff, would you do it, too?

Kid: Why do you read my online journal / blog—it's private!

Adult: If it's a private journal, use paper and pencil and store it under your mattress. If it's online, it's not private.

Kid: You are such a hypocrite—I know what you do with your Yahoo account! Porn!

Adult: What are you doing looking at my Yahoo account? That's like listening at your parents' bedroom door; it's not done.

Kid: But why do you get privacy and I don't? You hypocrite!



Adult: Parents have privacy; children have supervision. It's been that way since God was a child—and it still is.

Kid: I hate you!

Adult: You'll get over it. Meanwhile, "grounded" means no computer access.

Kid: I pay for my Internet account, then I have privacy.

Adult: Paying for it is good—Internet is a privilege you've earned. Let's make a set of rules and a plan so you can earn the second privilege of privacy, if that's what you want.

Kid: I can always sign on at the public library, you know.

Adult (who knows that library space is not private): Oh, and while you are there, would you please pick up my order?

Kid: Why are you so mean?

Adult (pick one of the following; vary them randomly):

- a) Because I'm going to get that 'Meanest Parent on the Block' award this month if it kills me.
- b) I don't know—maybe it's genetic
- c) Because I'm evil
- d) It's not mean to look after your safety

Get the picture? Cyber-misbehavior only looks new and intimidating because it's in the cyber-realm, where we think our kids can out-manuever us. But they can't, because it's still misbehavior and we still remember how to handle that.

One last word: Children need playgrounds that are well designed for safety, and adult oversight that is minimally invasive. Good games deserve some space, and some independence lets kids exercise their own problem-solving and imaginative skills. Some Internet spaces provide this; some do not. Good software can help. But always (a) keep the computer in a publicly visible space, in the midst of (not separate from) family life, (b) keep at least one eye and one ear open, and (c) share with other parents what you know about what the kids are up to.

Next month we are going to talk about another aspect of kid and the Internet: The Internet as a place of commerce and children as market. We welcome your comments and questions. You can reach us at grunberg@grunbergpatterson.ca, or (250) 339-3269.

©Grünberg Patterson Counselling & Psychological Services, 2007. This article was originally published in the *Island Word* newspaper.

