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Press Release

Survey Findings of the “Internet Use by Children and Youth” (31.3.2023)

Founded in 1979, Against Child Abuse (ACA) provides comprehensive child protection services, taking on the roles of educator/trainer, child protection agent, counsellor and therapist, and child advocate. ACA has been committed to eliminating all forms of child abuse in Hong Kong and promoting a caring and non-violent environment.

According to the Child Protection Registry of the Social Welfare Department, there were 1,439 newly registered child protection cases in 2022, in which 443 were sexual abuse cases, accounting for 30.8% of the total cases, second to physical harm/abuse. It is believed that child sexual grooming cases involved, i.e. the abuser got acquainted with the child through the Internet and gained their trust, and then sexually abused the child.

With the rapid development of information technology, children and young people have more and more access to the Internet. It is true that the Internet is a medium for learning, entertainment and promoting social interaction, but if children and young people are overly addicted to the online world, it may easily lead to parent-child conflicts and sexual crimes.

In view of this, ACA had conducted a questionnaire survey on “Internet Use by Children and Youth” from January to March 2023 to understand the situation and potential risks, so as to make suggestions on child protection. A total of 202 valid child questionnaires and 243 valid parent questionnaires were collected in this survey. The ages of the children interviewed range from 6 to 17 years old, 48% are male and 52% are female. The interviewed parents have children aged 6 to 17, of which 7.8% are male and 92.2% are female.

Most children started accessing the Internet in lower primary school

Most of the interviewed children started using the Internet in primary school (37.6% in Primary one to three; 33.7% in Primary four to six), and 20.3% started using the Internet in kindergarten. Most parents also thought that it was more appropriate for their children to start using the Internet in primary school (Primary 1 to 3 accounted for 35.8%; Primary 4 to 6 accounted for 34.2%), and 16% of parents believed that it was more appropriate for their children to start using the Internet in Secondary 1 to 3.

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More than 85% of children use the Internet every day

There was a gap between the frequency of children using the Internet and the expectations of their parents. Most children (174, 86.1%) said they used the Internet daily, while most parents (92, 37.9%) expected their children to use the Internet once to twice a week, 65 parents expected their children to use it daily, accounting for 26.7%.

Children use the Internet for learning purposes less than 1 hour per day

The majority of children (92, 45.5%) used the Internet for learning purposes less than 1 hour a day, followed by about 1 to 2 hours (56, 27.7%), which was similar to parents' expectation. Most of the parents (124, 51%) expected their children to use the Internet for learning purposes less than 1 hour a day, followed by about 1 to 2 hours (76, 31.3%).

Nearly 25% of children use about 4 to 5 hours a day for entertainment purposes

There was obvious difference between parents and children in this regard. 162 parents (66.7%) expected their children to use the Internet for entertainment purposes less than 1 hour a day on average; however, only 30 children (14.9%) used the Internet for entertainment purposes less than 1 hour a day, more children (49, 24.3%) used about 4 to 5 hours a day for entertainment purposes, and only a small number of parents expected their children to use about 4 to 5 hours a day for entertainment purposes (3, 1.2%).

Nearly 85% of children took entertainment as their main purpose, and 60% of children used the Internet to play online games and make friends

Nearly 85% of children took entertainment as their main purpose (171, 84.7%), followed by learning (133, 65.8%), playing online games (123, 60.9%) and making friends (121, 59.9%). More than 97% of the parents (237, 97.5%) expected their children to focus on learning first, followed by entertainment (138, 56.8%), and only 42 parents (17.3%) expected their children to use the Internet to play online games and 34 (14%) expected them to make friends. It is worth noting that 60% of children play online games and make friends through the Internet, which is obviously very different from the expectations of parents.

Exposure of children to objectionable information via the Internet

Among the 202 children interviewed, 120 (59.4%) said they had been exposed to foul language, 98 (48.5%) exposed to bloody or violent images, and 86 (42.6%) exposed to adult pornographic images, 29 (14.4%) exposed to child nudity images.

Among the 243 interviewed parents, 103 (42.4%) indicated that their children had been

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exposed to foul language, 89 (36.6%) exposed to bloody or violent images, and 26 (10.7%) exposed to adult pornographic images, 7 (2.9%) exposed to child nudity images. In terms of exposure to adult pornographic images and child nudity images, there was a big difference between children's actual situation and parents' cognition.

About 45% of children would continue to browse objectionable information from the Internet

Among the 149 children who responded, most children (96, 64.4%) would ignore it and turn to other information, followed by continuing to browse (65, 43.6%); among the 148 parents who responded, most parents (65 respondents, 43.9%) also said that their children would ignore it and turn to other information, followed by continuing browsing (56 respondents, 37.8%).

35% of children had disclosed personal information/shared photos with someone they met online

More than 80% of parents (202, 83.1%) said they have taught their children not to disclose personal information to people they met online, but 72 children (35.6%) said they had disclosed personal information to people they met online, of which 39 (54.2%) said they had disclosed their real name, contact information, school, address, etc., 35 (48.6%) said they had shared personal life photos, and 4 (5.6%) said they had shared personal nude photos. It can be seen that children have insufficient awareness of self-protection and crisis on the Internet.

Nearly 25% of children had been invited out by someone they met online

48 children (23.8%) had been invited out by people they met online. The main reason for their acceptance was to meet new friends, accounting for 74.6%, reflecting children's desire to make friends; 22 parents (9.1%) indicated that their children had been invited out by someone they met online.

97.1% of the parents expected their children to discuss with them when they had been invited out by people they met online. However, 66 children (32.7%) said that if they have been invited out by someone they met online, they would not discuss it with their parents/teachers. The main reasons are, in order, belief in one's own ability to deal with it, not wanting to reveal too much to parents/teachers, thinking parents/teachers are long-winded, worrying about being prevented from going out by parents/teachers, and worrying about being scolded by parents/teachers.

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Adverse experiences children have had with people they met online and how children have dealt with

Among the 202 interviewed children, 16 (7.9%) said they had been bullied (including physical violence, verbal attacks, malicious slander or ridicule, etc.), 9 (4.5%) said they had been cheated of money, 6 (3%) stated that they had been sexually harassed (being hugged or kissed without consent, talking about pornographic jokes, commenting on body or sexual characteristics, etc.), 5 (2.5%) said they had been sexually assaulted (such as touching private parts, nudity, invitation to watch pornographic materials, taking nude photos, etc.), and one (0.5%) said he/she had been lured into high-paying job. After encountering these experiences, they mostly dealt with them by asking their parents/caregivers for help (15 people, 40.5%), and ignoring/not dealing with them (15 people, 40.5%). The neglect/inaction of children cannot be ignored.

Among the 243 interviewed parents, 6 (2.5%) said that their children had been bullied, 2 (0.8%) said that their children had been cheated of money, 2 (0.8%) indicated that their children had been sexually harassed, 2 (0.8%) indicated that their children had been sexually assaulted, and 1 (0.4%) said that the child had been asked by netizen to buy game props in exchange. After encountering these experiences, the parents indicated that the most common way for their children to deal with the situation was to seek help from parents/caregivers, followed by seeking help from teachers/social workers.

Parent-child conflicts were most likely to be caused by children spending too much time online, and children expected to talk with their parents calmly

Among the 202 interviewed children, 93 children (46%) said that they had quarreled with their parents because of Internet access problems. The reasons for the quarrels were excessive online time (74.3%), influence on studies (53.5%), and addiction to online games (47.5%). Among them, more than 70% of the children (72.5%) said that their parents dealt with parent-child conflicts caused by surfing the Internet by scolding, followed by restricting the use of electronic products (52.9%). More than 70% of the children (70.9%) expected their parents to deal with the conflicts not to scold, but to talk calmly.

Among the 243 interviewed parents, 140 parents (57.6%) said that they had quarreled with their children because of Internet access problems. The reasons for the quarrels were excessive online time (81.4%), addiction to online games (45.5%), and influence on studies (44.9%). More than 60% of the parents (62.2%) indicated that they mostly dealt with parent-child conflicts caused by surfing the Internet by restricting their children's use of electronic

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products, followed by setting rules with their children or arranging other parent-child/extracurricular activities (51.3%).

From the survey findings, use of the Internet has become an integral part of the lives of children and young people. It brings many conveniences in learning, entertainment and social interaction; however, children and young people also have the opportunity to come into contact with harmful information and even be harmed through the Internet. Therefore, they should learn to make good use of the Internet, and have to raise awareness of self-protection, and avoid affecting family relationships due to excessive indulging in the cyber world. Handling of parent-child conflicts depends on positive communication.

Recommendations

To the Government:

- ✧ In recent years, cyber-sex crimes and child sexual grooming cases have increased. Children come into contact with offenders through the Internet and smartphones, and it is difficult to identify offenders. It is hoped that the government will formulate targeted regulations, policies and mechanisms to deal with the problem, and require online platforms to establish surveillance systems and identification tools on cyber safety, while internet service providers and social media companies also need to fulfill their social responsibilities to ensure the safety of children when using services, and regularly publish progress reports on related work of child protection;
- ✧ Provide law enforcers with tools to respond to online crises, and artificial intelligence has an important role to play, especially in identifying sexually exploitative materials on the Internet;
- ✧ Strengthen cybersecurity, develop globally recognized standards and best practices, coordinate law enforcement actions in cyberspace, and strengthen government, civil society, and international cooperation;
- ✧ Strengthen the training of professionals, including teachers, social workers, law enforcers, etc., to ensure that children receive timely and appropriate support in the process of seeking help;
- ✧ Carry out publicity and education activities in the community on cyber safety, healthy surfing the Internet, combating cyber-sex crimes and cyber-bullying;
- ✧ According to children's psychosexual development and growth needs, formulate guidelines, implement comprehensive and systematic school sex education, and establish evaluation and monitoring mechanisms.

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To schools:

- ✧ Arrange student talks, groups and educational activities on media information literacy/sex education to help students master safety knowledge and improve self-protection awareness and ability, and set up child-friendly channel for assistance;
- ✧ Carry out educational activities for parents to understand media information, acquire safety knowledge and skills, and understand how to help their children make good use of the Internet and media information;
- ✧ Provide parents with knowledge and skills in positive communication and parenting to promote parent-child relationship;
- ✧ Set up Child Protection Policy, provide regular training for teaching staff, and create a safe and friendly environment for children;
- ✧ Establish a culture of caring and inclusiveness, and promote a campus environment of respect, mutual assistance and tolerance.

To parents:

- ✧ Learn the knowledge and skills of positive communication and parenting to understand the growth and developmental needs of children;
- ✧ Keep pace with the times and learn more knowledge and skills about Information Technology and the Internet, so as to help children establish healthy habits on surfing the Internet;
- ✧ To prevent children from being addicted to the Internet, parents need to reasonably arrange time for their children to study, rest, play/entertainment, after school/parent-child/social activities;
- ✧ If child management difficulty or emotional distress encountered, parents should take the initiative to seek professional assistance.

Against Child Abuse strives to providing families with home visiting service, counselling service, parent therapeutic groups, etc., and provides the parent-child support line: 2755 1122 for service enquiry, assistance or report of suspected child abuse cases.

Enquiries:

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