Cyber bullying, cyber harassment and sexting

SUSAN MCLLEAN
Cyber safety consultant

Karen McLean is giving a lecture on cyber safety for teachers, according to a national survey involving over 1000 respondents.

The study was conducted by Generation Next Australia and the Mental Health and Wellbeing Foundation, and a total of 124 teachers responded to the 35 item survey, which sought the educators’ most common cyber concerns.

Generation Next is an organisation that runs a series of seminars with accompanying resources across the country, focusing on protecting young people and improving their well-being.

Cyber harassment is next in the teachers’ list of key concerns, followed by increasing prevalence of young people using mobile phones and their associated increase of technological issues, at number fifth.

Sixth is scoring sex, then internet addiction, followed by the impact of the internet on sleep, at number eight.

The ninth most important cyber safety concern for teachers is trying to keep up with recent developments in technology and cyber behaviour.

Knowing what cyber safety resources are available comes in at number 10.

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Violent video games and aggression

DR WAYNE WARBURTON, lecturer in developmental psychology at Macquarie University and deputy director of the Children and Families Research Centre

Violent video games and aggression is the subject of Dr Wayne Warburton's workshop at the upcoming event. The popular perception that playing violent video games does not lead to an increase in the likelihood of aggressive behaviour is a myth, Warburton says.

The large body of research amassed over the last 10 years shows this. But a few well-funded and loud researchers using questionable methods say otherwise, he says.

"The way the brain works is you are what you eat," Warburton tells Education Review.

"If you live in a war torn country, a very violent neighbourhood or have very high exposure to a lot of violent media, Warburton says the outcome is the same. "You tend to have a neural network where you have lots and lots of concepts encoded for violence and aggressive ideas. You tend to have lots of triggers that would make you think of something to do with aggressive or violent behaviour."

Additionally, a person has more scripts for responding to a provocation of aggression and how that would play out, he says.

"It's not just media. If that's your life that's the way your brain wires up."

Warburton says video games are great learning tools with many positive applications. He cites pilots, laparoscopic surgeons and soldiers as examples of people who use simulators in their training to act out roles and procedures to perfect moves.

"They're repetitive and behaviour is rewarded." If it is bad behaviour however, rewarding it sends the wrong signal, he says. Warburton says the world's leading researcher in the field, Craig Anderson, and his colleagues from Iowa State University conducted meta analyses using 380 studies with a total of 130,000 participants.

"They found very consistent effects where exposure to violent video games led to an increase in the likelihood of aggressive behaviour, an increase in aggressive thoughts, an increase in aggressive feelings, a decrease in empathy and a decrease in pro-social behaviour."

All the same, Warburton says that video games and media per se were not inherently bad, though it is important to find the right balance.

Warburton says he supports guidelines from the American Academy of Paediatrics that suggest children should aim for a maximum of one to two hours per day of reasonably good quality media.

"If you're watching for two hours a day and some of it is educational, some of it is reasonably benign and some of it is pro-social in its content, then that would be seen as a healthy media exposure."

In Australia, however, Warburton says the average exposure for young people aged eight to 18 is five hours a day, which he adds is more time than spent in school in terms of face-to-face teaching.

Warburton suggests that just as educators teach students about healthy eating they could cover healthy media habits too. And that education needs to be done early on.

"It’s helpful for kids to learn that our brain is part of our body and our brain growth like our body needs healthy nutrition too."

Warburton says it is important to teach children to self regulate in life so that by the time they are 12 or 13, they are making their own healthy decisions about media.

"Once somebody is a teenager, you have no control," he says.

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