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Info

How can we protect children from internet hazards?

One in two European children regularly surfs the internet and they are vulnerable to its dangers, which can range from pornographic images to violent and racist content. So how do we protect our children and teenagers from the hidden dangers of this vast new territory without exercising censorship or damaging freedom of expression? The European Parliament is coming up with new proposals to reinforce the rules already in force.

We often hear of predators who meet their victims on-line. It is all too easy for a paedophile to pretend to be someone else in a chat room or online game. Children tend to more technologically aware than their parents, making it difficult to exercise control. It is hard to find reliable statistics, but a recent survey in Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Ireland and Iceland found that 24% of children who used the internet had experienced unwanted sexual attention. Some 34% of those using chat rooms were invited to meet people, while 22% had actually met up with people via the internet. Today, letting a child surf without control is like letting them go out alone at night.

Where should action be taken?

Initially providers were self-regulating, but rules about content and action against illegal content varied widely prompting the EU to come up with a recommendation on the protection of minors in 1998 and the Safer Internet program. Given the pace of change in the sector a new recommendation is currently making its way through the institutions. Last week the Culture Committee adopted a report by French liberal Marielle de Sarnez highlighting three areas for action. "The pace of technological development in the area of communications media is such that ... new and more innovative measures which are better targeted and meet the concerns of the users of these new technologies" are needed, she said.

The report says the responsibility for protecting the young falls into three areas: the on-line industry, better education and government control, with the best method of protection automatic filters or blocks which stop children from accessing harmful information. The report calls on providers to provide regularly updated lists of harmful sites with common abbreviations.

Hotlines can play a role

Information is crucial. Some EU countries already have campaigns in place to warn children, teachers and parents about possible dangers. The Committee wants the European Commission to launch an EU campaign aimed at target groups to warn the public about the dangers of the internet.

There are already hotlines in some countries that the public can call to report illegal or

suspicious activities on the web. In 2005 they received around 65,000 complaints. To offset the absence of hotlines in some countries, MEPs are proposing the creation of an EU number.

Another suggestion in the report is the creation of a generic top domain name (like .com or .org) for continuously monitored sites committed to protecting minors, for example .kid. But for now the Committee notes, "Prevention and greater parental control will always be the best form of protection".

What's next

The report looks set to be adopted in the Parliament's December plenary session.