

# Theory

## How School Counselors Can Help Prevent Online Victimization

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Although the Internet is a beneficial tool, some youth are at risk for being victimized by Internet predators. School counselors are in a unique position to assist in efforts to prevent online victimizations because of their continual interaction with students, parents, and other school faculty. This article provides school counselors with information about youth Internet use; risk factors associated with online victimizations; and recommendations to assist youth, parents, and families in improving Internet safety practices.

The Internet is widely used among youth in the United States for academic purposes, to communicate with friends, and as a source of entertainment (Gross, 2004; Lenhart & Madden, 2007). Many youth and parents view the Internet as a positive tool that promotes and ensures academic success (Turow, 2000); however, there are negative aspects and risks associated with Internet use among children and adolescents. One of the major risks touted by the media is Internet victimization in which youth are solicited and groomed by Internet predators to participate in sexual and other harmful acts. Some research findings indicate that certain youth are more at risk for being victims of Internet predators than are others (Mitchell, Finkelhor, & Wolak, 2001). School counselors are in a unique position to assist in efforts to reduce and prevent online victimizations because of their continual interaction with students, parents, and other school faculty (Lambie & Rokutani, 2002; Watkins, Ellickson, Vaiana, & Hiromoto, 2006). They are also the most common provider of mental health services to students in school settings (Foster et al., 2005). However, the majority of school personnel, including counselors, report feeling unprepared to address matters related to Internet safety and online victimization (Finn & Kerman, 2004; Wells, Mitchell, Finkelhor, & Becker-Blease, 2006). Furthermore, there is limited research available in general on counseling youth and their families with Internet safety issues (see Burnham, 2009; Rosen, 2007; Wolak, Finkelhor, Mitchell, & Ybarra, 2008). The purpose of this article is to provide school counselors with an overview of youth Internet use behaviors, describe the emerging risk factors associated with online victimizations, and provide recommendations to promote Internet safety among families and assist students who may be at risk for victimization.

### Youth Internet Use Behavior

Internet use is common among youth in the United States. In a recent survey of adolescents living in the United States ( $N=935$ ) who were between 12 and 17 years old, approximately 93% of the

sample reported using the Internet (Lenhart & Madden, 2007). The youth in this sample were more likely to use the Internet if their parents had a college education and a higher income (98%) in comparison to participants whose parents were less educated and had a lower income (82%). Of those who reported using the Internet, 89% used the Internet at least once a week and 61% used the Internet daily (Lenhart & Madden, 2007).

Prior findings (Gross, 2004) indicate that adolescents who use the Internet enjoy communicating with their friends online because this medium provides a sense of privacy, which in turn promotes greater self-disclosure than when conversing face-to-face. However, the Internet is a public entity, which enables complete strangers to contact anyone via e-mail, spam e-mail messages, and chat rooms and through advertising (Jordan, 2002; Turow, 2001). Lenhart and Madden (2007) found that approximately 30% of their sample reported being contacted or receiving messages from a complete stranger while online. A small percentage of youth (21%) were curious about these unsolicited messages and reported that they replied to the sender for more information. Frequently, online relationships are formed from these types of interactions. Findings from the United Kingdom Children Go Online study, which surveyed children ( $N=1,511$ ) ages 9 to 19 years and their parents ( $N=906$ ), indicated that 30% of participants had met a person online, 46% of participants had given personal information to someone they met online, and 8% had face-to-face meetings with someone they met online (Livingstone & Bober, 2005). Similarly, another study (Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2003) assessing Internet activity among 1,501 youth in the United States between 10 to 17 years old determined that 14% of online participants had formed close relationships with individuals whom they met online.

Contrary to popular belief, it is not as common for youth to receive a sexual solicitation as it is for them to be contacted by a stranger. Finkelhor, Mitchell, and Wolak (2000) found that in their sample of youth, 20% received a sexual solicitation and 3%

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received an aggressive sexual solicitation via the Internet during a 1-year time period. Similar findings were found by Livingstone and Bober (2005), where approximately one third of their participants received unwanted sexual or nasty (e.g., upsetting or embarrassing) comments from strangers while online. Finkelhor et al. reported that the majority of youth in their sample did not report being negatively affected by the sexual solicitation; rather, a small portion of participants (25%) reported that the solicitations caused them to feel very or extremely upset and afraid. In particular, distressing reactions to sexual solicitations were more commonly reported by younger participants, those who received aggressive solicitations, and those who received such messages on a computer away from home.

Research findings indicate that the majority of youth are not likely to inform their parents about receiving unsolicited sexual messages. For example, Finkelhor et al. (2000) reported that 25% of youth who received an online sexual solicitation informed a parent, whereas only 7% of parents were aware that their child had received sexual comments online in another study (see Livingstone & Bober, 2005). Reasons that the majority of youth do not report online sexual solicitations to their parents could include being too embarrassed or uncomfortable to discuss the occurrence or that such solicitations are only minimally distressing to them (Mitchell et al., 2001). Thus, the quality of parent-child communication likely influences how much Internet-related information youth share with parents.

Results from the aforementioned studies suggest that sexual solicitations and encounters are not as common as typically depicted in the popular media. In fact, on the basis of data from Finkelhor and Dziuba-Leatherman (1994), youth are more likely to encounter intrafamilial sexual abuse, date rape, and gang violence than they are to receive an online sexual solicitation from a stranger. Although this information may be reassuring to parents and practitioners, precautions still need to be taken to prevent Internet victimizations, especially because certain subgroups of youth are at higher risk of victimization than are others (Mitchell et al., 2001, Mitchell, Finkelhor, & Wolak, 2003). In particular, school counselors and parents can promote Internet safety and intervene before online solicitations elicit lasting harm to youth by being aware of and identifying the emerging risk factors associated with online victimization.

## Emerging Risk Factors

Prior research on youth Internet activity has resulted in the identification of emerging risk factors for victimization (Fleming, Greentree, Cocotti-Muller, Elias, & Morrison, 2006; Jordan, 2002; Livingstone & Bober, 2005; Mitchell et al., 2001). Many of these risk factors are also associated with a variety of other problem behaviors, such as substance abuse, unsafe sexual practices, and gang membership (Burrow-Sanchez, 2006). Some comparisons have also been made between the risk factors associated with viewing negative television programming (e.g., content that is developmentally inappropriate in terms of violence, sex, and horror) and using the Internet

(Jordan, 2002; Livingstone, 2007). However, these two technological mediums have unique differences as described in the following sections. It is important that school counselors familiarize themselves with the following individual and familial risk factors, so they can assess students for the potential of online victimization: lack of interpersonal communication, lack of coviewing, discrepancy in expertness and decision making, problems with restrictive mediation, lack of rules and rule enforcement, and characteristics of at-risk youth.

### Lack of Interpersonal Communication

Many parents experience difficulty in initiating and maintaining a conversation with their child about uncomfortable topics such as substance use and sexual activity (King & Lorusso, 1997). Parents and youth also have different perceptions of what they consider to be a "good talk" about risky behaviors (Jaccard & Dittus, 1993). For example, Raffaelli, Bogenschneider, and Flood (1998) assessed adolescent perceptions of the conversations they had about sexuality with their parents. Results indicated that 50% of the sample stated they had one "good talk" about sexuality with their mother during the past year, and only 33% of participants stated the same about their father. Even though these types of conversations may be difficult for parents, effective parent-child communication is a protective factor against many problem behaviors for youth (Hawkins, Catalano, & Miller, 1992). Prior research on parent-child communication and television programming suggests that effective interpersonal communication positively influences youth perceptions of and reduces participation in risky behaviors. For instance, in one study (Peterson, Moore, & Furstenberg, 1991), female high school students who discussed media programming and events less frequently with their parents reported nearly twice the sexual experience rate than did their counterparts who discussed media more frequently. The findings from another study conducted in Australia (Fleming et al., 2006) indicated that children of parents who had not discussed Internet safety reported engaging in poorer safety practices, such as giving their password to someone they met online or accepting a gift or picture through the mail from an online acquaintance, compared with children whose parents had Internet safety discussions with them.

### Lack of Coviewing

The Internet is a more difficult medium for parents to coview with their children for a number of reasons. For example, the content and advertisements found on Internet websites are designed to attract the interests of specific target audiences (e.g., teens, adults) compared with television, which typically has certain blocks of programming targeted toward the entire family (Eastin, Greenberg, & Hofschire, 2006). Prior research on television has indicated that when coviewing occurs, parents and children are more likely to watch programs that both parties find entertaining rather than specific children's programming (Jordan, 2002). In addition, parents who coview television programs with their children tend to generally enjoy watching television. Thus, television mediation strategies are more likely influenced by parents' affinity toward television than

by their desire to protect or inform their child about this medium (Jordan, 2002). This idea also extends to parents who coview the Internet with their children. For example, Livingstone and Bober (2005) found that one third of the youth in their sample reported that their parents knew what they were doing online, and smaller numbers of youth reported that their parents stay in the same room (22%) or keep an eye on the screen (17%) while they were online. Furthermore, one third of the parents surveyed indicated that they sat with their child while they were online.

It can be confusing for parents to know when they need to coview the Internet because of the undefined role of this medium (Livingstone, 2007). For example, should the Internet be viewed as a form of entertainment, an educational tool, or both? In other words, the Internet is a difficult medium to domesticate because unlike television, it has no universal location within the home (e.g., living room) nor does it have only one explicit purpose. Specifically, Livingstone (2007) argued that after being purchased, a computer is often moved from room to room as families use a variety of strategies to domesticate a machine originally designed for the workplace. One domesticating strategy that some parents use is to allow their child to have a computer in his or her bedroom, which can serve to increase unmonitored Internet time as well as potentially increasing the child's isolation from the rest of the family. Research has found that youth with television sets in their bedrooms were more likely to watch programs that their parents would not approve (Holz, 1998; Reyna & Farley, 2006). Therefore, placing a computer in a child's room increases the potential for that child to view material on the Internet that his or her parents would not approve.

### Discrepancy in Expertness and Decision Making

Some parents express difficulty in mediating their children's Internet use because they see their child, real or imagined, as the computer expert in the family (Turow, 2001). In a telephone interview of 804 randomly selected youth ages 10 to 17 years, 67% reported that they possessed more knowledge about the Internet than their mother did, and 50% stated the same about their father (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2003). The disparity in knowledge and skills level of the Internet can influence family decision-making practices. For example, 167 parent-adolescent pairs completed a family decision-making survey to determine the amount of influence adolescent participants felt they had on their family's decision of a vacation purchase (Belch, Krentler, & Willis-Flurry, 2005). Results indicated that participants who perceived themselves as Internet mavens believed they had more influence in the family decision-making process of a vacation purchase in comparison to participants who did not view themselves as Internet experts. These findings are troublesome because even though youth are perceived as Internet experts, they are not experts in making decisions.

It is clear from brain research that the frontal lobe, which controls executive functions such as decision making, is not fully mature during adolescence; this biological observation is likely related to the finding that adolescents tend to underestimate the harmful consequences and long-term effects associated with risk-taking behavior (Reyna & Farley, 2006).

Adolescents also primarily make decisions on the basis of the perceived benefits of their intended behavior as opposed to the perceived risks. In regard to the Internet, there are differences in how parents and their children perceive the veracity of material found online and disclosure of personal information. Specifically, youth are more likely to trust the information found on the Internet compared with adults (National Public Radio, 2000). Furthermore, youth are more willing to disclose personal information over the Internet than are adults (Livingstone & Bober, 2006). Turow (2000) found that 45% of youth in his sample reported that they were much more likely than their parents to send sensitive personal and family information over the Internet to commercial websites in exchange for a gift. Thus, youth may be perceived as savvy Internet users; however, because of their limited decision-making capabilities, youth are more likely to be taken advantage of by those wanting to victimize or exploit individuals using the Internet in comparison to adults.

### Problems With Restrictive Mediation

Some parents attempt to decrease the amount of potentially harmful material their children are exposed to by installing blocking and filtering software programs (Mitchell, Finkelhor, & Wolak, 2005). These programs can create unintended problems by blocking some educational or other appropriate content in addition to unwanted material (Fleming et al., 2006). Mitchell et al. (2005) found that the use of filtering and blocking software was associated with only a modest reduction in unwanted exposure to negative content such as pornography or websites containing sexual connotations, which suggests that these software programs are not a panacea. Instead of using blocking software programs to prevent exposure to negative online material, parents could recommend educational or age-appropriate websites to their children to view. However, this is a difficult task for parents in comparison to recommending television programs because resources such as the *TV Guide* or V-chip (viewer-control chip) ratings do not exist for the Internet (Jordan, 2002).

Restrictive mediation such as filtering and blocking software has the potential to create tension between parents and youth (Turow, 2000). Livingstone and Bober (2006) found that youth in their sample were more concerned about maintaining privacy from people they knew compared with people they did not know. More specifically, 69% of youth reported that they did not like their parents monitoring or restricting their Internet use, which included checking their e-mail, blocking certain websites, and checking on their Internet use without their knowledge. To avoid this invasion of their privacy, 38% of youth reported deleting e-mails to prevent anyone from reading them, 38% minimized a window when someone else came into the room, 17% deleted the website history list, 17% deleted unwanted cookies, 12% hid or mislabeled files to keep them private, and 12% used someone else's password without their permission. A specific evasion technique used by youth in online chat rooms is the POS (parent over shoulder) acronym, which is entered when parents are nearby (Greenfield, 2004a).

### Lack of Rules and Rule Enforcement

Mitchell et al. (2003) found that the majority of parents in their sample (84%) reported having Internet use rules. Rules included limiting online purchases, coviewing, restricting use when not home, installing monitoring software, and setting time limits for using the Internet (Eastin et al., 2006; Lenhart & Madden, 2007; Livingstone & Bober, 2006). However, youth's perceptions are often different from their parents regarding Internet rules. Livingstone and Bober (2006) found that 77% of parents (and 54% of youth) reported that their child was not allowed to buy anything online, whereas 62% of parents (and 40% of youth) reported that their child was not allowed to chat online. Less than half of the youth surveyed (42%) indicated that they had to follow rules regarding time spent online, and only 25% of youth reported that their parents asked what they did while on the Internet.

### Characteristics of At-Risk Youth

Specific characteristics are associated with certain youth being at higher risk for Internet victimization. For example, some youth will turn to the Internet for solace and support they are not able to obtain in the real world. Youth who are drawn to forming close online relationships are at higher risk for being victimized (Wolak et al., 2003). This includes youth who have difficulty forming effective interpersonal relationships with others in their lives, such as parents and peers (Hazler & Denham, 2002). Adolescents with depression and related mental disorders are more likely than their mentally healthy counterparts to form online relationships in order to cope with or ameliorate their feelings of loneliness (Wolak, Finkelhor, & Mitchell, 2004). Regarding gender, girls are more at risk than boys for online victimization (Wolak et al., 2004). For example, girls who become sexually active during early adolescence are particularly susceptible to online victimization (Wolak et al., 2008) because they are more likely to participate in unsafe sexual practices (Ponton & Judice, 2004) and be intimately involved with older adults (Leitenberg & Saltzman, 2000, 2003; Manlove, Moore, Liechty, Ikramullah, & Cottinghamman, 2005). Another vulnerable group is questioning or homosexual youth who use the Internet to seek contacts or information about their sexual orientation. A quarter of Internet predator arrests involve relationships between male adolescents and adult men, and thus it becomes reasonable to assume that some predators target homosexual youth in the guise of assisting them in sorting out issues regarding sexual orientation (Wolak et al., 2004). Last, children and adolescents are more likely to be victimized online if they participate in certain risky behaviors while using the Internet. Ybarra, Mitchell, Finkelhor, and Wolak (2007) considered youth as being high risk for online victimization if they interacted with unknown people via the Internet and participated in at least four other risky online behaviors (e.g., talking online to unknown people about sex, searching for pornography online, being rude or nasty online, sending personal information to unknown people online).

### Recommendations

School counselors are in a unique position to prevent online victimization in a variety of ways because of their continual contact with both students and parents (House & Martin, 1998; Lambie & Rokutani, 2002; Watkins et al., 2006). As described in the previous sections, mediating youth Internet activity is a difficult task for parents. Not only are youth viewed as the expert in Internet use, but also parents have to walk a fine line between protecting their children from online solicitations while respecting their children's privacy (Livingstone, 2007). Parenting strategies for regulating Internet use in the home are slowly emerging but so are tactics for youth to evade parental regulations and restrictions. Fortunately, however, school counselors can assist students and their parents in preventing online victimization by implementing the psychoeducational and other counseling strategies described as follows (see also Table 1). Furthermore, school counselors can use specific strategies with students who are at high risk for online victimization (see also Table 2). It is important to note that the following recommendations take into account the general time and resource limitations that school counselors face on a daily basis. Many of these strategies can also be integrated into current projects and curricula or delegated to other individuals (e.g., teachers and parents) as highlighted in the following section. Therefore, it is important for school counselors reading this article to think of ways these strategies can be used in their own school settings.

**TABLE 1**

**Internet Safety Strategies for School Counselors to Provide Parents**

Prevention Area	Specific Strategy
Improve parent-child communication in relation to Internet use	Discuss benefits and dangers of using the Internet, including issues related to child sexual abuse Discuss appropriate and inappropriate content found on the Internet Discuss appropriate and inappropriate sending of personal information over the Internet Discuss who Internet predators are and ways to protect oneself from them Discuss privacy-related issues for youth
Participate in child's Internet activity	Implement (or increase) time spent coviewing Search for appropriate Internet sites together
Place computer in public place	Place computer in family room, kitchen, or other high-traffic area
Establish and reinforce Internet use rules	Negotiate and establish age-appropriate Internet use rules and appropriate consequences for breaking rules Publicly post Internet use rules in the home Enforce Internet use rules as appropriate Modify Internet use rules as the child (or children) grows older

TABLE 2

### Internet Safety Strategies for School Counselors When Working With Students at Risk for Online Victimization

Intervention Area	Specific Strategy
Assess for unsafe online behavior and other associated risk factors	<p>Ask about unsafe online behaviors and other risk factors, including</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• sharing personal information and interacting with unknown people met online</li> <li>• using the Internet to make rude and nasty comments or harass others</li> <li>• visiting X-rated websites on purpose</li> <li>• as appropriate, assessing for offline experiences with substance use, depression and stress, and physical and sexual abuse</li> </ul>
Provide education about online relationships	<p>Have an interactive discussion about</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the benefits and dangers of using the Internet, including issues related to child sexual abuse</li> <li>• appropriate and inappropriate sending of personal information over the Internet</li> <li>• who Internet predators are and ways to protect oneself from them</li> </ul>
Promote development of coping skills	<p>Teach problem-solving, decision-making, communication, assertiveness, anger management, and mood management skills</p> <p>Assist students in forming offline supportive relationships with peers and adult role models</p>
Report online victimizations	<p>CyberTipline: <a href="http://www.cybertipline.org">http://www.cybertipline.org</a> or 1-800-843-5678</p> <p>Internet Crimes Against Children: <a href="http://www.icctraining.org">http://www.icctraining.org</a></p>

#### Teach Internet Safety Skills to Students

Internet safety strategies are primarily taught in school-based settings. These preventive interventions often use scare tactics to inform adolescents about the dangers of posting personal information on the Internet (Wolak et al., 2008). Unfortunately, adolescents rarely respond to scare tactic strategies because they do not identify with the provided scenario or they believe themselves to be immune to online victimization (Lambie & Rokutani, 2002). Therefore, it is important for Internet safety education to be realistic and informative, to be applicable to actual adolescent online behavior, and to specifically address the risk factors associated with online victimization. For instance, students should learn who online sex offenders are and the tactics they use to seduce potential victims (Wolak et al., 2008). Adolescents should be taught that disclosing personal information via the Internet, whether in writing or images, is an action that could potentially be discovered by anyone including future employers, university selection committees, and online offenders. Students should also understand that it is potentially dangerous to talk with unknown individuals in chat rooms or place them on their buddy or friends list. Furthermore, youth should be informed to never talk about sex with anyone while online, no matter the situation, because this action is strongly associated with online harassment and victimization (Malesky, 2007). Last, prevention efforts need to

inform students how to respond if they are solicited or harassed online. Appropriate actions would include closing the website, blocking the offender from being able to read their online profile page, staying away from chat rooms, and removing the offender's name from their buddy or friends list. Students should also know who to talk to if they have been victimized, including parents, teachers, school counselors, and law enforcement officials.

As a mental health resource, school counselors can play an integral role in ensuring that effective Internet safety education is provided in their school (Clark & Breman, 2009; The Education Trust, 2003). For instance, school counselors can assume a leadership role and provide preventive interventions as a form of classroom guidance in small-group, classroom, or schoolwide settings (Gysbers & Henderson, 2001). They may also recruit and train both teachers and students to implement Internet safety programming within classroom curricula. This seems to be a pertinent recommendation because many teachers require students to use the Internet to complete assignments. Also, it is important to note that peer leaders should be included in any Internet safety intervention because adolescents are more likely to endorse a preventive behavior if they receive the information from a peer as opposed to an adult (Erhard, 1999). School counselors may also want to use a team-building approach and establish a committee to address online victimization and related issues, such as cyberbullying, in their school (Jackson, Snow, Phillips, Boes, & Rolle, 1999). This committee should consist of teachers, school administrators, community organizations, and parents to promote continual Internet safety messages at school, within the community, and at home. Resources are available for how to form committees to address Internet safety and other problem behavior in school settings (see Stanley, Juhnke, & Purkey, 2004; Storm & Storm, 2005).

#### Assist Parents in Regulating Internet Use

Although the majority of Internet safety interventions are provided in schools, parents can also play an important role in preventing online victimization. School counselors can serve as a liaison between parents and students in incorporating Internet safety strategies in the home. School counselors can reach parents through a variety of formats: designing an Internet safety handout to be made available at the school office, on the school's website, and at school events such as parent-teacher conferences; facilitating parent information sessions to discuss Internet safety strategies and resources; and providing more intensive trainings to include parenting skills to families with students who are at risk for online victimization (Davis, 2005). When discussing preventive efforts with parents, school counselors should be sure to recommend the following strategies: improving parent-child communication, covieing Internet activity, placing the computer in a public place in the home, and establishing appropriate Internet rules in the home (see also Table 1).

A warm and communicative parent-child relationship and an open family communication style are protective factors for many problem behaviors (Greenfield, 2004a). There are myriad resources available to help parents talk to their children about issues such as sex and sexual abuse, substance use, and other

potentially uncomfortable topics (Office of National Drug Control Policy, 2008; Palo Alto Medical Foundation, 2008), and the resources can be adapted to converse about Internet safety. Resources designed for parents for discussing Internet safety with their children are beginning to emerge (see Rosen, 2007; Willard, 2007). As with the prevention programming provided in schools, parents should openly talk to their children about the benefits and dangers of the Internet. This includes parents discussing with their children who Internet predators are, how they might deceive youth, and what to do if a stranger contacts the children while online (Wolak et al., 2008).

In addition to talking about the harms of the Internet, parents should increase the amount of time they spend with their child on the Internet. This includes having the child show the parent the websites he or she visits or having the parent and child search for favorite websites together. Coviewing activities promote interpersonal communication between parents and children and provide parents a feeling of control over their child's Internet activity. Previous research indicates that coviewing also increases family cohesion and reduces children's exposure to negative Internet content (Cho & Cheon, 2005; Greenfield, 2004b).

Because parents cannot always coview their children's Internet activity, they should create a public space within their home for the computer (Greenfield, 2004a). Placing the computer in a community area automatically promotes coviewing between parent and child or other family members. This type of placement also reduces opportunities for youth to conduct Internet searches on potentially negative topics or communicate with online acquaintances in a harmful manner because parents are more likely to monitor their children's Internet activity. It is suggested that families determine the best area for computer placement as well as negotiate how they can respect each other's Internet privacy while also monitoring one another's safety on the Internet. Furthermore, if youth are allowed Internet access in their room or another remote area of the home, then families should establish Internet use rules that promote appropriate and safe use of this media.

Findings from previous research on television suggest that television use is more likely predicted by family rules as opposed to specific television rules (Andreasen, 2001). These results highlight the importance of conceptualizing family rules and mediation strategies with different mediums in the context of larger norms because family patterns, values, and beliefs tend to influence what happens with media in the home (Jordan, 2002). Therefore, holding a family discussion about basic house rules also allows parents to engage their children in a positive decision-making process about how to use the Internet at home (Wolak et al., 2008). Established rules should address what websites are appropriate to visit, time limitations with using the Internet for academic and entertainment purposes, Internet use when youth are home alone, asking permission to use the Internet, what type of personal and family information youth are allowed to provide to others on the Internet, who youth are allowed to converse with online, and parental monitoring strategies (Greenfield, 2004a). Parents should also ensure that rules are fair for each family member, meaning that they are

age appropriate and respect the privacy of each family member. Family members should communicate with one another to determine how to enforce the established Internet rules and discuss how to modify these rules as youth mature and grow older. It is important to note that solely using restrictive mediation does not ensure protection from Internet predators. For example, Mitchell et al. (2001) found that parental supervision techniques, such as having rules about the number of hours spent online and checking the computer screen while youth were online, were not related to solicitation risk. Therefore, parents should use both mediation techniques and interpersonal communication to protect their children from online solicitations. The previous recommendations do not necessarily address what to do when Internet safety issues or concerns arise with individual students, especially those who may be more vulnerable to online victimization. School counselors should use a more intensive approach to prevent at-risk students from being harmed while using the Internet.

#### Identify and Assist Students at Risk for Online Victimization

School counselors can begin by conducting an assessment to better understand their students' online behaviors and to determine how at risk they are for being victimized. Although there is no specific measure available, counselors should ask their students a variety of questions related to their Internet use, including if they (a) interact with unknown people online, (b) send personal information (e.g., pictures) to unknown people online, (c) make rude or nasty comments to others via the Internet, (d) visit X-rated websites on purpose, (e) use the Internet to embarrass or harass others, or (f) talk about sex with unknown people online (Ybarra et al., 2007). As mentioned previously, students who engage in a frequent pattern of risky online behaviors are more at risk for being victimized (Wolak et al., 2008). Counselors may also want to assess for other risk factors associated with online victimization, such as mental health issues, lack of supportive peers and adult role models, substance abuse, previous sexual abuse, and issues related to sexual orientation (Wells & Mitchell, 2008).

School counselors should contact the parents or guardians of a student who is identified as being at risk for online victimization. During this conversation, counselors can describe the risks associated with the student's current online behavior and also engage the parents in designing a prevention plan for the student. They may also want to meet with the parents and student to discuss and practice the previously mentioned family-related recommendations. In conjunction with improving familial risk factors, school counselors can allot time toward developing the student's offline social support network and improving his or her coping skills. For instance, skills such as problem solving and decision making could be taught in an individual or group setting (Greenberg, 2003). Counselors should also spend time educating youth about the dangers of the Internet (Wolak et al., 2008). Similar to the parent recommendations, these types of discussions should be developmentally appropriate and highlight the dangers of sharing personal information with unknown individuals online. Last, assisting students who have been

victimized online is beyond the scope of this article; however, if victimization occurs, school counselors need to ensure that the incident is reported and that the student receives a referral to receive the appropriate assistance (Wolak et al., 2008). There are website resources available to assist school personnel in appropriately responding to this type of event (see Table 2).

## Conclusion

Internet use is rapidly increasing among youth, and it can serve as a beneficial educational tool but does come with certain risks. The rate of online sexual solicitation for youth is lower than commonly portrayed in the popular news media but does place some youth at risk for victimization. In general, youth who prefer online relationships, as opposed to relationships in the real world, are at particular risk for victimization. Other factors that increase the risk of being harmed online are poor interpersonal communication between parents and children, lack of coviewing, lack of rules and reinforcement, solely using restrictive mediation techniques to control Internet use, and engaging in risky online behaviors. Fortunately, school counselors can provide assistance to students and families for successfully negotiating issues related to using the Internet safely. Such strategies are providing effective school-based prevention programming to students and informing parents on how to improve parent-child communication, develop and reinforce family rules for Internet use, place the computer in a public place, and increase time spent coviewing Internet activity. Counselors can also assist students who may be especially vulnerable to online victimization by assessing for unsafe online behaviors and other risk factors, engaging parents in establishing a prevention plan, and enhancing students' coping skills.

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