

Using the Internet and Technology as a Violence Prevention Tool

2007 Provincial School Resource Officer Manual
Constable Scott Mills-Toronto Police Service School Crime Stoppers

The common theme of using the Internet and technology as a violence prevention tool is combining the power of positive relationships with the effective use of modern technology.

The reality is that there is a major communication gap between modern youth and their adult mentors relating to technology. This section is designed to offer some proactive tools to school resource officers, and any adult engaged in a position of trust with a youth.

Building relationships of trust in a multi-disciplinary model that includes students, parents, teachers, school security officials, school administrators; mental health professionals, social workers and the police are paramount to keeping a school and the community safe.

Using technology readily available to the ordinary citizen, such as the Internet and cell phones can allow an adult engaged with a youth to gain the necessary information in a timely fashion to prevent a violent incident, including everyone's worst nightmare, a school shooting.

If done with tact, and under the right circumstances, the relationship of trust between the adult involved and the youth will not be compromised, but will be enhanced by the positive use of technology, which in some circles, especially if the intervention is being done by a school police officer, would be seen as an intrusion into the privacy of a student.

The following Supreme Court of Canada decision should be referenced to support in law the use of technology as a prevention tool for youth violence.

- R v. M (M.R.), [1998] 3 S.C.R. 393
- The rights of an individual student sometimes have to be compromised to ensure the safety of the school**
- Case cited in 2006 Yukon Threat Assessment document research
- Concept is fully supported by the Canadian Centre of Threat Assessment and Trauma Response www.cctatr.com

At a Toronto, Ontario school conference in 2007, Betsy Thompson, a first responder to the 1999 Columbine High School shooting, and currently the head of student services from the Jefferson County School District in the state of Colorado, was asked a key question by an audience member after her presentation.

"What 3 things must be addressed in order to prevent school shootings?"

Betsy's response was:

1. Relationships with students are key
 - models of relationships more important than the curriculum

2. Invest in prevention programs
 - funding traditionally lacking
3. Have to be realistic
 - need intervention strategies
 - risk assessment strategies..

Betsy finished her presentation by stating "In years to come we would like history books to say that on April 20, 1999, Columbine High School united the world in creating a better place for the future. If we remember this as a tragedy, then we are dishonoring the people who have aided us in our struggle, and taking in vain the lives that were stolen."

In 2007, technology is a vital component to the life of most students from kindergarten age through to graduation at university. Most modern youth communicate, and use as a source of information the Internet, and cell phones. Text messaging is currently gaining widespread usage among youth.

The majority of youth frequently use some form of instant messaging (MSN, Yahoo, Aim) and belong to at least one, and likely several, social networking sites (MySpace, Facebook, Bebo) and video sharing websites (YouTube).

At the time of writing this training manual, many adults in positions of relationship building with youth are unofficially utilizing the power of the Internet and technology to curb violence. Once some type of formal training is offered on this subject, most of these adults see real value in using the Internet and cell phones as a violence prevention tool. The technological skills of younger, engaged police officers must be utilized by police services to engage youth in our communities.

A problem still exists with police officers, probation officers and youth workers not having the proper equipment to effectively use technology as a violence prevention tool. In reality, all that is needed is a computer hooked up to the Internet. The optimal situation would be that each school officer was assigned a portable lap top computer with a portable/covert Internet connection that they could have with them at their schools in the circumstances where they are able to engage youth. In the interim, using any computer readily accessible to the Internet is better than not looking into the Internet usage of a youth at risk.

Simply asking a youth for their e-mail address, their social networking site, or video sharing website URL is all that is needed. Never ask for passwords, and always strive to have a healthy two way dialogue with the youth about their Internet postings. Involve parents and school administrators in the conversations whenever possible. Think of preventing violence and multi-disciplinary collaboration, and not just evidence for court.

In order to properly explain what techniques you are using to prevent violence, it is helpful to think outside of the realm of traditional law enforcement. Think of the media finding the blog of a disturbed youth who has committed a violent act, and showing it on the evening news, often without the investigating police officers even knowing about the existence of the blog. In the role of the school police officer or any adult in the life of a youth, you can find those disturbing postings before an incident occurs by asking the youth to direct you to the websites during early

interventions for minor incidents. The risk factors are there. They cannot be ignored. Using technology as a violence prevention tool will assist you to ascertain the truth, and put you in a position to assist the youth having the problem.

Once disturbing material is found relating to suicide, drug usage/sale, gang activity, terrorism, bullying, school shooting plots and many other issues, then something can be done to engage the youth in the counseling he or she needs that will prevent a violent act for occurring. You now will have online evidence to show to parents, school administrators and social service workers who will be able to help the youth with whatever problem they are having.

In addition, when interviewing any youth about a serious incident, it is imperative to have the youth log into their e-mail accounts and instant messaging accounts. Important clues as to who the youth is talking to currently, and the truth of what is really going on is potentially going to be missed if these avenues are not followed up on. It is not suggested to go into private conversations on e-mails, but there is no harm in asking for the e-mail addresses of everyone noted on the contact list or buddy lists of MSN or an e-mail account. This information will greatly assist you and other investigating officers when investigating serious occurrences requiring immediate action. A prime example is a missing youth investigation. During a recent Toronto investigation, the e-mail addresses collected from witness student Hotmail accounts were used to send an invitation to view a YouTube.com video making a plea for tips in the disappearance of three missing teens.

It is a good idea to suggest to the youth and their parents to go through their 'buddy lists' on their instant messaging accounts, and delete any contact that they are no longer speaking with, or they don't know, as a prevention measure. On most instant messaging systems, each user has the capability of posting a message for everyone to see who is on their buddy list. Youths can be bullied by messages sent in these contact lines without a direct transmission of a message or e-mail. Contacts on the buddy list of a youth with whom the youth is no longer in contact with, or is having a problem with, should be removed from the active 'buddy list' as a prevention measure.

There are basic fundamentals of Internet safety that must always be instilled and reinforced with youth. These basics need to be fully understood by the adults in mentoring positions-especially school resource officers, as you will often be asked by school administrators, teachers and parents for your advice on these issues. The issues must be addressed with tact and intelligence with the youth, but we must first understand the issues ourselves.

If the adults do not understand technology issues well, youth will often dismiss the adult as 'stupid' based solely on the adult's lack of knowledge on the latest technology. The youth of today grew up with the Internet, much like the adults of today grew up with television and radio. A conscious effort on the part of school resource officers to familiarize themselves with the following information will go a long way to preventing a violent incident.

Top Six Concerns for Internet Safety

1. **Passwords** – treat them like your toothbrush.. and don't share them
2. **Webcams** – you never know who is watching/saving images
3. **Personal Information** – Never sign up for e-mail accounts, social

- networking sites or video sharing sites with your real personal identifiers such as name, address, phone #, school and date of birth
4. **Relationships Online** – you never really know who is on the other end of your online conversation
 5. **Buddy Lists/Strangers** – your buddy list should be kept to those persons you know and trust at all times.. never let strangers into your list
 6. **Public Nature of Digital Information** – everything posted to the Internet in any form is subject to being cached by a search engine, and remain searchable on the Internet forever

The Important Facts

- (a) Items uploaded to the internet are permanent. They are seldom ever deleted. This includes blog posts, pictures, and video files.
- (b) Peer to peer programs, such as Lime wire or Bit torrent, can open pathways to your machine through which you may be attacked.
- (c) Do not download files from a source that you do not trust, it may possess viruses or spy ware that can prove harmful to you or your computer.
- (d) 'Cookies' accumulated on your computer from surfing the web can contain spy ware that is potentially dangerous to your privacy.
- (e) Re-direct sites (web sites with similar spelling to high traffic web sites) often record the IP addresses that 'ping' them as well as often send out harmful 'cookies'. The hosts of the sites can later use these resources to negative effect.
- (f) Your IP address can easily be traced to a specific location. Be careful of where you navigate on the web.
- (g) Fill your online profiles with fabricated information. Anyone may be looking at it at any time of day.
- (h) Anything typed through chat programs such as MSN (or now, Windows Live Messenger) is recorded on the host server machine and can be recalled at anytime. If you would like something to remain private, use the phone or speak face to face.
- (i) If you receive an e-mail from a source that you do not trust, delete it and/or block the source. Do not open any attachments or click on any highlights such as "Click here to stop receiving these messages."
- (j) Do not complete a survey or apply for a contest unless it's from a source that you trust. Doing so may lead to your private or semi-private information being released to several spam e-mail services.
- (k) If you are unsure about whom you might be talking to online, ask them a question only they would know the answer to.
- (l) Any information or photos, no matter how secure, can be recorded via: screenshot.
- (m) Be cautious about what you say, type, or post online. If a relationship turns

sour, it just might come back to haunt you.

(n) If you are not using your webcam, unplug it or cover it up. It can be activated and controlled remotely.

- (o) Even if you're loaded with anti-virus software, you must still be cautious about where you surf or what you download. Although anti-virus software is constantly updated to deal with new threats, those threats at least have a short amount of time to run-amok before a vaccine is produced. Don't let those viruses in on your machine by carelessly opening files or surfing on unsafe websites.

Strategies For Social Networking Sites and Video Sharing Websites

It is imperative for school resource officers to check popular social networking sites such as Facebook.com and MySpace.com and popular video sharing websites like YouTube.com for groups or 'tags' that are associated with their schools. Students should be encouraged to set their privacy settings to protect themselves on these sites. Students should be encouraged not to associate themselves online to a geographical location such as their school. A simple reason for this is that anyone can track you down for any reason if your real name and real school is noted.

It is suggested that if a disturbing video is found associated to a student or the school, that the video must be captured immediately. There are many programs readily available on the Internet to save videos from these sites. They constantly change, and can easily be found by doing a search engine check for words similar to 'video download software'. If all else fails, simply use a camcorder or video function on a digital hand held camera and video tape the screen of the video playing on the computer.

Once this video is captured, utilize the knowledge of the school staff to identify those involved to identify the student who filmed it, posted it, and appear in the video. The goal should be to get the video removed from the Internet by the student who posted it, and deal with the issues that the video presents through the normal discipline process.

Keep in mind that the youth who filmed and posted the video is 'tech savvy', and his or her talents could be easily used to operate a legitimate YouTube.com account or school website that promotes the good work of the students and the school with the proper permissions.

By simply suspending this student, and not engaging their technological energy into a positive channel, we are only opening up the door for that youth to continue with a negative path relating to the Internet.

Teacher Bashing Website Strategies

There are several websites that are dedicated to rating and bashing teachers and school staff. There are many school staff members who will bring concerns to the attention of the school resource officer. Most of these staff members do not know where to start to help the situation. The issue is complicated, and often has an international scope because the websites are hosted and operated from countries other than Canada.

The best thing that a school resource officer can do is to take a statement from the school staff member involved and capture the information they are referring to from the Internet using a screen capture program readily available on the Internet.

Include in that statement how the discovery of the information makes them feel, and how they came to know about the posting. The captured information should be made available to the victim teacher to engage any process that they can to address the issue through their school board or teachers union, in addition to any possible charges that could be laid criminally such as criminal harassment.

It is suggested that proving a criminal offence in most of these situations will be very difficult, and other, non traditional avenues of action may be more appropriate for the victim teacher. The bottom line is the information posted on the Internet needs to be captured and made into a presentable and logical form for any action to occur, and the school resource officer can easily facilitate this process.

The Risks To Youth – How Will My Internet Usage Affect Me?

1. JOBS - Fortune 500 Companies are now hiring specialized Internet investigative companies to research online postings made by all current and prospective employees to protect the reputations of their companies, and ensure the integrity of their employees. THINK BEFORE YOU POST
2. PRIVACY - Anyone wishing to track you down for any reason (media interview after a tragic incident as an example) can easily do so from following social networking sites.
3. IDENTITY THEFT – your personal information can be stolen by others and they can pose as you to obtain credit, admission to schools etc...

Simple Rules

- refrain from posting anything of a derogatory nature (don't talk badly of anyone online)
- refrain from posting any pictures online that would cause you embarrassment if you were applying for a job or if a media outlet were to publish a photo of you in the event of you being involved in a major/tragic incident
- Absolutely nothing posted on the Internet is private
- Everything posted on the Internet is permanent.

In conclusion, use a positive relationship with a youth as an opportunity to engage using technology to prevent a violent incident. Technology can be an intimidating word for many adults. The simple version of everything presented here is summarized in the following points:

1. talk to youth about their use of technology
2. ask for e-mail addresses and record them like you would ask for a name, address, date of birth or a telephone number.
3. ask youth to see their social networking site / video sharing sites and mentor

them as to appropriate content based on the information presented in this document. Document these addresses on your computer system as they can become very valuable investigative tools in the event of a missing child investigation.

4. Remember – each youth is different – each situation is different. Your violence prevention actions using technology as a tool could potentially raise a privacy issue. Proper documentation of your reasons for doing the checks to prevent violence will make your actions lawful according to the Supreme Court of Canada.
5. If you can find evidence from the Internet or from a cell phone of that one youth at risk at the right time that allows you to do an intervention with that youth who is posting about committing a violent act, and you prevent that act from occurring.... You will have accomplished what Betsy Thompson talked about in her response to preventing a school shooting. You will PREVENT VIOLENT ACTS and PROTECT THE COMMUNITY.
6. Relationships first... technology discussion second.... A few quick Internet or cell phone checks with the youth present... may prevent a Columbine High School shooting incident in your community, stop a youth from joining a gang, prevent a suicide and even prevent a terrorist attack. It all starts with knowledge, good will, and caring for the community. HOPE, VISION and ACTION.

See two appendixes to this section in the tool box section titled:

INTERNET-BLOGS-CELL PHONES

Youth Violence Prevention

Relationships + Technology for School Administrators
(Power Point Presentation)

PROJECT INTERNET-TRUANCY

Youth Violence Prevention

An operational plan from 14 Division Toronto Police Service School Watch program that puts the threat assessment vision into action using truancy, relationships and technology as the focus points.
(Word Document)