

## **On the Frontline with Cybersavvy Parents**

Moderator: Marian Merritt, Internet Safety Advocate, Symantec Corporation

Panelists:

Lenore Skenazy, Journalist and Author

Monica Vila, Founder, TheOnlineMom

Laurie Coffin, Director of Marketing Communications, Blue Coat Systems

Tim Sullivan, President, School Family Media, Inc.

The panelists agreed that being a cybersavvy parent simply requires good parenting. They claimed that it is critical for parents to engage in ongoing communication with their children and that the school plays an important role in educating parents. They discussed that it is often a challenge to get parents involved in a discussion about online safety because parents are often intimidated by the Internet. The panelists suggested that parents take responsibility not only for their own children, but also for others' children by working closely with their friends and neighbors to educate everyone about Internet safety.

Merritt asked the panelists to define the term "cybersavvy parent." Sullivan stated that the key is good parenting, not just cyber parenting. He suggested that parents give kids freedom online only after they have earned that freedom. Vila encouraged parents to be curious and interested about what their children are doing online, even if they have to fake it. Coffin suggested that although it is impossible for parents to keep up with children, they should know just enough to exercise some control. Skenazy said that parents need simple ways to provide a framework for children to live in and then let the children live in it. Sullivan agreed that he often heard that parents want an easy way to monitor their children.

When asked what choices parents should be making to be cybersavvy, Vila commented that there were very few parents utilizing the controls available. Skenazy cautioned against parents turning into the FBI and following their children's every move online. Sullivan suggested that parents are scared of the Internet because all they hear about is exceptional cases like child abductions. He suggested that there be more of a focus on how to share the positive aspects of the Internet with parents. Vila agreed, but stated that parents will only come to such talks if they are motivated by fear because they are too busy to come to a session about the good things about technology.

When discussing the role of schools in educating parents, Sullivan expressed his frustration with the idea that schools are solely responsible for fixing all of society's major problems. Vila suggested that the role of schools should be to demystify the Internet while teaching children how to deal with risks online. Coffin agreed that children are going to make mistakes and need to learn how to overcome these mistakes.

Skenazy asked what parents should be doing to get children to turn off their computers. Sullivan suggested that a lot of computers have tools like timers to assist parents and Vila suggested that parents cannot abdicate parenting and are responsible for talking to their kids. Vila claimed that if parents are engaged with their children they can combat cyber bullying. She suggested making sure children have different groups of friends and have limited screen time to stay out of trouble. Sullivan suggested having an offline network of parents to discuss these issues with each other

and suggested that parents can remain engaged by continuously asking children what they are doing online. Vila agreed that if parents keep track of the conversations children are having online, they can look for behavioral signals that suggest that children are in trouble.

When Skenazy questioned whether parents were overreacting about online issues, Sullivan suggested it is such a problem because the ramifications are greater online. Coffin commented on the fact that anonymity makes it easier for children to act out online and that there can be a “Lord of Flies” pack mentality. Moreover, Sullivan suggested that there is more of an audience online for bad behavior. During audience questions there was a discussion about the legal ramifications of bad online behavior. A pediatrician suggested that laws vary state-by-state and suggested that parents should preserve any evidence and consider contacting the authorities. Another Internet safety expert cautioned against doing that because experience has shown that police may pursue unnecessary prosecution.

When asked how to reach parents before such an incident escalates, Vila suggested that parents talk one-on-one and adopt families, while Coffin agreed that neighbors should help each other. Sullivan suggested that schools are a natural meeting spot, and Skenazy commented that the issue might need to be linked to another more popular issue (e.g, getting into school or college) in order to attract parents to the meeting. Vila also shared that there were a number videos online that helped educate parents. Merritt wrapped up the session by emphasizing that online safety is a parenting issue. She emphasized that not only must parents keep up ongoing communication with their own children, they should also reach out to others’ children.