

Exploring Why Kids Behave the Way They Do Online

Moderator: Lisa Guernsey, New America Foundation

Panelists:

Dr. David Walsh, President, National Institute of Media and Family

Dr. Marty Klein, Sex Therapist

Dr. Gwenn Schurgin O’Keeffe, CEO, Pediatrics Now

Richard T. McKeon, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

The panelists began by explaining their perspectives on youth online behavior, based on the experience that they have obtained through their various professions. Dr. Walsh discussed how the brain development of teens affects their sometimes “risky” online behavior, and how the lack of real world barriers on the Internet causes them to push the limits set by adults. Dr. Klein stressed the importance of teaching youths how to engage in sexual behavior in a healthy way, which he believes will translate into healthy online sexual behavior. Dr. O’Keeffe said that good parenting is the same on and offline, parents need to learn how to teach their children about the Internet. Richard McKeon explained that the expression of suicidal thoughts and displaying other unhealthy behavior is the same as it’s always been, and the Internet is just a new medium for kids to use to express them.

Dr. O’Keeffe explained that the anonymity of the Internet makes kids feel free to express themselves, but that the speed of transmission of information leads to an amplifying effect when a child is experiencing problems. Dr. Walsh explained that our brain functions differently when we communicate with someone in the real world and when we communicate online, and that the Internet fuels our brain’s natural seeking instincts. McKeon mentioned some anecdotal evidence that youth try to help one another when one expresses suicidal thoughts online, but said that whatever the outcome, it happens rapidly.

The conversation turned to sexting and Dr. Klein pointed out that American culture does not view teenage sexuality in a legitimate way; therefore, we are unable to teach our kids how to engage in healthy sexual behavior. He believes that we miss the point by just talking about sexting, because we are ignoring problems with sex in general that underlie our problems with online sexuality. The panelists agreed that there is a problem with law enforcement in this area, kids who make mistakes spreading sexual pictures online are then getting charged as sex offenders, and that this is wrong and should be evaluated on a case by case basis. Dr. Walsh explained the differing motivations behind sexting, girls do it because boys ask them to, and that this is a result of the differences between boys’ and girls’ brain function when it comes to sex. According to Walsh, boys think of sex on a more physical level, and girls think of sex more in the context of interpersonal relationships, so girls take pictures of themselves for boys because they think it will get boys to like them.

Regarding parenting and teaching children about the Internet, the panelists all agreed that parents need to be more educated about Internet use, but also need to take more responsibility to learn about it themselves and teach their kids. The panelists believe that parents are scared, that parents need to step up to teach their kids how to be safe online, and that parents need to be willing to have difficult conversations with their children about the Internet. Lisa Guernsey wrapped up the discussion by saying that conversation is a great answer to a lot of these questions, and urged people to talk to their kids about the Internet. She also encouraged the technological community to play a role in educating parents.