

A Survey Report
Our Children at Risk Online
The Example of Thailand





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This survey was conducted by Isabelle Michelet

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Published by ECPAT International

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The printing cost of this publication was provided by UNICEF Thailand

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Introduction : Protecting Children Online

By Chitraporn Vanaspong, ECPAT International

Over the last few decades, the Internet has moved from an information source for academics and researchers to one of the most used media reaching all sorts of people all over the world. According to NUA Internet Survey Ltd., there were roughly 100 million Internet users worldwide in 1997. This number increased to 544.2 million in February 2002. The company also estimates that by 2005 there will be approximately 1,000 million users worldwide.

One of the fastest growing Internet user group are young people. In many countries, governments have started to promote the expansion of Internet use throughout the schools system. The Internet has also been installed in home-based computers and become a new toy for the young kids. Internet cafes have mushroomed, where more and more children familiarise themselves with emails, chat rooms and computer games.

Unfortunately, while the new technologies have improved communications and many people lives, they are also being used by dangerous individuals who exploit children. In a number of ways, the new technology revolution has greatly facilitated these exploiters' endeavours, and various cases of child sexual exploitation through the Internet have been revealed to the public in the past few years.

• The Internet and Child Exploitation

Child abusers are increasingly using the Internet to facilitate their exploitation of children in different ways. The Internet is a place where children can be contacted without great difficulty, and which grants offenders little chance of being caught by law enforcement agencies.

Child exploiters like new technology for the same reason as everyone else does: new technologies have made it easier, faster and cheaper to communicate, especially with people who are far away. By using the Internet, people who look for child pornography can download new photos immediately rather than waiting for them to arrive in the mail. Those who want to meet children will surf the online chat rooms, often pretending to be children themselves in order to gain their confidence.

The Internet has also made it easier for child abusers to extend their global reach. In one case, 50,000 images of child pornography were found on a server based in Moscow but directed by email from the United States.

Criminals who exploit children can also enjoy the anonymity of the Internet. By using pseudonyms in chat rooms and fake email addresses, they hope to cover their tracks and avoid prosecution.

• **How can the Internet be a danger for children?**

Children can be abused through the Internet in two main ways. Firstly, they can be exposed to illegal or other harmful materials which they are ill-prepared to deal with e.g. child pornography, hard-core adult pornography, information about drugs, bomb-making or financial scams. Secondly, children can come into direct contact with, and possibly fall prey to, sexual exploiters. Very often those who publish harmful or illegal material, such as child pornography, and those seeking to make contact with children through the Internet for illegal or improper ends, are one and the same.

Pornography

Hard-core pornographic magazines are not easy to get in bookstalls, but this does not apply to the Internet as there are no barriers to prevent children or others from viewing pornographic material on the Internet – whether they want it or not.

In the West, pornography is used by child abusers as a means of de-sensitising children and implying that there is nothing wrong with being filmed naked. Thus, while the availability of hard-core adult pornography on the Internet has different implications for children by comparison with child pornography, it is hard to remain wholly indifferent to it. To effectively prevent children from being drawn towards paedophiles, one also needs to keep hard-core pornography out of the easy reach of minors.

Other harmful material

Aside from child pornography there have been many complaints about the way in which children have been able to access a range of other information or materials e.g. connected with bomb-making, drugs and various sorts of illegal activities. In early 1998 in London, two boys in their early teens downloaded instructions from a web site on how to make bombs from commonly available household items. One bomb was used to blow up a flower bed in a local park. Another destroyed a wastepaper bin. The children were lucky that neither of them was hurt or killed. Children have also been persuaded to buy unsuitable or inappropriate goods over the Internet, or into providing financial data about their household.

Chat Rooms

Another major threat to children emanating from the Internet relates to the operation of “chat rooms”, meeting places in cyberspace.

The major problem is that many paedophiles make use of chat rooms by masquerading of as children and seeking to identify a real child with whom they can then engage in conversation. Generally they will try to persuade the child to go off into a private chat room to take the discussion further. A common approach would then be for the paedophile to attempt to win the child’s confidence, perhaps over a long period of time, and finally to try to meet the child and/or get them to send or receive child pornography. Alternatively, if the child is unwise enough to give personal information which might allow the paedophile to identify the child’s school or home address, abduction becomes a possibility.

The following illustrates the scale of the problem. During operation “Landmark”, Interpol monitored 11,000 users downloading child pornography from multiple web sites. The operation

concentrated on the 400 most active distributors, which led to 130 search and arrest warrants in over 19 countries. Another example is operation “Avalanche” in the U.S., where law enforcement officials arrested a married couple who provided paid access to child pornography web sites in Eastern Europe. They grossed more than \$1 million a month and had 250,000 subscribers from all over the world in their contact database. Research in the U.S. also revealed that as many as one out of five minors regularly using the Internet had received a sexual solicitation online.

- **The link between the Internet and the abuse of children in the real world**

Many people find it is difficult to understand why “just viewing a picture of naked children or letting children chat with strangers on the Internet” can be linked to a serious crime. In fact, there is a very clear link between the screen and the real world. Children who are videotaped or photographed naked are always victims of sexual abuse in the real world; and children who have been exposed to pornography may have been de-sensitised and made to believe that pornographic activity is normal. According to a study by U.S. Customs, the majority of child pornography viewers are themselves child abusers.

- **Thai children's use of the Internet**

In Thailand, the number of Internet users has increased rapidly in the past few years. Whereas an estimated 1.3 million Thai surfed the net in 2000, the figure had risen to 4.6 million in 2002. Although most Internet users in Thailand are between 20 and 29 years of age, the fastest growth in Internet usage was recorded in the under 20-year-old group.

According to previous surveys conducted among Thai users, 42 per cent of young users access the Internet at schools, 31 per cent at home and 24 per cent at Internet cafes. As for their usual activities on the Internet, these youngsters reported communicating with strangers as the number one activity. According to the ABAC/KSC Internet Poll conducted in April 1999 on teenagers and the use of chat rooms, 74.4 per cent of the respondents used chat rooms to seek new friends; 44.8 per cent went to meet their virtual friends in person. Moreover, 75 per cent of the respondents said that they were willing to meet with Internet friends if they had an opportunity. Children and young people do not seem to be aware of what this practice may lead to.

Thai Rath newspaper of 8 December 2000 reported the case of a 17-year-old girl who was raped and murdered by someone she had met through the Internet. This is not the first and only case reported on the papers. There are more sexual abuse, rape and even murder cases where victims had been persuaded to meet with “friends” that they know from the Internet.

- **Are we aware of those dangers?**

Parents

Research has shown that parents – who are the ones closest to children – do not demonstrate comprehensive knowledge about their children’s involvement with the Internet. According to

a survey on 300 parents of children who themselves are Internet users, 40 per cent recognised that they do not closely monitor their children's Internet use. Only 24 percent indicated very close monitoring and 26 per cent affirmed that they do not know how to monitor their children's use of the Internet. There seems to be little communication between parents and children when it comes to Internet practices. The gap seems to be both generational as well as technological.

Schools

In schools that provide computer facilities for their students to access the Internet, school management and teachers are usually concerned about the students' exposure to harmful information, especially pornographic sites. Another problematic type of web site that students like to access at school is games sites, and some schools forbid their students from playing computer games on the Internet. As for communication via the Internet, several schools do not allow applications such as emailing, ICQ and Chat.

Schools also seem to monitor students' use of the Internet – mostly through the same old looking over the shoulder method. A few schools have filtering systems to block obscene images and swear words.

However, while measures are taken against inappropriate net behaviour in schools, there has been little effort to educate the students about the Internet within classroom settings. Most of the surveyed schools tend to focus on the technical side of the Internet, failing to discuss the social aspects and ethical implications of Internet use.

• Addressing the problem

Several valuable initiatives to combat the new forms of Internet crimes have been undertaken in many countries, especially in Europe and America. These include the adoption of appropriate legislation, the establishment of cyber cops units and hotlines for reporting child pornography and other offences on the Internet, the adoption of codes of conducts by Internet service providers, and information campaigns for online safety targeting children and their caretakers.

The Internet Service Providers' (ISPs) Effort

The elimination of child pornography on the Internet also requires actions on the part of the ISPs. There is no doubt that the Internet industry should also be made responsible for addressing this issue, as pointed out by Steve Case, President of America Online - AOL the world's largest Internet Service Provider, who said:

“Let's face it, we are all parents ourselves, and we all want to work in an industry we can feel proud of.”

In several countries, ISP associations have drafted codes of conduct in order to clarify their roles and responsibilities relating to illegal contents on the web, such as EuroIspa, which brings together ISP associations from 10 European countries: Austria, Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain and the UK, altogether representing 500 service providers.

In general, Codes of Conduct for ISPS should include the following provisions:

- Users need to receive information about basic rules related to Internet usage and the legal responsibilities of those using the web as a communication vehicle.
- Minors should be protected from harmful content.
- Protection measures, such as a warning page, visual or sound signals, labeling and systems to check the age of users should be employed when potentially harmful content is available.
- ISPs should provide support for parental control, such as filtering software.
- Effective and easily accessible systems to handle complaints should be instituted
- ISPs should support comprehensive measures in the fight against illegal content offensive to human dignity.
- Basic rules for cooperation between operators and judicial and police authorities should be spelled out for ISPs.
- Procedures should be included for dealing with violations of the Codes of Conduct.
- Thai ISPs would be able to make a great impact on online safety by adopting a Code of Conduct on Internet safety for children. At present, Thai ISPs have begun to cooperate with the police and liaise with each other on this issue.

Hotlines

Hotlines receive reports from the general public about child exploitation web sites and newsgroup postings, and child exploiters' activities that happen through the Internet, phone, print, fax, and mail. Hotlines can be highly successful in fighting child pornography and child abusers.

Hotlines provide the public with advice on how to pursue a complaint against offensive and criminal web sites. It can also ask a poster to remove harmful content and urge ISPs to remove the content. In addition, law enforcement may be called upon, and offensive content from other countries can be dealt with by passing information to local hotlines or law enforcement agencies. Indeed, information often moves faster through hotlines than through law enforcement agencies.

Hotlines also encourage, promote and assist in the development of rating systems. They also disseminate information about the hotline services to Internet users. All good hotlines are transparent in their work, and report in an open manner on their operations.

• International Challenges

It is an enormous challenge for the international community to stop the disturbing trend of child sexual exploitation on the web, which must be combated on multiple fronts. ECPAT's strategy to tackle the problem is threefold:

Firstly, there is an urgent need for comprehensive legal reform in order to update national legislations against child pornography, thus facilitating the prosecution of child pornographers. The Optional Protocol to the CRC on Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography, which came into force on January 18 this year, lays down international legal

standards for this purpose. It calls states to criminalise the production, distribution and – most importantly – the mere possession of all forms of child pornography.

Secondly, greater cooperation between stakeholders, such as law enforcers, the private sector, NGOs, IGOs and civil society must take place. The civil society as a whole must be able to report easily child pornography found online to relevant authorities. In addition, Internet hotlines and the private sector must play a stronger role in facilitating reporting and identification of criminals. Although considerable progress has been made in this area in recent years, there are still several obstacles to effective tracking down and prosecution of criminals on the Internet.

Last, but not least important, education must be provided for children and their teachers and parents – to enable them to use the Internet in a safe way and be aware of potential dangers. As the use of the Internet is spreading rapidly in developing countries, steps need to be taken immediately to curtail the problem before it grows out of hand.

- **What we can do**

It is important to note again that the Internet is not creating new types of crimes against children, but instead child abusers are using the Internet to facilitate behaviours that are already illegal in most countries. The Internet just offers new ways through which such long-existing crimes can be perpetrated, besides being a place where offenders can make contact with children without great difficulty and with a smaller chance of being caught by law enforcement agencies.

Trying to stop children from accessing the Internet is not useful. Instead, parents need to be involved with their children's Internet experience. Teaching children how to handle themselves on the Internet is extremely important. Start by learning to use a computer!

Our Children at Risk Online: The Example of Thailand

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1. Introduction

The growing importance of the Internet and cyberspace in our global society, and in the lives of children and young people in particular, prompted ECPAT International in early 2002 to decide to conduct an online survey in order to gain a better understanding of Internet usage by young Thais and the dangers it may pose for them. The survey results would then be used to help the organisation design appropriate action to ensure that children in Thailand could use the Internet safely. Prasena, a global consulting company, conducted this survey.

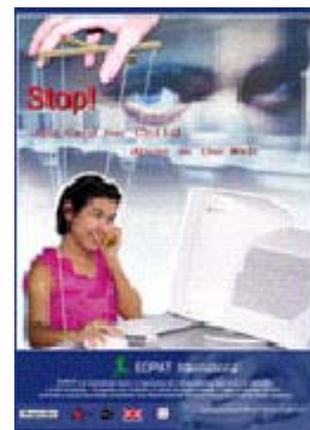
In order to acquire a good picture of Internet usage by young Thais, the survey needed to capture different and complementary viewpoints. The young people themselves were categorised into two groups (7-11 years and 12-18 years) while the perceptions of parents and teachers would offer an additional perspective. The idea was to ask people in each of these target groups generic questions about their familiarity with the Internet with the aim of gaining an understanding of the young people's quantitative and qualitative Internet usage; their exposure to potential dangers; and the types of traumatic experiences they may have encountered already (as perceived by the children, their parents and teachers). The survey designers assumed that the differences in perception among the four target groups would offer lessons as valuable as the responses of individuals.

Another important factor came into consideration in designing the survey: while the Internet per se may carry inherent dangers, it may not be the main source of risk for young Thai users. Rather, the wide array of online communication platforms and tools easily available to children and young people in Thailand may also present significant additional risks. These risks had to be taken into account to ensure that the survey did not give a misleading picture. As a result, the survey included questions not only about use of the Internet (mainly web sites), but also about emails, instant messaging (ICQ, a related feature, is particularly popular in Thailand), web cams, dating boards and online chats rooms.

Finally, because dangers do not lie so much in technological tools alone as in the way in which such tools may be used by ill-intentioned people, the survey was designed to capture the human relationships developed online by young Thais and to allow analysis of the nature and impact of these relationships. The survey also sought to capture the impact of “real life” relationships on young Thais’ use of the Internet and related communication tools, particularly with regard to how parents, teachers and friends may or may not influence the behaviour of kids in cyberspace.

The end result of this process of designing a survey that would capture so many elements was, however, a rather heavy and time-consuming questionnaire. Large numbers of people could not be expected to complete it easily unless participants were fully aware of what was at stake and motivated to spend some time doing the questionnaire. For this reason, the project expanded to include several additional partners willing to help increase the survey’s visibility and to encourage Thai people to participate. The Bangkok Post, a leading English-language newspaper in Thailand, agreed to host the survey on its web site. Local public relations company Frontier Digest took on the task of coordinating promotion of the survey among media representatives, government agencies and business communities. The Thai modern rock band Pru promoted the survey at its concerts and in its CDs. The British embassy in Thailand also provided financial support to help cover the project’s costs.

The project secured considerable media coverage, particularly after the media launch in early July 2002. Articles were published in the local Thai and English-language press, several web sites popular with young Thais posted banners promoting the survey and 1000 posters were placed in cyber cafes, embassy chambers and schools.



The great majority of those who agreed to participate in the survey responded because they had seen the poster or an online banner, or because they had read or heard about it. Most responded online, although about 20 per cent of participants completed paper questionnaires available at Bangkok post offices and some cyber cafes. Incentives were also provided in the form of prizes generously offered by hotel group Accor and rock band Pru.

The survey was kept open for July and August 2002. The data was then consolidated into a central database and Prasena’s analysts filtered out any incomplete, invalid or unreliable data. It should be noted that although the questionnaire’s complexity probably contributed to a reduced sample size, this complexity nevertheless enhanced the quality of data; the respondents had to be motivated and willing to devote time and thinking to answering the questions. The number of discrepancies identified through cross-checking questions was therefore noticeably below the average levels for online surveys.

When the database contained only the valid and useable data, Prasena’s analysts processed the results and conducted statistical analyses within and across each target group. Trends were identified and analysed from the global perspective of the Internet and the local perspective of Thai culture and society.

2. Findings

The 557 useable data gathered allowed a detailed analysis of the Internet practices and experiences young Thai people. For more clarity, the findings have been organised to show the technologies most used by the surveyed children and teenagers; the dangers to which such technologies expose them; the general attitude of respondents vis-à-vis these dangers; and the experiences they perceived as shocking. The findings also highlight the growing phenomenon of online friendships. These may become intimate and lead to face-to-face meetings, with often unwelcome results. Finally, adult support and involvement (or their lack) were also analysed.

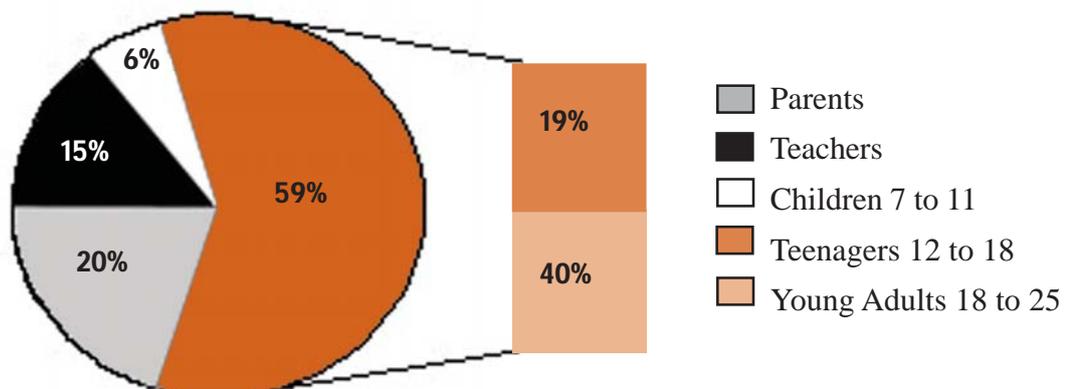
2.1 Sample Analysis

A total of 557 useable data were gathered and analysed. Although they were not specifically targeted, a number of 18 to 25-year-olds responded to the survey and their data has been consolidated with that of teenagers (12 to 18-year-olds). However, separate analyses were conducted where possible.

2.1.1 Children

The useable sample of children was provided by 7 to 11-year-olds living in different cities (mostly Bangkok and Chiang Mai): 85 per cent were Thai citizens, mostly of Thai-Chinese and Northern Province origin; 58 per cent were female; and 85 per cent were studying at local schools, mostly at P3 to P6 levels (primary school grades 3 to 6). Most of the children were cared for after school by their mothers or nannies, but 12 per cent were left alone. Most used computers only for some applications, although 9 per cent claimed to be “computer experts”.

2.1 A survey sample



2.1.2 Young People

The useable sample of young people was provided by 11 to 25-year-olds living in different cities (though most were in Bangkok): 96 per cent were Thai citizens, mostly of Thai-Chinese and Bangkok Province origin; 62 per cent were female; and 84 per cent were studying at a local high school (mathayom) or university. Most used computers only for some applications, but 19 per cent said they were “computer experts” – the younger they were, the more confidence they revealed.

2.1.3 Parents

The useable sample of parents was provided by adults living in different cities (mostly Bangkok and Chiang Mai): 53 were Thai citizens, generally of Thai-Chinese or Northern Province origin; 67 per cent were male; and most were aged in their 40s. The majority held a Bachelor degree (42 per cent) or higher educational qualification (33 per cent). Sixty-eight per cent were professionals who worked outside the home while 15 per cent worked from home.

Thirty-seven per cent of parents were familiar with web cams while 29 per cent did not know what they were. Most, whether they had ever seen a web cam or not, held rather poor opinions of people who recorded their lives and posted them on the Internet. Only 5 per cent thought the idea might be fun. Among the responding parents, their knowledge and understanding of their children’s use of the Internet and online communication tools were at times inconsistent and vague. For each of the questions regarding their children’s Internet practices, 10 to 30 per cent of parents responded that they did not know.

2.1.4 Teachers

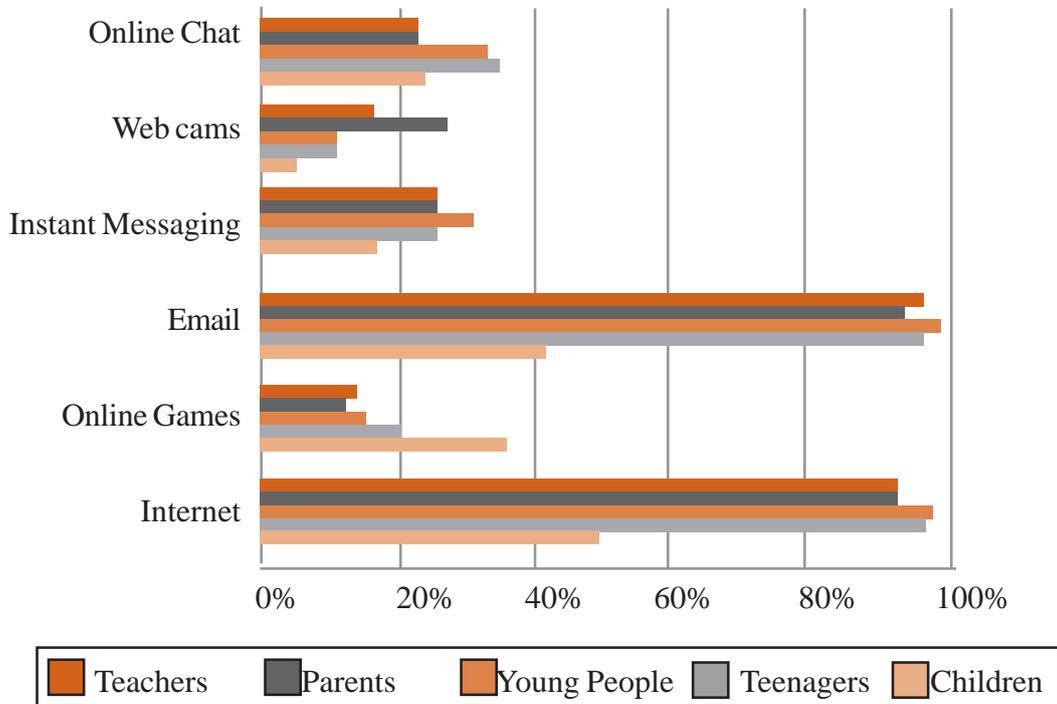
The useable sample of teachers was provided by teachers (73 per cent) and other caregivers (27 per cent) living in different cities, mostly Bangkok and Chiang Mai: 84 per cent were Thai citizens, generally of Thai-Chinese or Northern Province origin; 53 per cent were male; and most were aged in their 30s. The majority held a Bachelor degree (53 per cent) or higher qualification (41 per cent).

The number of students for whom these teachers or caregivers were responsible ranged from one to 100, with the average class comprising 43 students whose average age ranged from 12 to 18.

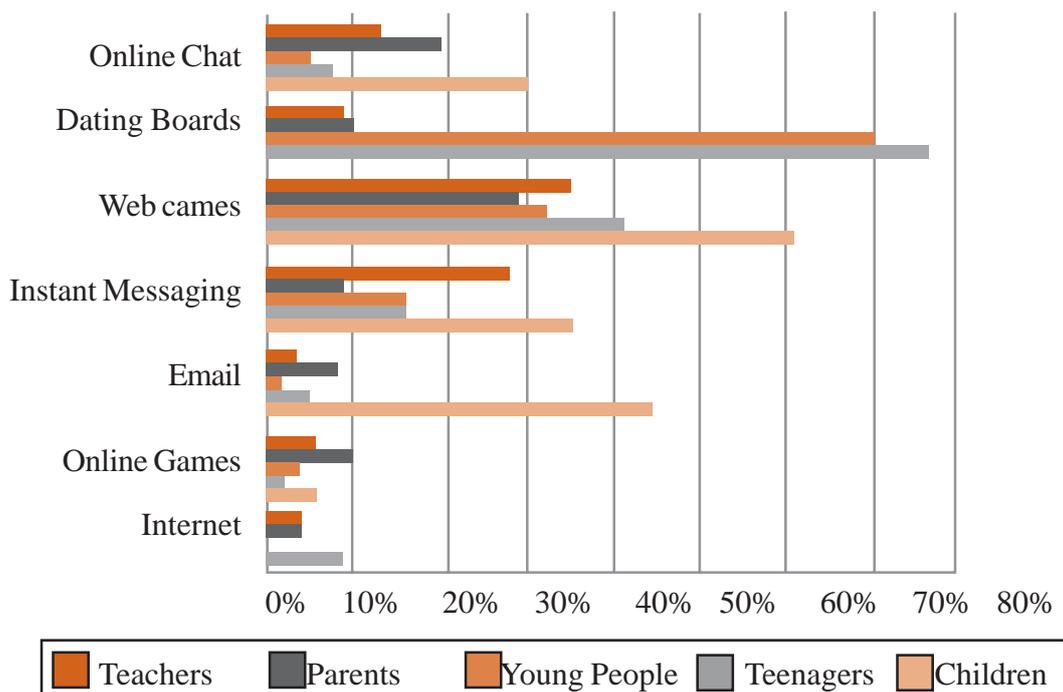
Most of the teachers and caregivers (74 per cent) used computers only for some applications, although 23 per cent claimed to be “computer experts”. Ninety-two per cent were familiar with the Internet; 33 per cent had received user training and the others had learnt themselves or with the help of friends. Fifty-five per cent were familiar with online games while 5 per cent had never seen such games. Ninety-six per cent had access to email, mostly through yahoo or hotmail-type addresses (73 per cent); 60 per cent were familiar with instant messaging while 18 per cent were not; 47 per cent were familiar with ICQ, 19 per cent were not; and 74 per cent were more or less familiar with online chats while 13 per cent had never been involved. Only 24 per cent were familiar with web cams and 36 per cent did not know what they were. As with the sample of parents, most did not think highly of people who recorded their lives and exhibited them on the net, with just 10 per cent regarding the concept as fun.

Their students' use of Internet and related communication features was often inconsistent and vague. For each of the questions regarding their students' practices, 25 to 50 per cent of the teachers said they did not know how their students used these tools.

2.1 b Proportion of respondents who are very familiar with and Often use Internet and communication tools



2.1 c Proportion of respondents who are unacquainted with and never used the Internet and communication tools



2.1.5 Implications of the Survey Sample

Clearly, a survey sample of 557 from a national population of 60 million appears insignificant. Moreover, the educational level of the respondents and their relatively easy access to technologies seem to indicate that the sample is restricted to relatively privileged urban communities. No doubt, this sample does represent only a small minority of the Thai population. Many Thai people live in rural environments and work in sectors where information technologies are limited. In such environments, a limited percentage of schools have computers.

Despite this, Thailand is ready to embrace networked technologies. Its ICT infrastructure is improving rapidly and promises to become even more efficient and wide-ranging within a few years. Several large-scale internationally supported projects are being developed. Cyber cafes are almost everywhere.

The Internet culture is pervasive. Within just a few years, it is possible that most young Thais will be acquainted with and actively using the Internet. Adults may take much longer to catch up if their profession does not require them to do so. This may come as a surprise to many law-makers and education experts who may tend to believe that one needs to be well educated and qualified to use a computer and/or the Internet.

As small as this survey sample may be, those who have analysed the data believe the findings can, and should, be extrapolated to the general Thai population so that “adults” are well prepared to safeguard their children in both the virtual and the physical worlds. Failure to do so would also be to ignore an important additional risk posed to children by indiscriminate use of new technologies.

2.2 Use and Dangers of the Internet

Like all technologies and media, the Internet presents a variety of benefits and risks for users. The risks are amplified by the Internet’s status as a huge library in which the contents are neither centrally organised nor controlled: it offers as much false and biased information as it does constructive high-quality materials. For the purposes of this survey, the focus is on the dangers that may be posed to children and teenagers able to access “inappropriate” materials, especially where violent and/or pornographic contents may lead to trauma for a young person or insidiously affect their sense of values imparted by their parents, teachers and the wider community.

2.2.1 Use of the Internet

Children become acquainted with the Internet at an early age nowadays, provided that access is available, and familiarise themselves quickly with the technology. Among the 7 to 11-year-old survey respondents, 58 per cent played on the Internet for more than five hours a week, and 13 per cent of these children played daily, although only 15 per cent had received any training. Older respondents used the Internet even more intensively, with 90 per cent of young people spending more than five hours a week on the net: 54 per cent of the teenagers and more than three-quarters of the young adults used it daily, although the percentage of those who had received training was low (13 per cent).

Most of the respondents accessed the Internet from home, with the highest percentage of home users being in the teenage group (84 per cent). It may be the case that young adults use the Internet more at work or university while the lower proportion of home users among children (61 per cent) may be because parents are less inclined to invest in a home computer for their “babies” than for their teenage offspring. The latter have more need of a computer for school work, but it may also be the case that parents consider worthwhile anything that helps to keep their children off the street. It should also be pointed out that there is a growing trend – at least in Bangkok – whereby cyber cafes are viewed as convenient substitute “child-care” facilities, where young children may wait each day for their working parents to collect them or return home.

A significantly high percentage of the respondents used the Internet alone. Among young children, some of whom played on the Internet with their families (26 per cent) or their friends (29 per cent), close to 40 per cent were alone for most of the time they spent in cyberspace. This percentage increased to 74 per cent among teenagers and kept rising with age. In the context of the highly sociable Thai culture, where children usually have been “cocooned” until a late age and constantly surrounded by elders and adults, this solitude on the Internet is the more remarkable because it means that children and teenagers face situations where they may make decisions alone for the first time in their lives.

What do young Thais do on the Internet? Children in the survey used the Internet for their school work (70 per cent), but this type of usage was not very regular yet for most of them. Rather, 82 per cent of school children searched the net for fun – 39 per cent of them regularly. They surfed the world wide web, finding new sites mostly thanks to tips from their friends. Online games were great favorites, played by 84 per cent of children responding to the survey.

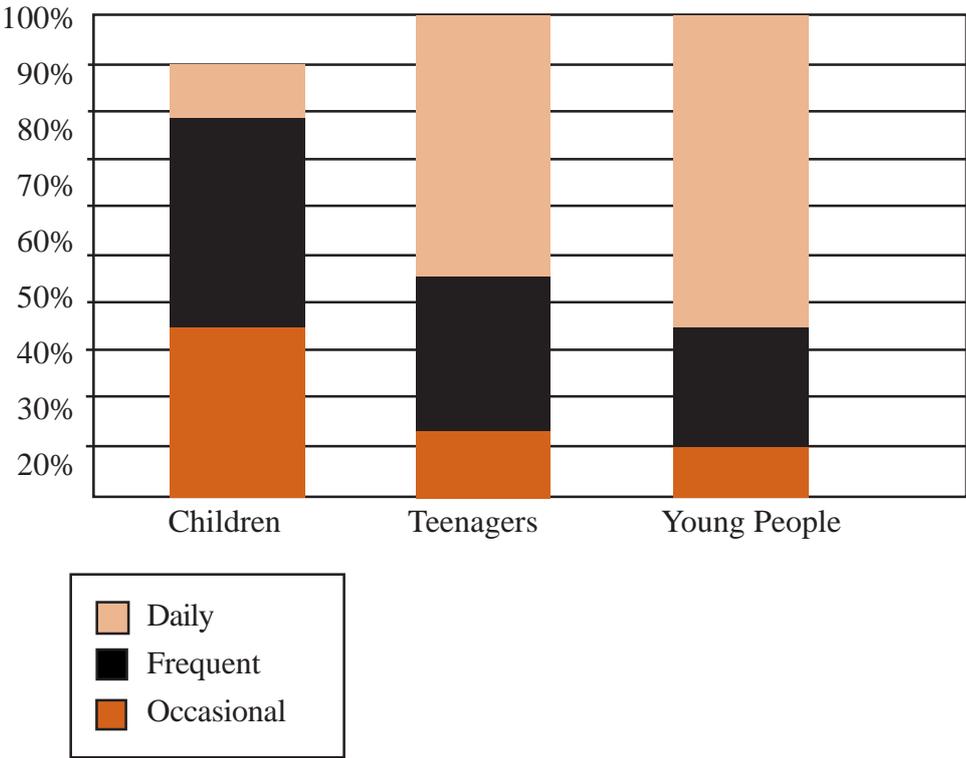
Teenagers and young people also liked online games, but except for an addicted minority, they played them much less often. Eighty-two per cent searched the Internet for their school work, 57 per cent of them regularly. But the net’s entertainment value was more powerful for them than for children: 97 per cent of teenagers and young people searched the net for fun, 84 per cent of them regularly (and 37 per cent every day). Mostly, they surfed the web, letting chance determine the destinations of their cyber voyages. The older they get, the more they tended to structure their search, but tools such as search engines, for example, seem to remain a secondary way of discovering a web site (23 per cent).

Do parents and teachers have a realistic idea of the extent and nature of their children’s Internet usage? Considering that the offspring of most of the responding parents were in the “children” age group, responses tended to indicate that the estimations of parents were not very far off the mark. They tended to over-estimate the time their children spent using the Internet at home with their family, as well as usage for school work purposes, but overall their perceptions of the time spent on the net appears realistic. They also estimated correctly the proportion of children who spent most of their time on the Internet alone. Responses to further questions in the survey, however, indicate that many parents may not be fully aware of the potential dangers in cyberspace, or that they consider such dangers much less “real” and threatening than those in the physical world. In other words, many parents appear to regard playing on the Internet as a much safer activity than playing in the street.

Teachers, meanwhile, revealed a much less accurate estimation of young people’s Internet usage than parents. Responding teachers widely underestimated their students’ use of the net, believing that 68 per cent used it for more than five hours a week (compared with 87 per cent of the young respondents). They believed access was mostly through school or cyber cafes, with only 25 per cent thinking children used the net mostly at home (compared with 84 per cent of the respondents). They thought that most children and young people (29 per cent) used the Internet in the company of friends, family members or teachers, failing to recognise the extent of solitary Internet usage (74 per cent). They also underestimated the use of the Internet for fun, and even its use for schoolwork.

Overall, these responses demonstrate Thai teachers’ poor understanding of their students’ practices. One of the few areas in which they had a more realistic view was in relation to the proportion of young Thais who have received training on the use of Internet; their estimation that 14 per cent of young people had received such training was only slightly above the reality. Considering that Internet use by children in Thailand is a recent phenomenon, this may have to do with the difficulties of education curricula keeping pace with rapid change and the lack of encouragement for teachers to take initiatives beyond official guidelines.

2.2 a Frequency of internet use



2.2 b Young Thais' Internet usage & parents' and teachers' estimations of usage

	Children	Teenagers	Young People	Parents	Teachers
INTERNET USE					
Familiar with Internet	51%	95%	69%	NA	NA
Received user training	15%	7%	13%	NA	14%
USE					
Daily Use	13%	54%	65%	36%	34%
Frequent Use	45%	33%	25%	24%	34%
Sub-total	58%	87%	90%	60%	68%
<5 hours a week	42%	12%	10%	39%	31%
LOCATION					
School	13%	8%	9%	12%	36%
Cyber cafe	10%	7%	9%	5%	35%
Home	61%	84%	80%	79%	25%
COMPANY					
Alone	39%	74%	80%	39%	29%
With friends	29%	16%	8%	10%	36%
With family	26%	8%	10%	36%	18%
With teacher	6%	2%	2%	10%	11%
Use for work >1/week	15%	46%	57%	46%	40%
Use for work <1/week	55%	30%	25%	28%	26%
Sub-total	70%	76%	82%	74%	66%
Use for fun > 1/week	39%	83%	84%	41%	61%
Use for fun < 1/week	42%	15%	13%	34%	19%
Sub-total	81%	98%	97%	75%	80%

2.2.2 Exposure to Pornography and Shocking Web Sites

Although the “children” age group was not asked direct questions about visits to pornographic web sites, responses to other questions show indirectly that at least 35 per cent of seven to 11-year-olds had found themselves at least once, intentionally or not, in a web site displaying pornographic materials.

Among the older respondents, 71 per cent (58 per cent of 12 to 18-year-olds) had voluntarily visited a pornographic web site at least once. Forty-five per cent (38 per cent of the 12-to-18 group) visited such sites occasionally or regularly. Their motivations were diverse: It was exciting, funny, educational, cheaper than magazines, etc.

Two-thirds of those who had visited a pornographic web site at least once had been plagued later by annoyances such as the automatic appearance of sex-related web sites on their browsers, sex-related spam mail and the automatic inclusion of sex-related web sites in their favorites folders. In response, 33 per cent of the recipients of unsolicited material said they did not really care about it while 39 per cent quickly deleted it (by themselves or with the help of a friend). The reaction of the remainder ranged from embarrassment to panic.

Forty-three per cent of the children and 63 per cent of the other young people had stumbled upon web sites which they said shocked them, mostly because they displayed “ugly” pictures (37 per cent and 34 per cent respectively), sexual or violence-related content (21 per cent and 25 per cent), depictions of nudity (21 per cent and 20 per cent), or bad language (14 per cent and 13 per cent).

Yet, even as the encounter with pornographic materials was a painful experience for some young people, many children and teenagers were not shocked by it. Instead, they appear to have developed a double standard in their views about pornography; 30 per cent of children, 43 per cent of teenagers and 52 per cent of the other young people perceived no problem with the idea of distributing a photo of a naked movie star on the Internet, but 9 per cent, 27 per cent and 28 per cent respectively would see a problem if such a photo depicted someone they knew personally.

2.2 c Young Thais’ exposure to pornography and shocking web sites

	Children	Teenagers	Young People	Parents	Teachers
PORNOGRAPHY ON NET					
No problem with depictions of nakedness	30%	43%	52%	NA	NA
Porn site visit at least once	NA	58%	71%	NA	NA
Regularly or occasionally	NA	38%	45%	NA	NA
Inconvenient consequences	NA	67%	73%	NA	NA
SHOCKING WEB SITE					
Encountered:	43%	64%	63%	30%	44%
Depictions of nudity	21%	28%	20%	30%	45%
Sex-related contents	14%	17%	15%	23%	11%
Violence-related contents	7%	6%	10%	3%	0%
Invitation to have sex	7%	8%	8%	17%	11%
Bad language	14%	6%	13%	0%	0%
Ugly pictures	37%	34%	34%	27%	32%

2.3 Use and Dangers of Virtual Communication Tools

Virtual communication tools have several characteristics that are helping to bring our society to the threshold of a new socio-economic era. They enable anyone to join “Internet communities” of people of all ages, nationalities, genders, religions and cultures, where relationships, knowledge sharing and the exchange of ideas may be direct and immediate. Yet the virtual nature of such communities enables members to join anonymously or disguised under assumed identities. When all members are aware of this possibility and the potential consequences, anonymity or disguise may be regarded as part of a game or as a positive element. But they may also become a dangerous tool for manipulation when used by unscrupulous people who seek to prey on naïve Internet users. As a result, the security of anonymity favours paedophiles on the prowl.

This trend of preying on young Internet users is explained easily by the increasing number of children who, even at an early age, employ these very user-friendly tools. Among the survey’s respondents, 55 per cent of the seven to 11-year-olds and 95 per cent of the 12 to 25-year-olds used emails, instant messaging (or ICQ) and/or online chat rooms. It is noticeably the younger children who appear to put themselves at most risk in their use of virtual communication tools. Forty-four per cent of those who used them generally did so to speak with their friends and family; 22 per cent used them to communicate with “virtual friends”; and 33 per cent used them to speak with strangers. Teenagers and young adults play it just a bit safer. Fifty-nine per cent communicated mainly with their friends and family, 33 per cent with ‘virtual friends’ and 8 per cent with strangers.

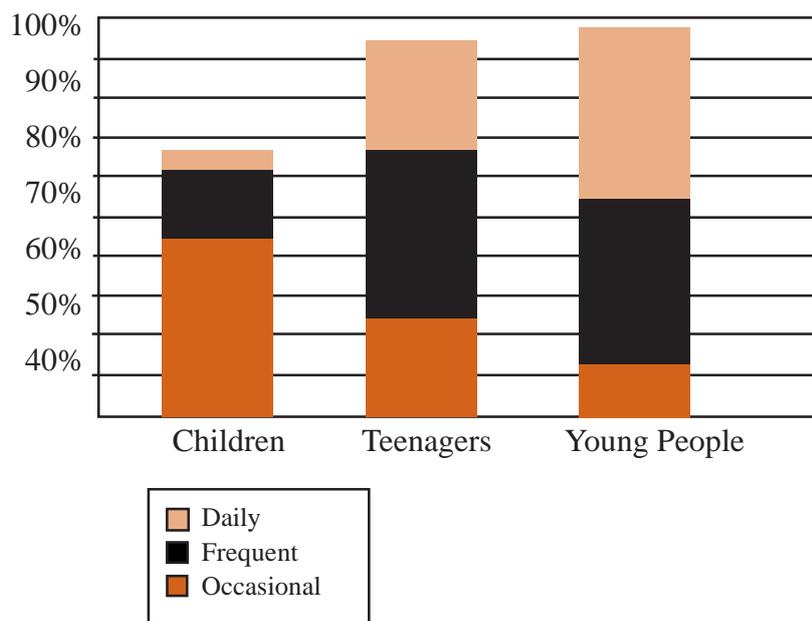
Since so-called “virtual friends” are also often strangers who have built a regular relationship with the young people and gained their trust, and considering that most young people, alone in front of their computers, must rely solely on themselves to distinguish lies from truth, it seems reasonable to estimate that, on the basis of this survey, a large number of Thai children and teenagers potentially put themselves at risk of being manipulated by sexual exploiters and paedophiles.

In this light, it is interesting that a significant proportion of parents and teachers appear to have little idea of how children and young people use virtual communication tools. The teachers who ventured an opinion were not so far off the mark regarding their students’ practices, but parents tended to believe their children used such tools much more often than they actually did (82 per cent compared with 55 per cent in reality). They also over-estimated the use of such tools to speak with friends and family (53 per cent as against 44 per cent). Overall, however, caregiving adults estimated that at least 12 per cent of children and 50 per cent of teenagers used virtual communication tools to communicate with “virtual friends” or complete strangers. Do they understand what this means?

2.3.1 Use of Email

It is usually expected that older children, teenagers and young adults are more likely than young children to make use of the email facility, a tool that supposedly requires a good command of written language. Yet even among the seven to 11-year-olds surveyed, more than half had access to email. Forty-four per cent used it occasionally and 22 per cent more than once a week. Almost all the young people used email, with 85 per cent doing so regularly (71 per cent of teenagers) and daily use by 44 per cent (28 per cent of teenagers).

2.3 a Frequency of email use



Caregiving adults' estimations were again off the mark. While parents over-estimated their offspring's use of email (they thought 44 per cent of children used it regularly, rather than 22 per cent in reality), teachers widely underestimated their students' email usage (they thought 43 per cent used it regularly compared with 71 per cent in reality).

2.3 b Young Thais' actual email usage and parents' and teachers' estimation of usage

	Children	Teenagers	Young People	Parents	Teachers
EMAIL					
Own address	43%	94%	98%	NA	NA
Use > 1/week	22%	94%	85%	44%	43%
Use < 1/week	44%	24%	13%	24%	26%
Sub-total	66%	95%	98%	68%	69%

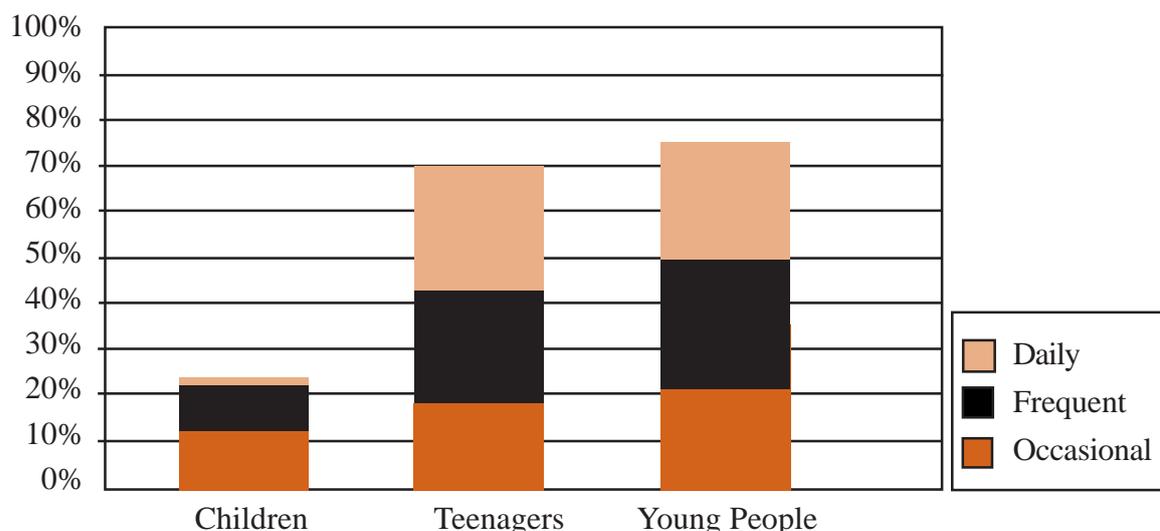
2.3.2 Use of Instant Messaging

Respondents in the survey were less likely to use instant messaging (including ICQ, a related system popular in Thailand), which is relatively more recent and more sophisticated than email. Thirty-six per cent of children and 14 per cent of young people including teenagers did not even know about it. Nevertheless, 12 per cent of children used instant messaging and/or ICQ occasionally and another 12 per cent used them regularly. Among the young people including teenagers, 21 per cent used instant messaging and/or ICQ occasionally and 54 per cent did so regularly. In most cases, only the text feature was used, rather than the audiovisual feature on

offer. The respondents' anonymity, as well as that of their counterparts, was therefore as protected as with email. However, it may be the case that these real-time conversations, which allow little time for thinking about responses, may present greater risks of manipulation for children and young people than asynchronous emails.

Parents seem to think that their children use instant messaging much more than they do, with 29 per cent believing children used it and/or ICQ regularly. Teachers, however, tended to underestimate usage of these tools by their students, believing that only 42 per cent used them regularly.

2.3 c Frequency of instant messaging use



2.3 d Young Thais' use of IM and parents' and teachers' estimation of usage

	Children	Teenager	Young People	Parents	Teachers
IM/ICQ					
Familiar with IM	30%	65%	69%	NA	NA
Do not know it	36%	14%	14%	NA	NA
Familiar with ICQ	21%	55%	61%	NA	NA
Do not know it	55%	17%	10%	NA	NA
Use > 1/week	12%	51%	54%	29%	42%
Use < 1/week	12%	18%	21%	15%	27%
Sub-total	24%	69%	75%	44%	69%

2.3.3 Use of Web Cams

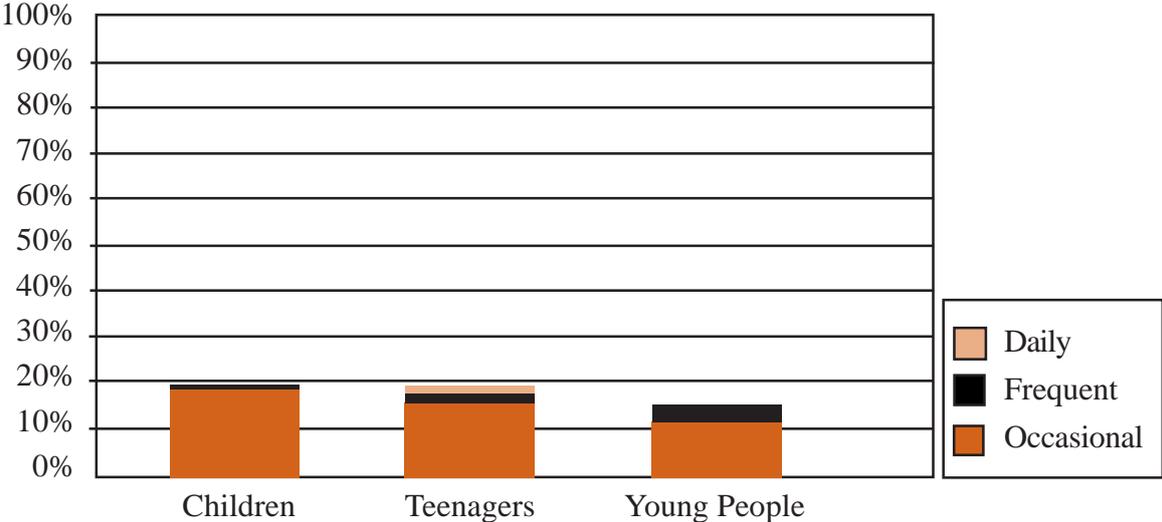
The web cam is another Internet audiovisual tool that still has some way to go before it becomes a part of everyday life in Thailand. Sixty-one per cent of Thai children, 41 per cent of teenagers and 32 per cent of the older group did not know about web cams. Only 3 per cent of children

used them regularly, 18 per cent occasionally. For once, the older respondents do not show much more enthusiasm: only 6 per cent used web cams regularly, 12 per cent occasionally.

Usage of web cams seemed more occasional; they are probably not often installed as a permanent feature of a young person’s computer, but rather used when the opportunity arises to see one and play with it. Yet the web cam is a potentially dangerous tool in that it allows minors to record themselves, at a whim or at someone’s suggestion, without any external help (that is, without any external control or incitement to “behave”) and then to upload such recordings onto the Internet, where access may be public or restricted to visitors with passwords. These recordings may then be picked up by ill-intentioned people.

Web cams are so user-friendly and their output is so immediate that control seems impossible. The only efficient way to prevent problems for young people is to ensure that they themselves are aware of the risks, understand what is inappropriate and refuse to proceed with dangerous recordings. But at the moment, such awareness does not exist.

2.3 e Frequency of web cams use



Most of the older respondents held a rather poor opinion of people who recorded their lives with web cams and displayed them on the Internet while 17 per cent thought the idea was fun. Only 6 per cent had recorded themselves (though in most cases they had not uploaded the recordings onto the net). It should be noted here that a significant proportion of teachers admitted ignorance of their students’ practices with web cams, and that while only 9 per cent believed some of their students might have recorded themselves, no more than 50 per cent felt reasonably sure that their students had never done so.

Of more concern was the attitude of seven to 11-year-olds. Twenty-three per cent liked the idea of recording one’s life on a web cam and displaying it on the Internet while 22 per cent had already done so at least once. It was not clear whether parents were aware of this practice, and the accompanying risks. Only 9 per cent thought that their children had recorded themselves

with web cams; 80 per cent felt sure that their children had never done so, mostly for lack of equipment (39 per cent) or because they had personally forbidden it (12 per cent).

2.3 f Young Thais' Web Cams usage and parents' and teachers' estimation of usage

	Children	Teenagers	Young People	Parents	Teachers
WEB CAM					
Familiarity	18%	18%	19%	NA	NA
Do not know it	61%	41%	32%	NA	NA
Use > 1/week	3%	4%	6%	11%	16%
Use < 1/week	18%	15%	12%	51%	17%
Sub-total	21%	19%	18%	62%	33%
Record for net = fun	23%	20%	17%	NA	NA
Record for net = no	77%	81%	83%	NA	NA
Actual recording	22%	5%	6%	6%	9%

2.3.4 Use of Dating Boards

Children in the youngest age group were not asked any specific questions about online dating boards, although it is suspected that most of them would be unaware of such services. Indeed, even among the older respondents, 76 per cent of the teenagers had never been on a dating board. However, 13 per cent of teenagers and 17 per cent of the older group were making active use of these services, with 9 per cent of teenagers and 13 per cent of young people having posted their personal details on at least one such board.

Parents and teachers were unsure about the practices of their children and students in this respect, and those who ventured an opinion seemed to overestimate the use of dating boards. Fifty-eight per cent of parents did not think their children would use these services, but 8 per cent believed their children definitely used them or might be doing so. Among teachers, 32 per cent did not think their students would use dating boards while 28 per cent believed they used them already or would do so.

These over-estimations make even more remarkable the lack of communication and guidance from parents and teachers revealed elsewhere in the survey. A simple “passive” visit to a dating board may not be dangerous, but the sharing of personal details is another matter because it may offer manipulators a short cut from the virtual to the physical world. Is it the case that adults are unaware of the risks, or do they consider the risks too limited to be worth transgressing cultural taboos surrounding sex, pornography and amorous relationships?

2.3 g Young Thais' dating board usage and parents' and teachers' estimation of usage

	Children	Teenagers	Young People	Parents	Teachers
DATING BOARDS					
Never been	NA	76	70	58	32
Just a look	NA	12	13		
Engaged in relations	NA	3	4	8	28
Posted personal details	NA	9	13		
Sub-total	NA	24	30	8	28

2.3.5 Use of Online Chat Rooms

Chat rooms are the virtual meeting places. Never before has there been such an easy, fast and convenient way to meet people of all ages, social status, gender, nationalities and levels of expertise, and discuss with them any topic of common interest. Online chats usually focus on topics or themes. But depending on the attitude of the moderator, if there is one, sidetracks can be long and wide. Join a moderated chat focusing on something as specific as “e-learning English language”, for example: the mainstream discussions will certainly revolve around educational theory, but at the sidelines are exchanges of culinary recipes, heated debates on global politics, or lengthy descriptions of the chatters' latest camping trips. Moreover, while the central theme or topic of discussion may be taken very seriously, some chat rooms use it as an excuse for visitors to interact and build personal relationships. Online chats can offer synchronous exchanges only (real-time discussions, similar to instant messaging), or a mix of synchronous and asynchronous exchanges (real-time discussions organised at specific times, with email exchange or online “forums” in the meantime). The exchanges may be done in public, which means the discussion may be viewed and joined by all visitors, or privately, in which case messages are exchanged only between two or more selected people.

Although 30 per cent of surveyed seven to 11-year-olds had never visited a chat room, 27 per cent joined online chats occasionally and 21 per cent regularly. Those who joined chats mostly visited chat lines on specialised topics (53 per cent) and chat lines for kids where they can speak about whatever they like (33 per cent). Fifty-three per cent of the children who chatted (24 per cent of all children) went to private chat rooms because they wanted to have fun with their friends and/or because they had been invited by an online correspondent.

The older they were, the more likely the respondents were to attend online chats. Only 5 per cent of 12 to 18-year-olds had never been in a chat room. Twenty-two per cent joined chats occasionally and 48 per cent more than once a week. Those who chatted mostly joined chat lines for teenagers where they could discuss whatever they wanted (37 per cent), chat lines with specialised topics (32 per cent), chat lines focused on topics of general educational interest (17 per cent) and chat lines where they had been invited by a friend (14 per cent). Forty-five per cent of the teenagers who chatted (that is, 29 per cent of teenagers) were accustomed to visiting private chat rooms.

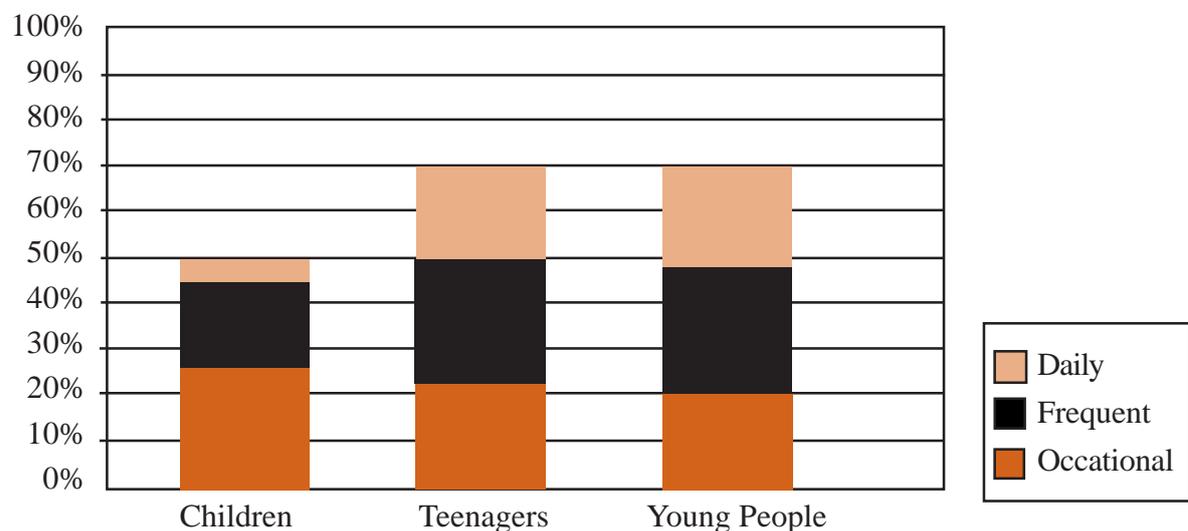
Parents and teachers underestimated the number of children and young people who joined chat lines, but not by much. Many, however, were not aware of how their children or students used chat lines, thinking they were just trying to recreate in cyberspace interaction among groups of same-age friends with whom they could discuss anything. They failed to recognise that young people preferred to use the opportunity offered by chat lines to exchange ideas and information with people of all ages and experiences. Many parents and teachers admitted that they did not know the details of the children’s practices on chat lines. Yet their estimates of the percentage of children and teenagers who joined private chat rooms were very accurate. This again prompted the analysts to wonder why children and young people were not being warned and educated about the potential dangers involved in joining chat rooms. While public chat rooms are often relatively safe due to the presence of a moderator, or even simply because of the self-restraint that is usually exercised in the presence of many others (unless, of course, it is a public chat room openly focused on sex, pornography and/or violence), private chat rooms do not offer this safety and their isolation may allow sexual and other abusers to manipulate young people online.

Indeed, as many as 92 per cent of the children and teenagers who chatted (that is, 36 per cent of the entire “children” group and 55 per cent of the young people age-group) had had the experience on a chat line of people wanting to speak with them about sex. But again, the respondents’ reactions show that the influence exerted by media has greatly eroded their capacity to be shocked.

Among the seven to 11-year-olds who encountered this situation, many eliminated the chat line from their list (42 per cent) while many others shrugged it off as an annoyance and changed the subject of conversation (33 per cent). Only 8 per cent of those who had this experience decided as a result not to try a chat line again.

This trend was confirmed among the older children. Many young people faced with an invitation to discuss sex shrugged it off by changing the correspondent (27 per cent), changing the chat line (23 per cent) or switching the subject of conversation (17 per cent). Few were discouraged from using chat lines altogether (7 per cent). What is more, 17 per cent pursue the matter, believing it to be devoid of risk since the conversation is held in cyberspace.

2.3 h Frequency of chat use



2.3 i Young Thais' online chat usage and parents' and teachers' estimation of usage

	Children	Teenagers	Young People	Parents	Teachers
ONLINE CHATS					
Familiarity	45%	75%	85%	NA	NA
Non-familiarity	30%	7%	5%	NA	NA
Use > 1/week	21%	48%	48%	29%	44%
Use < 1/week	27%	22%	21%	8%	22%
Sub-total	48%	70%	69%	37%	66%
Kids' chat line	33%	45%	37	21%	61%
General interest	47%	14%	17%	14%	4%
Specific topics	53%	22%	32%	19%	14%
Invited	7%	19%	14%	9%	21%
Private chat room	27%(53%)	24%(38%)	29%(45%)	24%(41%)	28%(31%)
SEX ONLINE					
Invit. to discuss sex	36%(92%)	59%(98%)	55%	NA	NA
Change chat line	42%	37%	(92%)		
Change correspondent	17%	32%	23%		
Change subject	33%	15%	27%		
Never chat again	8%	0%	17%		
Continue conversation	NA	12%	7%		
			17%		

2.3.6 Shocking Experiences Online

Although a simple invitation to speak about sex is not enough to shock Thai kids online, several have found themselves in situations that they did consider shocking. Twenty per cent of the seven to 11-year-olds who used chat lines (9 per cent of the entire age group) mentioned traumatic experiences, mainly due to the use of bad language (34 per cent) or because their correspondents said they wanted to send them violent or sex-related materials (66 per cent). When that happened, they talked about it with their friends (67 per cent) or their parents (33 per cent).

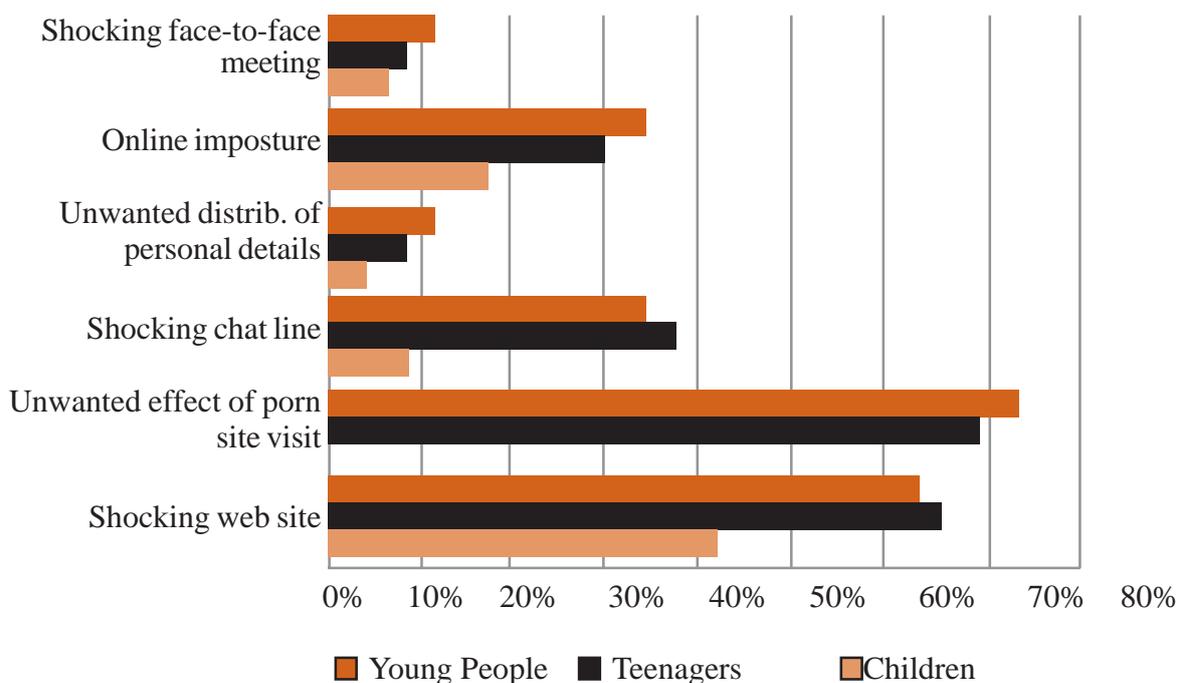
Parents' estimations were more or less consistent with these findings. Thirty per cent said one or more of their children had come to talk to them about web sites or chat lines that had shocked them, mostly because they contained pictures of nudity (30 per cent of cases), "ugly" pictures (37 per cent), sex and/or violence-related contents (26 per cent) or invitations to have sex (17 per cent). However, the 70 per cent of parents whose children had not confided in

them did not know whether this was because the children had not encountered upsetting material. Only 30 per cent of parents who had not discussed the matter with their children felt reasonably sure that nothing had happened. Twelve per cent said their children might not discuss such things with them, while 10 per cent suspected that sex and/or violence-related material might not shock their children.

Among the older group of young people, 55 per cent of those who used chat lines (36 per cent of the entire group) had had an experience that shocked them, mostly as a result of bad language (50 per cent), or because a correspondent had invited them to engage in sexual activities (25 per cent) or wanted to send them violent and/or sex-related materials (25 per cent). Sixty-seven per cent would discuss such an experience with friends, but 28 per cent kept it to themselves, either because they did not want to talk about it or because they did not know to whom they should turn. Parents and teachers do not appear on the list of people with whom upset teenagers would want to discuss such issues.

Yet, teachers seemed to show some over-confidence in the matter. Forty-four per cent said one or more of their students had come to talk to them about web sites or chat lines that had upset them, mostly because they contained pictures of nudity (45 per cent), ‘ugly pictures’ (32 per cent), sex and/or violence-related contents (11 per cent) or invitations to have sex (11 per cent). Only 4 per cent of the remaining teachers felt reasonably sure that their students had not encountered upsetting material; 9 per cent suspected that sex and/or violence-related contents might not shock their students; and 19 per cent thought their students might not talk to them in such situations.

2.4 e Young Thais’ shocking experiences on the Internet



2.3 j Young Thais' exposure to shocking experiences on chat lines

	Children	Teenager	Young People	Parents	Teachers
SHOCKING CHAT LINE	9%(20%)	39%(61%)	36%	NA	NA
Shocking chat line	33%	15%	(55%)		
Send sex materials	33%	3%	19%		
Send violent materials	0%	21%	6%		
Invitation for sex	34%	61%	25%		
Bad language			50%		
(if yes)	33%	5%		NA	NA
Talk to parents	67%	55%	4%		
Talk to friends	0%	0%	67%		
Talk to teacher	0%	40%	0%		
Talk to no one			28%		

2.4 Online Friends and Impostors

Information technology tools pose potential risks for children, for example, by leading them voluntarily or accidentally to false information and/or inappropriate and even traumatic material. But the greatest dangers emerge when children and young people are exposed to psychological manipulation, which may lead to face-to-face meetings with sexual abusers or exploiters. Technology may be the tool of manipulation, but it is wielded by people. With this in mind, the survey sought to explore children's online relationships, the depth of these relationships and any related dangers. The survey focused on online "correspondents", defined as people with whom the children and young people were in virtual contact at least once a week. More sporadic exchanges were deemed to present less risk of manipulation because it usually requires a regular relationship in which trust is gained and confidences are exchanged.

Fifty per cent of the seven to 11-year-olds said they communicated regularly with one or more virtual correspondents. Although the figure seems very high, it is lower than parents estimated. Eighteen per cent of parents did not think their children communicated regularly with stranger via the Internet, and 17 per cent were unaware of their children's net habits. But all other parents thought their children had virtual correspondents with whom they communicated more than once a week.

Among teenagers and 'young people', the proportion of those corresponding with strangers was even greater. Ninety-one per cent of the older group and 84 per cent of 12 to 18-year-olds had virtual correspondents with whom they communicated regularly. In 61 per cent of these cases, the young people had less than 10 such correspondents. But 26 per cent had between 10 and 50 regular correspondents, and 4 per cent said they had more than 50. As far as they knew, these correspondents were usually of a similar age to them, or slightly older, and the proportion of foreigners was slim.

Teachers' estimations on this issue were not very far from the reality, although a significant proportion did not know their students' habits in this respect. Ninety-five per cent who ventured an opinion thought that their students had virtual correspondents with whom they communicated more than once a week. Estimations about the number of correspondents, their age and their nationality corresponded with the responses of the young people.

2.4.1 Online Friends and Confidantes

Thirty-nine per cent of seven to 11-year-olds considered some of their virtual correspondents as friends, with whom they usually engaged in mundane talk about their daily life (44 per cent) or about topics of general interest (24 per cent). However, 32 per cent took the opportunity to discuss subjects they felt they could not, or did not want, to discuss with "real" people (especially their families).

Sixty-nine per cent of the children with virtual friends (that is, 27 per cent of all children) had at least one intimate confidante with whom they shared very personal thoughts and discussed intimate matters. They did so mainly because anonymity and the lack of a physical presence gave them a feeling of freedom (59 per cent), and also because they felt it was the only way for them to talk about certain taboo subjects (26 per cent) or because they felt that their virtual intimate friend understood them best (15 per cent).

Fifty-four per cent of those with virtual friends (that is, 21 per cent of all children) shared their personal details with them. And 8 per cent of these children had since become aware that their personal details had been passed around without their authorisation, with terrible consequences for them. Another 31 per cent thought that the unwanted passing along of their details might have occurred, though they were not yet aware of it.

Although parents tended to over-estimate the number of children who considered some of their virtual correspondents as friends (57 per cent compared with 39 per cent in reality), they underestimated the proportion of children who discussed "taboo" subjects with their virtual friends (12 per cent compared with 32 per cent who discussed such topics with friends, or 21 per cent compared with the 26 per cent who confided in confidantes) and those who shared personal details with their virtual friends (39 per cent compared with 54 per cent in reality). It seems that parents underestimate how much trust their children have in their virtual friends – a trust that is often greater than that given to "physical" friends who, after all, can always "tell" on them. For kids, a virtual friend is not just a friend who happens to be located somewhere else – it is often a friendly disembodied voice who understands them, agrees to talk about everything without judgment, and who cannot tell their parents.

Seventy-five per cent of young people (72 per cent of 12 to 18-year-olds) considered some of their virtual correspondents as friends with whom they discussed their daily lives (45 per cent) or general-interest topics (45 per cent). However, 10 per cent (16 per cent of the 11 to 18-year-olds) also discussed subjects that they would or could not discuss with "real" people (especially their families).

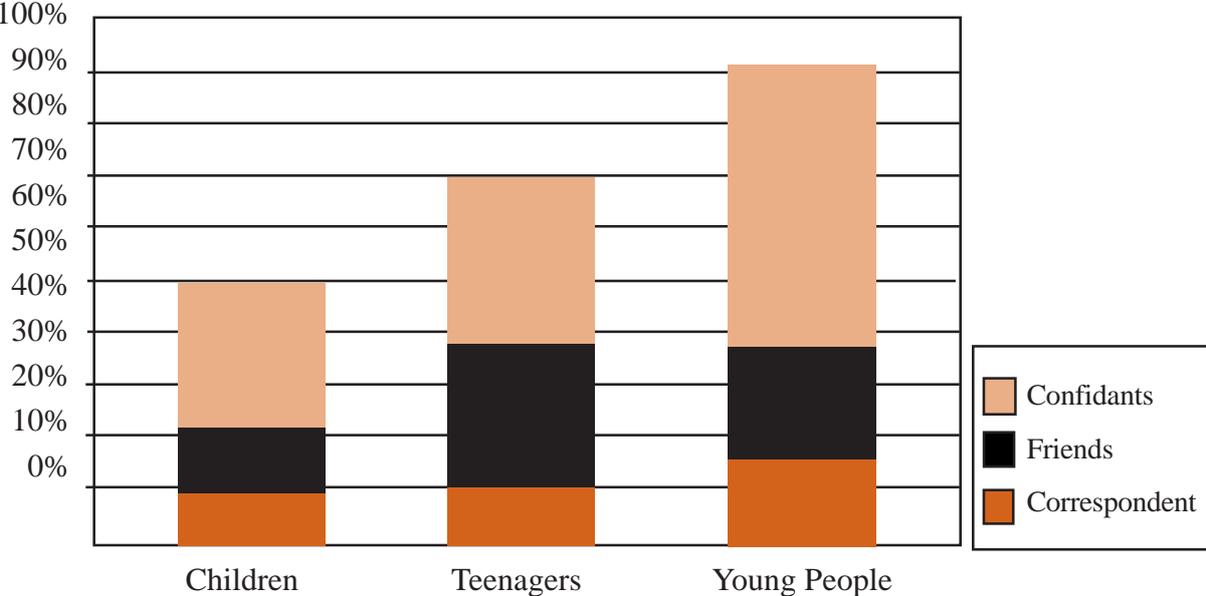
Seventy-three per cent of the young people who had virtual friends (55 per cent of the entire age group) had at least one intimate confidante with whom they shared very personal and

intimate thoughts. They did so mainly because anonymity and the lack of a physical presence reduced their inhibitions (47 per cent), but also because it allowed them to discuss taboo subjects (45 per cent) or because they felt that their virtual intimate friend understood them best (8 per cent).

Young people in general said that they usually did not share personal details with their virtual friends, but 69 per cent of those with such friends (that is, 52 per cent of the whole age group) had shared personal details at least a few times, and 9 per cent did so whenever they were asked. As a result, 12 per cent of the teenagers with virtual friends had discovered that their personal details had been distributed without their authorisation, with unpleasant or even terrible consequences for them. Another 45 per cent admitted that the unwanted distribution of their details might have occurred, though they were not yet aware of it.

As with parents, teachers over-estimated the number of students who had virtual friends (82 per cent compared with 72 per cent) and confidantes (75 per cent compared with 46 per cent). They also underestimated the discussion of “taboo” subjects (12 per cent compared with 16 per cent with friends or 16 per cent compared with 42 per cent with confidantes) and the sharing of personal details (50 per cent compared with 69 per cent), indicating a failure to understand the nature of virtual friendship. Yet, caregiving adults overall suspected that a quarter to half of the children or young people in their charge shared personal details with people they had never seen. They were people with whom the kids had discussed “taboo” subjects and who might therefore know many more things about the children and young people than did their parents and teachers. Still, neither parents nor teachers express worry.

2.4 a Young Thais’ online friendships



2.4.2 Impostors Online

When talking about the dangers of the Internet, one should not assume that all Thai kids are naïve to the extent of not understanding the meaning of anonymity. Indeed, even at an early age, most of them understand the concept well. The danger, rather, lies in the attitude of these

kids vis-à-vis a situation of which they may be aware towards a situation about which they may be complacent and not regard as danger but which they do not regard as potentially dangerous. In answer to the question “Do you think that the people you talk to on the Internet are always who they say they are?”, 54 per cent of seven to 11-year-olds responded that they were aware of the possibilities of disguise and found it exciting; 15 per cent did not really care; and 8 per cent admitted the risk worried them. The remaining 23 per cent would be the “naïve” ones who apparently had never given much thought to the issue or who believed they would be able to see through lies.

In this respect, responding parents tended to be blind to the reality, preferring to believe that their children were not only aware of the possibility of disguise, but were worried about it (46 per cent). Only 11 per cent thought their kids did not really care or that they may find it exciting (9 per cent). And only 5 per cent suspected that their children were not aware of the potential problem.

Older children demonstrated an even more offhand attitude. To the question “Do you think that the people you talk to on the Internet are always who they say they are?”, 43 per cent of the young people said they did not really care and 29 per cent were aware of the possibilities of disguise and found it exciting. Twenty-two per cent admitted they were worried by the risk. Only 6 per cent believed they would be able to see through lies.

A rather cynical attitude prevails among teachers in this respect. Most tended to believe that their teenage students were excited by the possibilities of disguise (37 per cent) or did not care (13 per cent). They did not regard their students as naïve on this front or perceive that they might be worried about such things.

Unsurprisingly, several kids ended up discovering that all was not perfect in the world of virtual friendships and that some games, exciting as they might be, could also be painful. Eighteen per cent of seven to 11-year-olds (that is, 46 per cent of those with virtual friends) had found out that a supposed friend was an imposter. They discovered this when they realised they had been lied to, when they were asked what they thought were weird questions, or when they were harassed. When such experiences occurred, they mostly talked about it with their friends. Yet, as many as 22 per cent of responding parents (that is, 39 per cent of those who knew their children had virtual friends) had had one or more of their children come to talk to them about bad experiences with virtual friends. The children had generally discovered the imposture because their correspondent had passed their personal details around, started to engage them in sexual conversations, harassed them, or lied to them in some way.

Older children were not spared such painful experiences. Thirty-five per cent of young people (that is, 47 per cent of those with virtual friends) had discovered an impostor behind a supposed friend. This happened when they realised they had been lied to, when they were asked weird questions, or when they were harassed. Generally, they talked about this with their friends (58 per cent) or kept it to themselves (26 per cent). But 26 per cent of teachers (that is, 32 per cent of those who knew their students had virtual friends) had had one or more students tell them about bad experiences with virtual friends. The students had discovered the imposture because their correspondent had passed on their personal details, started to engage in sexual conversations, harassed them or lied in some way.

2.4 b Young Thais' exposure to impostors online

	Children	Teenagers	Young People	Parents	Teachers
IMPOSTORS ONLINE					
Possibility of disguise	15%	39%	43%	11%	13%
Don't care	54%	30%	29%	9%	37%
Exciting	8%	24%	22%	46%	16%
Worrying	23%	7%	6%	5%	5%
Don't know/No way	18%(46%)	31%(43%)	35%(47%)	22%(39%)	26%(32%)
Imposture discovered (if yes)					
Talk to parents	0%	22%	8%		
Talk to friends	100%	33%	58%		
Talk to teacher	0%	0%	8%		
Talk to no one	0%	45%	26%		

2.4.3 The Surprises of Face-to-Face Meetings

Considering the number of Thai kids who develop intimate friendships online and who share their personal details with virtual friends, it is not surprising that some of them eventually want to meet these friends in real life.

Hence, 24 per cent of all responding seven to 11-year-olds (that is, 88 per cent of those with intimate virtual friends) have met face to face with someone they first met over the Internet. Another 42 per cent would very much like to have such an experience. For the first meeting, most of the children were accompanied by friends, but 25 per cent were alone (a remarkable occurrence in Thai society, where it used to be that children were rarely left alone).

In 58 per cent of the cases, the meeting was a surprise, which turned “nasty” for half of them, mostly because the children realised their virtual “friends” had lied about themselves. When this happened, they mostly talked to their friends about it and not to caregiving adults.

Only 15 per cent of parents knew that their children had met face to face with someone they had first met through the Internet. Fifty-three per cent of these parents accompanied their children to the first meeting or ensured that another adult did so. The rest said they did not care or knew about it only later. But in 20 per cent of these cases, the children reported to their parents a shocking experience, because the person had lied to them and/or had tried to engage them in inappropriate actions. Most of the parents who knew of meetings and did not receive negative feedback from their children were unable to say if that meant the children had not suffered a shocking experience.

Overall, 49 per cent of parents had had to assist a child who had gone through a traumatic experience (Internet-related or not). Their reaction usually had been to spend time talking with the child and/or to alert the police.

As far as older children were concerned, 37 per cent of young people (29 per cent of the 11 to 18-year-olds) had met face to face with someone they had first met through the Internet. Another 12 per cent would very much like to have such an experience. For the first meeting, most of them (54 per cent) were alone, although the younger they were, the more likely it was that they were accompanied by friends. Most often, the person they met was of a similar age. But in 37 per cent of cases, the virtual friend turned out to be older or much older.

In 46 per cent of cases, this “friend” was not in line with the respondent’s expectations; not at all for 14 per cent. In 32 per cent of the cases, the surprise turned “nasty” and became a shocking experience. When that happened, the young people talked to their friends (physical or virtual) about it (68 per cent), but 16 per cent kept the experience to themselves. Very few talked to parents or teachers.

Only 13 per cent of teachers knew that their students had met face to face with someone they had first met through the Internet. The teachers did not attend any of these first meetings – they only knew about them later. But in 46 per cent of these cases, the students reported to their teachers a shocking experience, because the person had lied to them and/or had tried to engage them in inappropriate actions. The teachers were unable to say if the absence of a report meant that their students had not had such experiences.

Despite the limited communication between students and teachers, 63 per cent of teachers overall had had to help a student who had gone through a traumatic experience (Internet-related or not). On such occasions, they had usually spent time talking with the student (44 per cent) and/or alerting the parents or even the police (19 per cent).

2.4 c Young Thais’ face-to-face meetings with virtual friends

	Children	Teenagers	Young People	Parents	Teachers
MEETINGS					
Had at least one	24%	29%	37%	15%	13%
Would like to do so	42%	16%	12%	NA	NA
First meeting alone	6% (25%)	11% (38%)	20% (54%)	NA	NA
Surprise	58%	48%	46%	NA	NA
Shock	25%	28%	32%	20%	46%
(if yes)					
Talk to parents	0%	0%	16%	NA	NA
Talk to friends	100%	78%	68%		
Talk to teacher	0%	0%	0%		
Talk to no one	0%	22%	16%		

2.5 Adult Support and Involvement

As observed several times throughout the survey, many findings regarding Thai children's practices on the Internet tend to indicate that while they are familiar with most Internet and online communication tools, they often seem to take risks and expose themselves to dangers they could easily avoid if they received proper training and guidance. Meanwhile, adults' estimations of young people's practices are often widely off the mark or seem to indicate a blindness to reality. It is therefore important to analyse more closely the extent of adult support and involvement in children's use of the Internet, and the amount and quality of information and training that Thai children have received about the Internet and its potential dangers.

Eighty-five per cent of responding seven to 11-year-olds claimed to have received explanations about the Internet and its possible dangers, whether from their parents (24 per cent), their teachers (18 per cent) or other people (43 per cent). Ninety per cent also said they were familiar with the Internet's safety rules, either because their parents and/or teachers had explained it to them (59 per cent) or because they had gained guidance from web sites and chat lines (24 per cent). However, the quality of the information received may be questionable because 64 per cent of these children had never read a brochure or visited a web site explaining the net's potential dangers, and altogether only 15 per cent had received any training on Internet usage.

Parents' responses tend to compound the doubt about Internet's safety rules. 83 per cent claimed that their children had received explanations about the Internet and its possible dangers, either from themselves (80 per cent) or from someone they knew (3 per cent). Fifty-three per cent claimed they had explained the Internet's Code of Conduct to their children, but 24 per cent admitted that, although they are aware of such a code, they had not explained it to their children. The remaining 23 per cent were unaware of a code. Moreover, 60 per cent had never shown their children a brochure or a web site explaining the Internet's potential dangers. This was partly because 45 per cent of the parents had never accessed such information themselves. But 21 per cent of those who had received information did not share it with their children. Thirty per cent said they and their children would be interested in such information, but 9 per cent confessed they were not really interested.

Eighty-five per cent of responding young people said they had received explanations about the Internet and its possible dangers, whether from their parents (14 per cent), their teachers (4 per cent) or other people (67 per cent). Ninety-one per cent also claimed to be familiar with the Code of Conduct, either because their parents and/or teachers had explained it to them (18 per cent) or because they gained guidance from web sites and chat lines (54 per cent). Yet, the same questions arise as with younger children when observing that 36 per cent of the young people had never read a brochure or visited a web site explaining the dangers of the Internet, and that altogether only 13 per cent (7 per cent of 12 to 18-year-olds) had received any training on the use of the Internet.

Teachers' responses, like those of parents, are rather confused: Ninety per cent claimed their students had received explanations about the Internet and its possible dangers, either from themselves (82 per cent) or someone they knew (8 per cent). Seventy-three per cent said they had explained the Code of Conduct to their students. However, 22 per cent admitted that

while they were aware of the code, they had not explained it to their students. The remaining 5 per cent were unaware of the code. Moreover, 42 per cent had never shown their students a brochure or a web site explaining the dangers of the Internet. This was partly because only 33 per cent of the teachers received regular updated information about the Internet, while another 33 per cent received only occasional and incomplete information. But 12 per cent of those who did receive information did not share it with their students.

2.5 a Young Thais' level of information about the Internet

	Children	Teenagers	Young People	Parents	Teachers
INFORMATION					
Explanation of dangers	85%	84%	85%	83%	90%
From parents	24%	21%	14%	80%	NA
From teachers	18%	6%	4%	NA	82%
From others	43%	57%	67%	3%	8%
Code of Conduct	90%	94%	91%	53%	73%
From parents/teachers	59%	26%	18%	53%	73%
From sites/chat lines	25%	52%	54	NA	NA
From others	6%	16%	18%	NA	NA
Never seen web site/brochure	64%	37%	36%	60%	42%

2.5.1 Parental Support

Overall, parents viewed themselves as mostly proactive and regularly involved in their children's use of the Internet (56 per cent). Fifty-three per cent believed they actively discussed with their children the positive and negative aspects of the Internet, while 9 per cent said they were learning along with their children. Fifteen per cent, however, admitted that they provided only passive support, 14 per cent did not care about their children's use of the Internet, and 8 per cent had no clue about the Internet.

Forty-six per cent had not given their children any guiding rules for using the Internet (11 per cent had not even thought about it). Another 10 per cent had given their children such rules but suspected they did not follow them. Only 44 per cent were reasonably sure that their children had a structured approach to their use of the Internet.

Twenty-eight per cent of the parents had installed screening software on the computers their children used to access the net. Another 24 per cent intended to do so. Eleven per cent did not know about screening software.

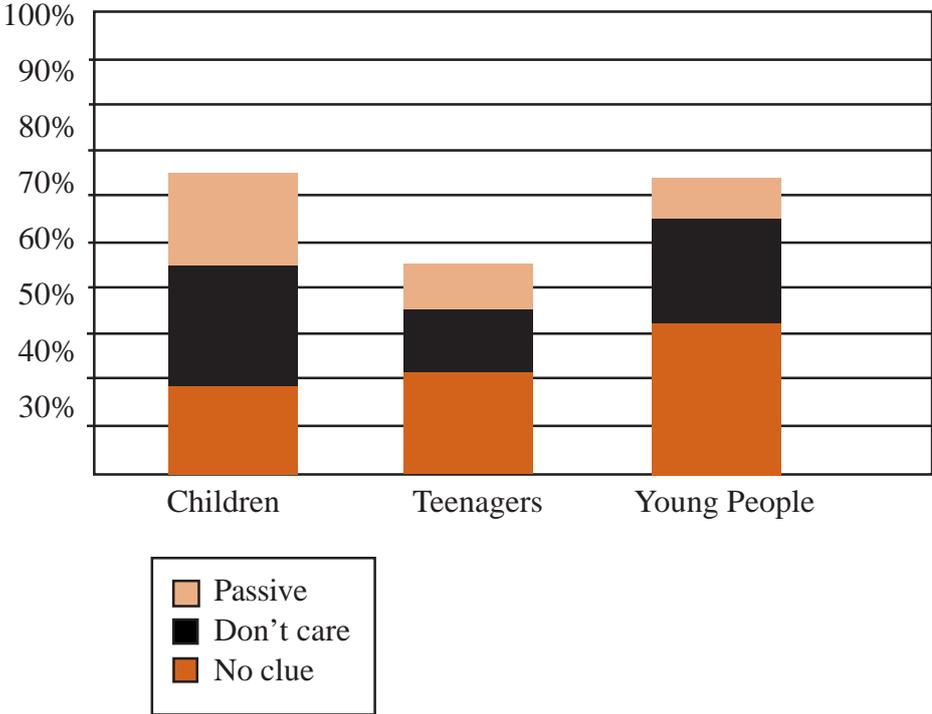
In the children's eyes, however, things look different. Only 29 per cent of seven to 11-year-olds said their parents actively guided and supported them in their use of the Internet; 13 per cent said their parents were learning about it with them. Another 13 per cent thought their

parents gave them passive support (encouragement to use the net but no direct involvement). Finally, 19 per cent of these children believed their parents had no idea about the Internet.

Older children have more dramatically different perceptions to their parents. As many as 33 per cent of young people thought their parents had no idea about the Internet. Seven per cent said their parents were learning about it with them and 9 per cent thought their parents gave them passive support. Only 30 per cent believed their parents actively guided and supported them.

Twenty-nine per cent of teachers admitted that they did not know about the attitude of their students' parents towards the Internet. Thirty-four per cent of teachers thought parents had no idea about the Internet and 8 per cent thought parents did not care about it. Only 7 per cent believed parents discussed the Internet's positive and negative aspects with their children. Twelve per cent believed parents made an effort to learn with their children while 9 per cent thought parents encouraged Internet usage without getting involved themselves.

2.5 b Proportion of young Thais who do not benefit from active parental support and involvement in internet use



2.5 c Parental support for young Thais' internet usage

	Children	Teenagers	Young People	Parents	Teachers
PARENTAL SUPPORT					
No	19%	22%	33%	8%	34%
Don't care	26%	16%	21%	14%	8%
Active support	29%	44%	30%	53%	7%
Passive support	13%	8%	9%	15%	9%
Learn together	13%	10%	7%	9%	12%

2.5.2 Teacher Support

Overall, 96 per cent of the schools and universities of responding teachers encourage their students to use the Internet. However, in 66 per cent of cases, the encouragement is mild because students are not required to use the Internet for their studies. Moreover, it is this encouragement is not supported by concrete measures, with just since 14 per cent of teachers mentioning the existence of special Internet learning sessions organised by their establishment.

Personally, most teachers said their involvement in their students' use of the Internet was rather limited. Forty-two per cent claimed they were proactively and regularly involved. As much many as 15 per cent have nothing to do with it were not involved at all. But 56 per cent said they did explain the Internet's positive and negative aspects to their students, while 12 per cent adopted an encouraging but uninvolved attitude. Seven per cent did not know enough about using the Internet to help their students and 5 per cent tried to learn together with their students. Six per cent confessed they did not care enough.

Thirty-seven per cent had not provided their students with guiding rules for using the Internet (16 per cent had not thought about it). Another 27 per cent had offered such rules, whether devised by their establishment or themselves, but they suspected their students did not follow them. Only 36 per cent were reasonably sure that their students had a structured approach to using the Internet.

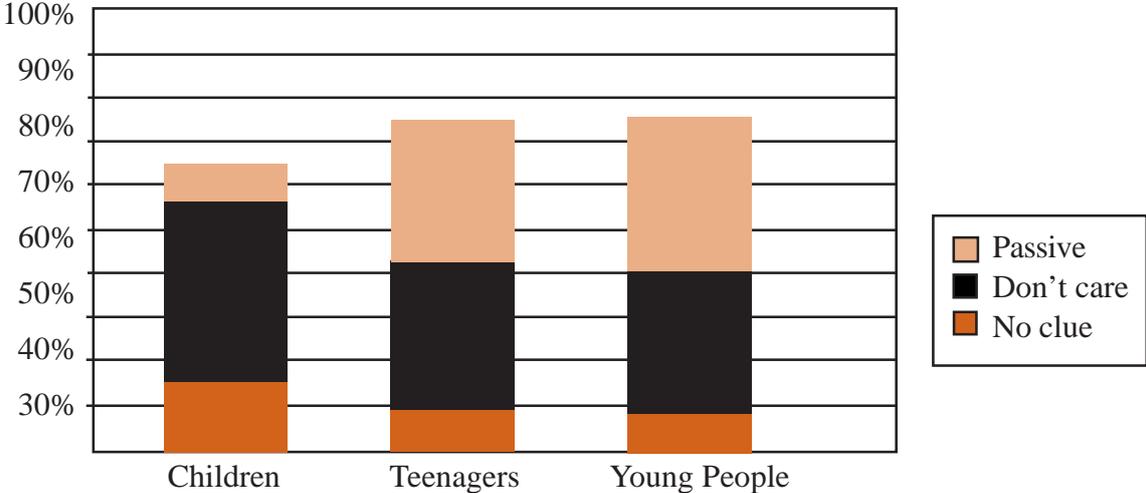
Thirty-one per cent of the teachers had installed screening software on the computers used by their students to access the Internet. Another 37 per cent intended to do so. Twelve per cent did not know about screening software.

Again, the situation looks different when viewed through the eyes of the young people. Although 88 per cent of the seven to 11-year-old students were encouraged by their schools to use the Internet (though without any real obligation or incentive for 67 per cent), teachers were generally perceived as having no clue about the children's Internet usage (16 per cent), not caring (41 per cent) or offering encouragement without involvement (7 per cent). Only 23 per cent of children said their teachers actively supported them while 13 per cent said their teachers were learning with them.

Amongst young people, ninety-six per cent were encouraged by their school to use the Internet (without any real obligation or incentive for 47 per cent of them), but teachers were generally perceived as not caring (33 per cent) or offering only uninvolved encouragement (35 per cent), even if they were quite knowledgeable. Seven per cent were perceived to have no clue about the Internet. Just 17 per cent said their teachers actively supported them through special sessions on the Internet at school or university and 8 per cent said their teachers were learning with them.

Twenty-five per cent of the parents admitted they were unsure of the attitude of their kids' teachers towards the Internet. This was because they had never investigated the matter. Those who ventured an opinion generally thought that their children's schools or universities encouraged Internet usage (85 per cent), although such encouragement was mild because the young people were not required to use the Internet for their studies (46 per cent). Parents also believed that their children's teachers were quite knowledgeable – only 4 per cent thought the teachers did not have a clue about the Internet while another 8 per cent thought teachers were learning with the children. However, 12 per cent suspected teachers did not care and 16 per cent thought they had an encouraging but uninvolved attitude. Only 34 per cent of parents thought teachers sought to explain the Internet's positive and negative aspects to their students.

2.5 d Proportion of young Thais who do not benefit from active teacher support in Internet use



2.5 e Teacher support for young Thais' use of the Internet

	Children	Teenagers	Young People	Parents	Teachers
TEACHER SUPPORT					
Internet use is required	21%	35%	49%	39%	30%
Encouraged, not obliged	67%	60%	47%	46%	66%
Sub-total	88%	95%	69%	85%	96%
No clue	16%	9%	7%	4%	7%
Don't care	41%	33%	33%	12%	6%
Active support (sessions)	23%	19%	17%	34%	70%
Passive support	7%	33%	35%	16	12%
Learn together	13%	6%	8%	8%	5%

2.5.3 Adult Involvement

Overall, only 18 per cent of the seven to 11-year-olds said that adults were proactively and regularly involved in their use of the Internet. Another 44 per cent indicated that adult involvement was reactive and irregular. Thirty-eight per cent of these children were entirely on their own when using the Internet.

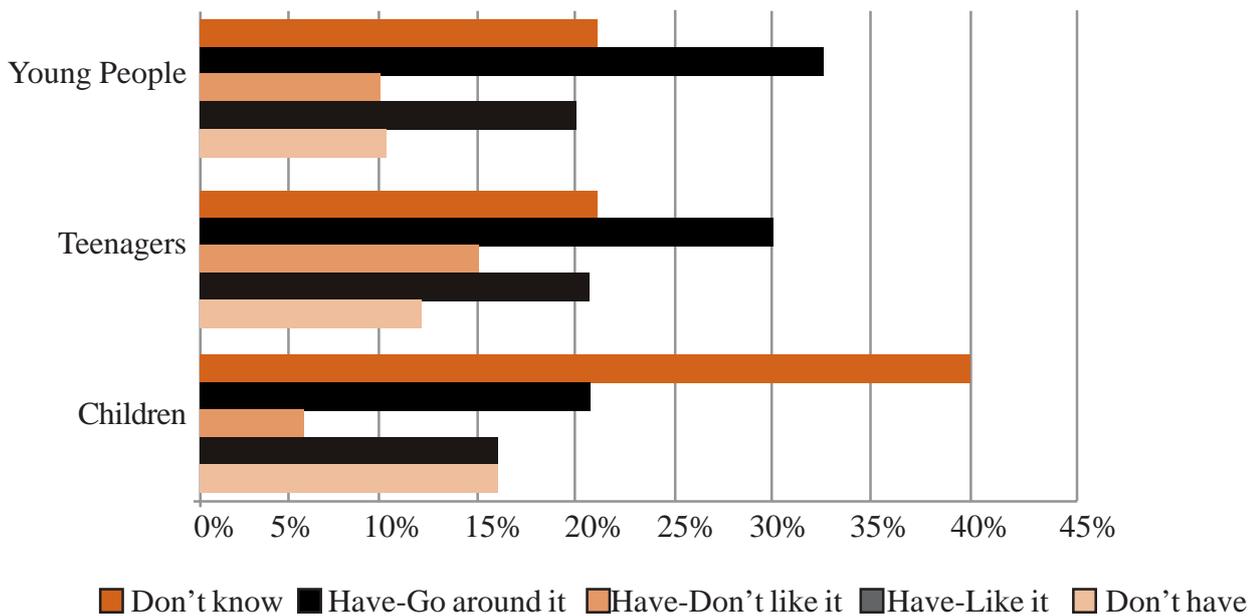
Forty-six per cent had not been given guiding rules for using the Internet. Another 8 per cent had been given rules but did not follow them. Hence, only 46 per cent had a structured approach to using the net, which corresponds well with the estimations of parents. Forty-four per cent said screening software had been installed on the computers they used for the Internet. But half of this number indicated they could easily get around such software if they wanted to do so.

As for older children, only 12 per cent of the responding young people said adults were proactively and regularly involved in their use of the Internet. Another 44 per cent mentioned adult involvement that was reactive and irregular. Forty-four per cent of this group are entirely on their own when using the Internet.

Eighty-four per cent (72 per cent of the 11 to 18-year-old students) had not received guiding rules for Internet usage. Another 9 per cent had been given rules but did not follow them. Hence, only 7 per cent had a structured approach to using the Internet, whereas teachers had thought that 36 per cent of their students had such as approach.

Sixty-seven per cent of young people accessed the Internet on computers with screening software. But 55 per cent of this group indicated they could get around such software.

2.5 f Screening software on young Thais' computers



2.5 g Adult involvement in young Thais' use of the Internet

	Children	Teenagers	Young People	Parents	Teachers
ADULT INVOLVEMENT					
Regular and proactive	18%	17%	12%	56%	42%
Irregular and reactive	44%	47%	44%	36%	39%
Not at all	38%	35%	44%	8%	19%
Rules followed	46%	14%	7%	44%	36%
Rules not followed	8%	13%	9%	10%	27%
No rules	46%	72%	84%	46%	37%
Screening SW	44%	66%	67%	28%	31%
>Can bypass the SW	50%	45%	55%	NA	NA

2.5.4 Overall Awareness of Internet Dangers

Not surprisingly in view of the insufficient support, training, guidance and active involvement from parents and teachers, young Thais demonstrate a rather low level of awareness of the possible dangers of the Internet. This helps to explain much of the survey's findings.

Among the seven to 11-year-olds, 47 per cent had not given thought to the idea of adults

posing as children on the Internet or online communication platforms. Nor were they aware of the existence of ill-intentioned adults who could access and manipulate children with sexual intent via the Internet.

Only 22 per cent suspected that an Internet search for words such as Disney, Action Man, Barbie, Pokemon, ESPN, Alice or My Little Pony could lead to pornographic web sites.

When asked what they thought about adults who wanted to have sex with little kids, 34 per cent said they did not understand what this meant. Only 19 per cent realised that child exploiters could entice children through seemingly caring and understanding behaviour.

Among the older group, 88 per cent of young people were aware that the Internet was used to promote child prostitution and trafficking, but 17 per cent (22 per cent of the 11 to 18-year-olds) thought it had nothing to do with them. Similarly, the use of Internet communication features by child exploiters and paedophiles was known to 92 per cent of this group, but 11 per cent (13 per cent of the 11 to 18-year-olds) believed that it did not concern them. Even those who may feel concerned probably do not spend much time thinking about it, since they do not seem to grasp the real scope of the problem: only 6% suspected that an Internet search for words such as Disney, Action Man, Barbie, Pokemon, ESPN, Alice or My Little Pony might lead to pornographic web sites.

Asked what they thought about paedophiles, 95 per cent of this group believed they knew what a paedophile was, but only 37 per cent (42 per cent of teenagers) realised that paedophiles could entice children through seemingly caring and understanding behaviour.

Adult guidance and involvement would obviously help children and teenagers better understand the risks of their Internet activities. The problem is that in many cases, parents and teachers also do not have a high awareness of the dangers.

Eighty-six per cent of responding parents and 83 per cent of the teachers were aware that the Internet was used to promote child prostitution and trafficking, but 12 per cent and 11 per cent respectively believed this had nothing to do with them or the children under their care. Similarly, the use of the Internet by perverts and paedophiles was known to 89 per cent of the parents and 86 per cent of the teachers, but 8 per cent and 7 per cent respectively believed this did not concern them. Even those who felt concerned tended to downgrade the issue, since they did not seem to grasp the full scope of the problem: Only 9 per cent of parents and 12 per cent of teachers suspected that an Internet search for words such as Disney, Action Man, Barbie, Pokemon, ESPN, Alice or My Little Pony could lead to pornographic web sites. Only 35 per cent of parents and 33 per cent of teachers were aware of the extent of child pornography on the Internet (100,000 web sites in 2001) and only 21 per cent and 15 per cent respectively suspected the scope of business that online pornography represents (it is estimated that 100 billion baht was spent in 2001 on pornographic web sites with pay access).

When asked what they thought about paedophiles, only 34 per cent of parents and 19 per cent of teachers realised that paedophiles could entice children through seemingly caring and understanding behaviour. Sixty-four per cent of parents knew or suspected that very few children

subjected to sexual solicitation would tell their parents, but 20 per cent said they did not know what they could do about it.

Many of these parents (49 per cent) and teachers (47 per cent) thought Thai kids were no different to children elsewhere—amused, interested and excited by sex but very vulnerable to shocking features. However, 27 per cent of parents and 37 per cent of teachers saw young Thais as culturally very different, and believed that their exposure to other cultures through the Internet might dim their values and make them more interested in sex than would normally be the case. This kind of thinking indicates a failure to recognise that most online correspondents of young Thais are also Thai, and that the “local” nature of young people’s online communications (probably enhanced by language restrictions) does not really reduce the dangers they face.

In the opinion of parents and teachers, the greatest dangers posed by the Internet for Thai children and teenagers are (in decreasing order): possible involvement with dangerous people, possible exposure to pornography and/or violence, as well as encouragement to have sex at an early age. In addition, parents fear that their child could be influenced by someone they do not know and would not recognise, and/or the possible involvement in prostitution ring. But overall, parents and teachers regard these Internet-transmitted dangers as remote and they are much more keenly aware of and focused on reducing the more obvious risks they perceive in the tangible world.

3. Conclusion

The results of this survey amply demonstrate that young Thais, like other children worldwide, are attracted to the entertaining and educational qualities of the Internet and related communication tools, and much more intensively so than is appreciated by adults. Young people also quickly understand that cyberspace offers possibilities that are different from those in the real world. Rather than trying to replicate in the virtual world what they have at home, they often enthusiastically use these possibilities to gain a whole new sense of freedom. This is apparent in their interest in chat rooms, where they can “meet” people of all ages, social backgrounds and levels of knowledge; their openness to the possibility of posing on the net as an entirely new character; and their fondness for virtual friends with whom they can talk about taboo subjects without any perceivable risk.

However, since no environment – physical or virtual – is devoid of dangers, young Thais who engage in such online activities expose themselves to risks. These risks can be minimised, just as they are in the physical world, if children are made aware of them and taught how to behave and respond to imposters. This survey reveals that most young Thais, irrespective of age, are metaphorically diving into a swimming pool without knowing how to swim properly and with no lifebuoy nearby. They are rarely trained on how to use the Internet and related tools, they are scarcely informed of the possible dangers of their actions, they do not benefit from sufficient parental and/or teacher guidance and support, and they are usually alone when they venture online.

As expected, their level of exposure online to pornography, invitations to discuss sex and impostors is very high, while their level of readiness to handle such situations is low. Their trust in the strangers they identify as “virtual friends” is such that many do not mind sharing personal details and many accept face-to-face meetings – often alone. Unsurprisingly, the proportion of these young people who have already gone through shocking or even traumatic experiences is far from insignificant, even though most must have been using the net for only a few years.

Due to cultural restrictions on adult-child communication on matters related to sex, pornography or amorous relationships, as well as many children’s lack of confidence in the ability of adults to understand the virtual world, young Thais tend to speak about their online experiences (especially when they are painful) only with their friends, physical or virtual. Sometimes they do not reveal these experiences to anyone. Ironically, this secretive attitude only compounds the problem thrown up by the Internet. It reinforces the ignorance of young people and their parents and teachers, and thus their inability (and lack of motivation to acquire the ability) to address Internet-related problems.

The survey demonstrates repeatedly that many Thai parents and teachers are unaware of the dangers to which their children may be exposed. Worse still, it reveals that even when Thai caregiving adults are aware of the dangers, they tend to dismiss them because such risks still somehow appear to be unreal and/or insignificant compared with the dangers of the physical world. At the same time, many parents and teachers underestimate the amount of time young people spend in cyberspace and the nature of their activities there; they also fail to appreciate that most of the dangers in cyberspace relate to subjects considered culturally “taboo”. As a consequence, parents and teachers do not seem to have sufficient incentives to acquire more information that can be shared with young people, and/or to start adapting their educational methods to address the virtual dimension of their children’s world. Thai kids are taught not to talk to strangers in the street, but little is said about how to surf the net and not sharing personal details with strangers in chat rooms.

Some parents and teachers feel confident because they have installed screening software on their children’s computers. Indeed, screening software may be better than nothing. But as this survey and many others on this topic have revealed, such software is not a fail-safe solution on its own. To regard it as such is to put on a psychological blindfold that hides the fact that many children know how to get around such restrictions if they care to do so.

Some caregiving adults tend to transfer their responsibility onto others. Parents often say it is a school’s responsibility to teach children how to use this technology. Teachers may say it is the responsibility of the computer teacher. And the computer teacher may say that their responsibility lies in instructing on the technicalities of the tool but not on its sociological and psychological aspects. All miss the point. Since it is every adult’s responsibility to help children adapt to and succeed in society, it is also their responsibility to help children make effective use of the virtual world. Mastery of the technology is of secondary importance. A few parents and teachers understand this and cleverly ask their kids and students to “teach” them to use the Internet, thus allowing an opportunity for discussion about what can happen in cyberspace.

It should be stressed once again that the sample of respondents in this survey, whether children and young people or adults, is representative of a small minority that is educated and urban. In the meantime, children of less privileged backgrounds are also quickly gaining access to the net, and their usage is expected to increase greatly in the near future. They may find themselves doing so with even less understanding, support and guidance than that received by the young respondents in this survey. If adults nationwide, at home and at school, do not adopt measures to alter their educational methods and the content of curricula, young Thais of all social backgrounds may soon become a market of choice for sexual predators.

The Internet and its Implications for Child Protection in Thailand

By Guy Thompstone, ECPAT International

• Technology vs Society

The Internet is a powerful new technology, heralding a new chapter in global communication. The Internet presents many exciting opportunities, allowing greater freedom of information and exchange, and defying national and international boundaries. However, children who use the Internet are brought up within a culturally specific society, and it is their life experiences within that society that determine their choices and actions.

Thai families are traditionally nuclear, with clearly defined structures of hierarchy, founded upon a strong tradition of reverence and respect by the young for those older than themselves. Children have played a subordinate role within the family and, in comparison with many western societies, have had little control in their day-to-day lives.

Within Thai society, the social identity of young people is perhaps evolving more rapidly than at any other time and has become increasingly ambiguous. Young Thai people are continually exposed to outside cultures and practices, and their behaviour and ideas are re-shaped accordingly. While they are perhaps becoming more independent from traditional kinship expectations, they are nonetheless more restricted than their western counterparts. For many, the Internet offers a new, autonomous, even rebellious reality. In this environment children and young people feel that they can exert more control over their lives and relationships. Unfortunately, as this research has revealed, the Internet may be a double-edged sword for children.

As children grow up, they receive many messages about personal safety and are often accompanied by a responsible adult. They are warned not to accept a lift from a stranger on the way to school; non-swimmers are told to stay in the shallow end of the pool; and, later on, when they first learn to drive, they are undoubtedly accompanied by an instructor. However, children's use of the Internet has been based largely upon "trial and error".

• Internet Safety

However, due to both naivety and complacency, the same kind of protection measures do not exist in this virtual world. As the survey demonstrates, children are often unaccompanied by adults when using the Internet. This may be for a number of reasons, but it is primarily because such technology is considered harmless, perhaps regarded in the same way as watching television

or playing electronic games. The Internet is used in the home, in cafes and at school, all of which are considered physically safe environments.

Secondly, the evolution of the Internet has been so rapid, and the younger generation has embraced this new technology more so than their parents' generation. This means that children have a better understanding of the technology than those adults who are responsible for them.

Even when protective filtering software is installed on the computer, children apparently have such advanced IT skills that they are technically able to evade them. Learning and guidance in this world often comes from other children, creating a situation where, in this virtual world, the messages or life skills they receive are not controlled by a responsible adult. The normal boundaries that exist within the Thai family and by which they are traditionally protected are dissipated as they enter this exciting adult world.

The Internet targets all age groups, and adults and children alike can find age-appropriate activities online. Unfortunately, as is borne out by the research, exploring the Internet is not a passive activity, nor is it as anonymous as children often believe. Rather, it is an interactive tool and, sadly, the Internet also potentially brings them into contact with the kind of abusive adults from whom they would be protected from in real life.

The supposed anonymity on the Internet may lead children into conversations that they would not otherwise have. It is clear that, on the Internet, children explore new identities and assume pseudo-personalities and roles. Typically, such fantasy involves children pretending to be older than they really are. The danger in this kind of innocent indulgence lies in the fact that they may adopt patterns of behaviour that they would never dare to replicate in real life. It is questionable whether their emotional and mental maturity to deal with the potential consequences of online experiences match their advanced technical skills.

Just as in the real world, even innocuous conversation creates a relationship or a dynamic between the actors. While chatting freely on the supposedly harmless Internet, children may be lured to leave their normal zone of safety. Social negotiation of this adult world is beyond their realm of experience and many will lack the capacity to negotiate those virtual relationships, let alone physical encounters, safely.

- **Abuse**

Research demonstrates that the Internet is increasingly used as a vehicle for the abuse of children. It is, therefore, worrying that this survey reveals that Thai children continue to use chat lines despite their negative experiences. This perhaps suggests that they believe themselves mature enough to handle both the traumatic experience and its consequences. Alternatively, as this survey demonstrates, Thai children are perhaps either native or apathetic to the dangers inherent to chatting with someone who makes sexual advances towards them. Even though some children asked their correspondent to change the subject, the results reveal a surprising lack of concern for the potential risk such conversations pose. The Internet clearly instills in

children a false sense of security and control. Pseudo-maturity, naivety and apathy are in fact all classic states that leave children vulnerable.

Adult sexual abusers tend to be devious and persistent. Through a long and sophisticated process, known as “grooming”, they nurture special and intimate relationships with vulnerable or naive children. Such befriending of children is often founded upon a series of shared secrets, ensuring that the abuser obtains the absolute confidence of children. This ploy aims to exclude all other adults, including teachers and parents. Children who are unhappy, isolated or who have poor relationships with their parents are especially susceptible to this kind of manipulation. Abusers elicit such information from potential victims and use their insecurities and vulnerability to forge a closer intimacy.

Whereas in the real world a child will recognise physical signals that cause them concern, they are unable to register these warning signs in the virtual world. When using the Internet it is important that children follow their instincts in the same way they would in reality. When a child does not definitively terminate the conversation or relationship, the abuser is able to re-group and try a different strategy. In many ways this online grooming process may replicate abuse within the real world. The groundwork is laid and the child has been being unwittingly manipulated. It is usually only then that a sexual abuser will move towards actual abuse.

- **The Encounter**

At this stage of the “relationship” children are encouraged to meet with their new “friend”. This is the point at which adult intervention is most needed and it is particularly disturbing that children do not talk to adults before they arrange to meet their virtual friend. By this stage, children are probably not in a position to refuse a request to meet: they do not want to let their “friend” down, are excited by this illicit relationship, or are threatened with exposure of their secrets. As this survey shows, many children meet their Internet friends unaccompanied. This leaves them at particular risk, although there is no certainty that, even in a pair, younger children would be any more effective in refusing an abuser. In fact, taking a friend along possibly only places more children at risk and may well be the original intention of an abuser.

While children may be able to switch off the computer at home, once faced with the reality of an adult who they do not recognize as their virtual friend, it is far harder to backtrack. This difficulty may be especially acute in Thailand where there remains an ingrained respect for older people. While a child may feel in control online, but they are not equipped to deal with the persistent, often calculated offensive of an abuser in real life. Adult skills are required to re-negotiate the relationship with this stranger.

- **Disclosure**

A child who is abused, threatened or made to feel uncomfortable is often unable to disclose this to an adult, perhaps not even to friends. As in many cases of sexual abuse, the children may feel guilty, thinking that they are to blame for their abusive experience. They may even feel

embarrassed that they have been manipulated in such a way, especially if they had been using a chat line secretly, perhaps against their parents' wishes.

It is particularly worrisome that children do not talk to adults before they arrange to meet their virtual friend. This is the point at which adult intervention is most needed.

• **Conclusions and Recommendations**

There are a few key lessons to learn from the survey.

- Firstly, prevention of abuse is crucial. Children need to learn assertiveness and negotiation on the Internet, so that if they feel uncomfortable they follow both their instinct and apply the same safety codes on the Internet as in the real world. Guidelines for safe use of the Internet need to be established and circulated in schools and Internet cafes. It is important that these guidelines become integral to the IT curriculum and that teachers themselves are trained in protection techniques. Some children will inevitably attempt to meet their virtual friends, so a “safety code” needs to be established and discussed in collaboration with children themselves.
- Secondly, mechanisms for reporting unpleasant experiences on the Internet must be established. Fundamentally, children need to be able to talk to parents and teachers about their experiences. However, if they are unwilling to talk to parents and teachers, then perhaps a designated peer at school could act as a reference point. Similarly, bulletin boards could be created for children to warn others of their experiences.
- Finally, above all, there needs to be improved dialogue between Thai children and their parents concerning use of the Internet. Parents need to revise their scepticism of the Internet and become familiar with the working and benefits of the technology. In this way they will become more involved in their children's activities and offer more direct guidance. However, it is equally important that parents in Thailand learn to speak more openly with their children on issues that are either taboo or cause embarrassment. The Internet does not respect cultural boundaries, and parents must address their own inhibitions if they are to open honest discussion with their children. In this way, informal mechanisms for reporting Internet abuse are created. When combined with the more formal systems that need to be instituted in schools and Internet cafes, children will be afforded a significantly higher level of protection.