

Evaluation of the Effectiveness of the NetSmartz Program: A Study of Maine Public Schools

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The NetSmartz Workshop
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Prepared by
Malena Brookshire & Christine Maulhardt

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY
WASHINGTON DC

Executive Summary

This report is the result of a sanctioned study conducted by the George Washington University to evaluate the effectiveness of the NetSmartz program, an Internet safety educational program created sponsored by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC). The study was designed to determine students' existing Internet behaviors and their conceptions of safe Internet behavior.

The data obtained from surveying Maine students between the ages of 9-14 proved that involvement in the NetSmartz program resulted in more responsible online behavior by children. Prior to participation in NetSmartz:

- **Fifty-four percent** were unsure or believed it was safe to meet someone in person after they had been chatting with them for a long time compared to a post-test result of **eighty-three percent** saying it was *not* safe to meet someone in person;
- **Twenty-five percent** were unsure or believed it was safe to post their picture on the Internet compared to a post-test result of **ninety-six percent** saying it was *not* safe to post their picture on the Internet;
- **Twenty percent** have told people their real name on the Internet compared to a post-test compared to a post-test result of **ninety-eight percent** saying it was *not* safe to state their real name on the Internet; and
- **Twenty-five percent** were unsure or believed it was safe to put their address on the Internet compared to a post-test result of **eighty-eight percent** saying it was *not* safe to put their address on the Internet.

Participation in the Netsmartz program increased the children's awareness of Internet dangers and allowed them to be more comfortable and confident Internet users. Overall, eighty-one percent of the students surveyed reported that NetSmartz would change their Internet behaviors, and that they feel safe or very safe when using the Internet.

I. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study was to determine the effectiveness of NetSmartz, an Internet safety educational program sponsored by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC), for children ages six to eighteen by collecting quantitative data through surveys administered in schools in the state of Maine. The survey was designed in the spring of 2004 by two graduate students at the George Washington.

The survey materials were presented to the George Washington University (GWU) Institutional Review Board (IRB) for approval for use with human subjects. The materials were approved by GWU's IRB; however, the students were unable to conduct the evaluation on schools using NetSmartz because of time constraints.

In early 2005 two new GWU students were recruited to complete the evaluation of the NetSmartz program. Two schools in the state of Maine agreed to participate in the GWU sanctioned evaluation of the NetSmartz program. This study focused on the following questions identified by NCMEC staff:

- Does participation in the NetSmartz program make children more knowledgeable about Internet dangers?
- Does participation in the NetSmartz program allow children to be more comfortable and confident when using the Internet?
- Does the NetSmartz program result in more responsible online behavior and choices by children

The data obtained from surveying Maine students is intended to be compiled with survey results from other NetSmartz testing locations to assess the program's overall effectiveness. This report will present only data obtained from two schools in Maine.

II. METHODOLOGY

In 2004 two GWU graduate students, Brianne Miers and Alexandra Londos, created pre- and post-test surveys consisting of twenty open- and closed-ended questions. The questions were designed to get a sense of students' current Internet behaviors and their conceptions of safe Internet behavior. The pre-tests were administered by a designated teacher prior to the implementation of the NetSmartz program. The teachers then led the students through the NetSmartz program and administered the post-tests. The pre- and post-tests were sent to the researchers by the schools' NetSmartz contacts for analysis.

These surveys were administered at two Maine schools that were selected by the NetSmartz Program Manager. The NetSmartz contact at each of these schools selected classrooms to participate in the study. Consent forms were signed by the administrators, teachers, and parents of the students participating in the evaluation of NetSmartz.

In the Saco School District one third grade class with twenty-four students agreed to participate in the evaluation. A second third grade class was designated to participate in the study, however, they chose not to participate because parents did not want their children involved in an outside evaluation. The NetSmartz contact in the Saco School District was Steve Bedell, a School Resource Officer (SRO) with the Saco Police Department. Bedell acted as a liaison between the researchers, school administrators, and teachers.

Approximately 98 students of Palermo Consolidated School in Palermo, Maine participated in the study. These students were between the ages of 9-14 enrolled in grades 3 thru 7. Jason Tarr, principal of Palermo Consolidated School, was the NetSmartz contact and served as the liaison between the researchers, school administrators and teachers.

III. RESULTS

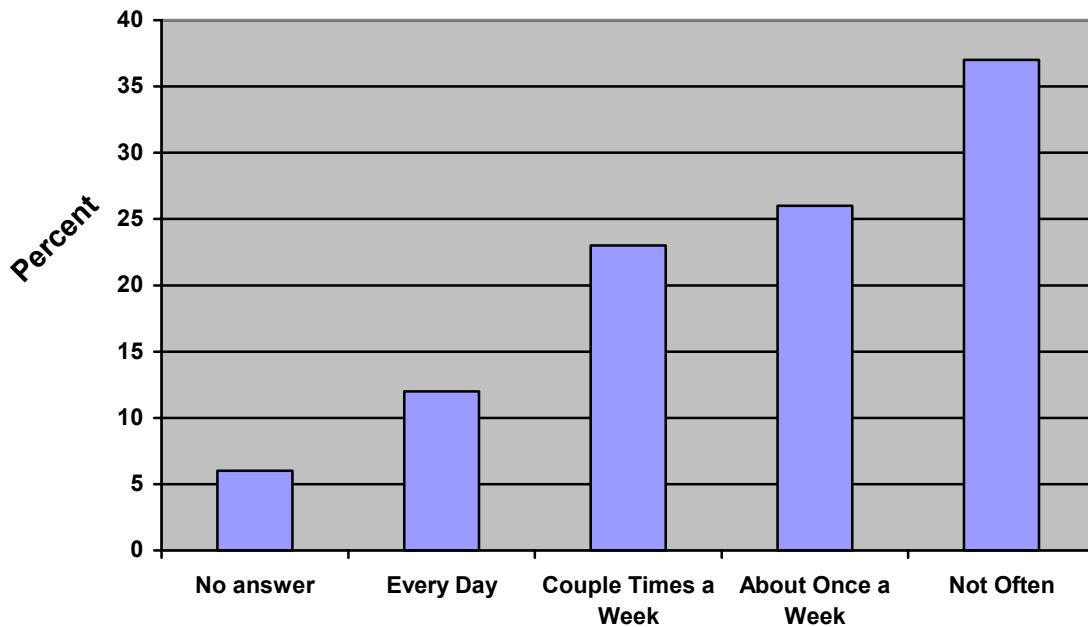
Saco Pre-tests

Of the twenty-four students surveyed in the Saco School District ten were girls and fourteen were boys. Thirteen students were eight years old and eleven students were nine years old. Nearly ninety-two percent of the students surveyed stated that they have used the Internet, and almost eighty-eight percent of the students have a computer at home. The students surveyed are most likely to use computers at home or school, and their primary use of computers is to search the Internet. Email, instant messenger, and chat rooms are not widely used by the third graders surveyed (see Table 1). Only three of the twenty-four students surveyed have their own email addresses and use the Internet everyday. Almost thirty-eight percent of students reported their Internet use as "Not Often" (see Figure 1).

Table 1: Online tools used

Have You Used	Yes	No	No Answer
...the Internet?	91.7%	8.3%	0%
...email?	25%	58.3%	16.7%
...instant messenger?	16.7%	66.7%	16.7%
...chat rooms?	8.3%	66.7%	25%

Figure 1: How Often Do You Go Online?



Parents were most often identified as the adult who had talked to the students about Internet safety, however, only forty-six percent of parents had talked to their children about Internet safety. Additionally, forty-six percent of students reported that no one had ever spoken to them about Internet safety. When asked specific questions about Internet safety, the students responded with the following:

- Fifty-four percent were unsure or believed it was safe to meet someone in person after they had been chatting with them for a long time.
- Fifty percent were unsure or believed it was safe to say what school they attend.
- Twenty-nine percent were unsure or believed it was safe to tell people where they hang out.
- Twenty-five percent were unsure or believed it was safe to state their real name on the Internet.
- Twenty-five percent were unsure or believed it was safe to put their address on the Internet.
- Twenty-five percent were unsure or believed it was safe to post their picture on the Internet.

Saco Post-tests

Following their involvement with the NetSmartz workshop the percentage of students who reported an adult discussing Internet safety increased. Nearly eighty percent of students reported that someone had discussed Internet safety with them. This number should be 100% since all of the students surveyed participated in the NetSmartz Workshop, however, the question may have been worded too sophistically causing the students to misreport. When asked the same specific questions about Internet safety as the pre-tests, the students responded with the following:

- Eighty-three percent said it was *not* safe to meet someone in person after they had been chatting with them for a long time.
- Ninety-two percent said it was *not* safe to say what school they attend.
- Ninety-two percent said it was *not* safe to tell people where they hang out.
- Ninety-two percent said it was *not* safe to state their real name on the Internet.
- Eighty-eight percent said it was *not* safe to put their address on the Internet.
- Ninety-six percent said it was *not* safe to post their picture on the Internet.

Overall, seventy-nine percent of the students surveyed reported that NetSmartz will change the way they do things on the Internet and that they feel safe or very safe when using the Internet.

Palermo Pre-tests

Ninety-eight students of Palermo school, ages 8-14, participated in the NetSmartz study. Of the ninety-eight students surveyed, thirty-nine were boys, forty-eight were girls, and two did not report their gender. Ten students were eight years old, sixteen students were age nine, sixteen students were age ten, seventeen students were age eleven, fifteen students were age twelve, thirteen students were age thirteen, and two students did not report their age.

Ninety percent of the students reported that they have a computer at home, ninety-two percent of the students reported that they have used the Internet, and nearly seventy-one percent stated that they go online at least once a week. While on the computer, nearly fifty-nine percent of the students reported that they used Instant Messaging and sixty-four percent reported that they used Email.

While ninety-two percent of the students reported that they have used the Internet, only slightly over half of them stated that a parent or teacher has talked to them about Internet safety. When asked specific questions about Internet safety, the students responded with the following:

- Thirteen percent were unsure or believed it was safe to meet someone in person after they had been chatting with them for a long time.
- Thirty-six percent were unsure or believed it was safe to say what school they attend.
- Twenty percent have told people their real name on the Internet.
- Sixteen percent were unsure or believed it was safe to tell people where they hang out.
- Sixteen percent were unsure or believed it was safe to put their address on the Internet.
- Fifteen percent were unsure or believed it was safe to post their picture on the Internet.

Palermo Post-tests

Following their involvement with the NetSmartz workshop the percentage of students who reported an adult discussing Internet safety increased from twenty-four percent to forty percent. Again, this number should be 100% since all of the students surveyed participated in the NetSmartz Workshop, however, the question may have been worded too sophistically causing the students to misreport. When asked the same specific questions about Internet safety as the pre-tests, the students responded with the following:

- Eighty-two percent said it was *not* safe to meet someone in person after they had been chatting with them for a long time.
- Ninety-six percent said it was *not* safe to say what school they attend.
- 100% said it was *not* safe to tell people where they hang out.
- Ninety-eight percent said it was *not* safe to state their real name on the Internet.
- Ninety-five percent said it was *not* safe to put their address on the Internet.
- Ninety-eight percent said it was *not* safe to post their picture on the Internet.

Overall, eighty-two percent of the students surveyed reported that NetSmartz will change the way they do things on the Internet, and ninety-two percent reported that they feel safe or very safe when using the Internet.

IV. SUMMARY AND RECCOMENDATIONS

Given the data reported, usage of computers and the Internet by students is very high. Of the 8-9 year-old student of the Saco school, nearly ninety-two percent of the students surveyed stated that they have used the Internet, and almost eighty-eight percent of the students have a computer at home. Of the 8-14 year-old students of the Palermo school, ninety percent of the students reported that they have a computer at home, ninety-two percent of the students reported that they have used the Internet, and nearly seventy-one percent stated that they go online at least once a week. With students using the Internet at this rate, it is important that they receive education in Internet safety.

After completing the NetSmartz workshop high percentages of students at both schools surveyed expressed that they felt safe or very safe when using the Internet. In addition, roughly 80% of the students surveyed stated that the NetSmartz workshop will change the way they do things on the Internet. Based on the surveyed populations in Saco and Palermo schools it may be concluded that NetSmartz has a strong overall effect on 8 to 13 year olds using the Internet.