



MEDIA RELATIONS

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CHILDREN CAN LEARN INTERNET SAFETY FROM PREVENTATIVE PROGRAMS, SAY UNH RESEARCHERS

Preliminary Research Finds NetSmartz Workshop Increases Awareness of Internet Risks

DURHAM – Preventative Internet safety programs may be helpful in increasing awareness among elementary and middle school students about Internet dangers, according to preliminary research from the University of New Hampshire. The findings come at a time of heightened concern for the online safety of children, who currently use the Internet more than any other age group (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2002). Research suggests that approximately one in five youth (10 – 17 years) experience a sexual solicitation while online within a one-year time frame.

UNH researchers, led by assistant professor of social work Melissa Wells, surveyed students in two public school classrooms in New England to evaluate the effectiveness of one Internet safety program, the NetSmartz Workshop, developed by the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children® (NCMEC) and Boys & Girls Clubs of America (BGCA) to teach children about being safer while using the Internet. The goal of the NetSmartz Workshop is to extend the safety awareness of children to prevent victimization and increase self-confidence whenever they go online.

“The big message is that a preventative program like Netsmartz can make a big impact on youth knowledge of online safety,” said Wells, who led students in her master’s level Program and Practice Evaluation class in the research.

Evaluating elementary and middle school students before and after using the NetSmartz Workshop, researchers found that NetSmartz enhanced students’ knowledge of online safety issues and of the risks associated with Internet use. Among elementary school students, knowledge of whether it was safe to tell someone one’s real name or address on the Internet, to meet someone they had chatted with on the Internet, and to reveal where they went to school increased. After these elementary students participated in the NetSmartz Workshop, their knowledge around not giving out personal information increased from a pre-test score of 82% to a post-test score of 94%.

Middle school students reported improved awareness of safe online purchasing. For instance, students’ knowledge about paying with a credit card and not a debit card increased from 25% to 80%.

Wells underscored the importance of Internet safety – not only from predators, but also from exposure to inappropriate or disturbing content – for youth. “Kids are using the Internet more and

more. It's how they communicate with each other, it's how they learn about the world," she said. "But kids on average probably don't realize the risks."