Parents, Teens, and Online Safety: Improving Parenting Practices in a Digital Age

Principal Investigator: Natalya Bazarova, Associate Professor

The Need: Children’s exposure to online risks — such as cyberbullying, being contacted by strangers online, and searching for sexual content — is a primary parental concern, but there are few evidence-based resources to guide parents and teens on strategies to reduce these risks. A growing number of parents are becoming social media users themselves, but rapid changes in media technologies make it difficult for parents to stay up to date with their children’s Internet use. We sought to understand the types of social media use that increase chances of risky online behaviors and reduce family bonding. And we have provided insights into how parents can help their children successfully navigate a diverse media environment.

The Approach: To research the factors that influence social media use, we conducted in-depth interviews with 44 participants: 22 teens, ages 12-17 years old, and 22 parents. Parents and teens were interviewed separately and asked about family rules governing social media use, and whether they felt those rules were effective. We found that parenting strategies frequently have limited efficacy, perhaps because parents and teens have different understandings of online risks. While parents focused on longer-term risks, teens cared more about immediate, relationship-based concerns. Younger teens, 12-13 years old, showed the highest discrepancies in understanding. Discrepancies markedly reduce as teens get older and move from relying on family rules to self-regulating social media behavior.

Impacts: We developed a social media simulator, Social Media TestDrive, which provides interactive lessons that teach children and caregivers social media literacy in a safe, realistic environment. One of the lessons teaches how to choose a username and a safe password. Another helps teens understand the importance of self-presentation to multiple audiences at once, and how to make smart self-disclosures. A lesson on cyberbullying helps students learn to detect the signs of cyberbullying and practice “upstanding” behaviors to interrupt it. A lesson on information literacy helps teens learn how to evaluate the quality and veracity of facts they encounter online, and how to help others detect fake news. Results of this study have been disseminated through academic conferences, via two Psychology Today blog posts, and through various workshops and webinars, some in partnership with Cooperative Extension and 4-H programming. We have also partnered with Common Sense Media to develop and disseminate the Social Media TestDrive modules as supplements to the Common Sense Digital Citizenship curriculum.

Website: https://socialmediatestdrive.org/