

Generation Web

Part 5: How can we guide and protect our young people on-line

Nick Sharp

The internet is Free?

When the internet began, it was a product of the American West coast "free" culture. Some people see in it a remnant of the 60's hippy culture, leaderless and uncontrollable.

Certainly there is a profound emphasis on freedom and independence alive on the internet, and a resistance and suspicion of anything that smacks of control.

When Australia announced plans to filter out the worst material from the internet, there was much protest, leading to the nickname "The Great Firewall of Australia." Behind the furore can be seen the clash of cultures between the freewheeling internet pioneers, and those with a law enforcement or child protection remit. Objectors say it won't work, because they have great faith in programmers' ability to circumvent any barriers.

However, we accept boundaries in other areas of life: censorship of books and films, laws against speeding or dangerous driving. But there is a culture around that suggests that the internet must be completely untrammelled. Deep down, it seems, we just want to have our cake and eat it.

Free for what?

It can't really be free, can it?
Free to abuse? Surely not.

Christian Freedom

Of course, as Christians, we believe in freedom. "If the Son sets you free, you shall be free indeed." Galatians 5 talks about Christian freedom as opposed to two different types of slavery: slavery to the law, or slavery to our sinful desires. This teaches us that freedom to do what we want is illusory: we become enslaved very quickly to a cycle of unfulfilled desire, and to shallow and repetitive lives.

Addiction

The internet has arrived at just the right time for our addictive culture. At last it gives us

the chance to consume as much as we like, for little or no cost. Retail therapy has never tasted so good.

When it comes to challenging such a powerful cultural bias, what can be done? Stephen Watters, in his book *Overcoming Internet Addictions*, identifies five elements essential to overcoming an online addiction:

- 1) A honest assessment of the problem, coupled with a willingness to change
- 2) A community of support
- 3) Immediate and ongoing action to change harmful behaviour
- 4) Understanding and addressing underlying thoughts and emotions
- 5) A restored relationship with God.

With some adaptations, I believe that these five points can be applied to the question we began this section with: How can we guide and protect our young people online?

Firstly, an honest assessment is essential. Our instincts are skewed when it comes to the internet,. We don't perceive dangers that we would instantly spot in another situation. We need to educate ourselves, in much the same way that previous generations educated themselves about road safety, or stranger danger. Our society desperately needs to gain critical distance from its obsessions, and we need prophets and teachers who can tell us hard truths about ourselves.

We have seen how attractive online community seems. We need to work harder to make offline community better, to meet the needs that our young people are rushing online to satisfy. Within the family, online activity should be a poor substitute for time spent together, parents and children talking and listening to each other, giving and receiving affection and support. If your son or daughter says to you "my online friends understand me better than you do," maybe they need more

empathy from you as their parent. We have become accustomed to using the television as a babysitter, and the signs are that we are treating the internet in the same way. This needs to stop, in my opinion.

Thirdly, if parents have allowed their children inappropriate freedoms online, it is time to swallow their pride and change the rules. This may lead to heated arguments(!) but if they can discuss and explain rather than simply lecturing, they may be able to change things. Parents could sit down and browse through www.thinkuknow.com together with their children, discussing it together, and agreeing to abide by the same rules.

Fourthly, we all know about teenage angst. Adolescence is the most turbulent time to live through, and the online world can be a welcome distraction from the pains and unfulfilled longings that young people endure. But should it be their only help? There are a number of excellent peer-led mentoring schemes to address issues like cyber-bullying. Perhaps there is room also for peers to help young people deal with their addictive behaviour in the wider sense.

A renewed relationship with God

The Bible never mentions addiction, but does deal with related issues in helpful ways. What follows is a short survey of some Bible passages which reflect something of God's attitude to people struggling with addiction.

Slavery

The first thing to say is that God has mercy on us when we're trapped. God loves us, and feels concern for our trouble, and offers to set us free. The themes of slavery, and redemption from slavery, are at the heart of the Biblical message. Throughout the Bible, God is clearly portrayed as hearing people's cries, and acting in mercy to release them.

When God spoke to Cain in Genesis 4:6-7, we can sense the concern: "Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is

crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it." God knew the dangers for Cain, that the sin of jealousy and anger at his brother were threatening to beat down his defences, and God tried to open Cain's eyes. Before God judges, God reaches out in mercy.

What the Bible calls "sin" includes all the powers that might enslave us. God's desire is to set us free – not free to please ourselves, but genuine, authentic freedom.

Adultery

God has much to say through the prophetic writings about Israel's poor choices. Jeremiah 2:13 says, "My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water."

The prophet Hosea is called to live a life that was itself a parable: to marry a woman who would be unfaithful to him, and to woo her back. In the prophet's broken heart we see the wounded heart of God the lover. This teaches us that our addictive behaviour is tantamount to adultery, digging leaking cisterns that cannot satisfy us, while the source of living water stands by, spurned.

God reacts with wounded love to our spiritual adultery, but never gives up: wayward children who turn and seek forgiveness are welcomed with open arms.

Idolatry

Finally, The Bible is full of warnings to people who turn away to false gods, to ways of life and patterns of behaviour which look attractive, but which are futile. We need to work hard to communicate this reality afresh to our bedazzled culture.

One way in which this can be done is by planting the flag for God in areas of idolatry. Tom Wright, Bishop of Durham, once reflected on the early Christians' practice of building churches on sites of pagan worship. He called it "a conscious decision ... to worship God in places where idols are worshipped. It is to plant the flag for God in hostile soil, to claim the good things of God for him, to proclaim that only

All Saints Alive

under the loving and gracious gaze of God can everything be held in the right balance and perspective."

"Planting the flag" in the midst of the internet surely means not running and hiding from this new phenomenon, but seeking to say something profound and helpful about it, and through it, to anyone who will listen.

Christmas Alone 2010

Volunteers are wanted for Christmas Alone 2010, to help make Christmas Day special for many housebound, lonely, young or old people living in our area. There is an invitation, no strings attached, to anyone who would otherwise be on their own on Christmas Day, to join the party at Sele School or if they are housebound or prefer to be alone, to receive Christmas Lunch in their own home

A traditional lunch will be served followed by entertainment and tea. Transport will be laid on for those who need it. Churches Together makes no charge but obviously needs all the help it can get from the community and all the churches to make this day a success. Financial help is needed and gifts of cakes, shortbread and mince pies are important. We need help with preparation, cooking and serving food, transport and entertainment.

It would help us a great deal with the organisation if you could phone directly to the co-ordinators whose names and numbers are below. They will give you further details if necessary.

1. Help Beforehand

a) Making cakes, mince pies, shortbread. Please telephone *Mrs Janet Bird (587544)*

b) Making table decorations, providing small presents. Please telephone *Mrs Linda Moore (589909)* or *Libby Shillito (5839790)*

c) Holding a coffee morning to raise funds or making a donation.

Please contact *Mrs Cheryl Jackson (583958)* 10 Holly Grove Road, Bramfield, SG14 2HQ

2. Help on Christmas Eve

a) Offers to help in the morning on Christmas Eve, packing teas for housebound, laying tables and packing mini hampers 9.30am -12 noon December 24th at Sele School.

Please telephone *Mrs Libby Shillito (583979)* or *Mrs Linda Moore (589909)*

b) Offers to help prepare food, peel vegetables etc. in the morning on Christmas Eve 9.30am -12 noon December 24th at Sele School.

Please telephone *Mrs Janet Bird (587544)*

3. Christmas Day (All helpers at the school are invited to sit down for a meal once the guests have been fed.)

Please telephone *Mrs Janet Bird (587544)*

a) Taking a meal to the housebound on Christmas Day at 12 noon or helping to provide entertainment.

b) Staying all or part of the day helping cook lunch, welcoming, serving, serving tea or washing up.

(i) 9am -12 noon (including some cooking of food)

(ii) 11am -1 p.m. (including serving food and washing up)

(iii) 1pm -4 p.m. (including clearing up)

c) Providing transport to and from Sele School 12noon -12.30p.m. and 3.15 - 4.00 p.m.

d) Helping provide entertainment at the school. 2pm-3pm

We would like to reach as many people as possible so if you know of anybody who might like to be included application forms will be available in all churches, Hertford Citizens Advice Bureau and Hertford Library and should be sent to Janet Bird, 140 North Road, Hertford, SG14 2BZ or placed in the box which will be available from November in Hertford Library.