

A Review of “Internet and Computer Ethics for Kids”

by Diane DeMott Painter, Ph.D.

During the weekend of Oct. 6-8, 2000 I had the opportunity to attend the National Conference on Cyber Ethics at Marymount University in Arlington, Virginia. Educators, parents, government officials, and business leaders from all over the country attended this joint initiative between the Department of Justice and the Information Technology Association of America. The mission of the Cyber Citizen Partnership Conference was to bring together a body of proactive individuals who would create, launch and lead a program dedicated to teaching young computer users, their parents and teachers smart, ethical, safe and socially conscious online behaviors.

It was through this conference that I met Winn Schwartau, president of Interpact, Inc., a security awareness consulting firm that develops innovative and entertaining corporate awareness programs. Schwartau is the founder of www.nicekids.net, a web site that is a forum for parents and teachers to address cyber safety and cyber ethics issues. Contained in this web site are online resources designed to help create ethical, educated and responsible Internet and computer users.

Schwartau is also an author of numerous books and articles that address cyber warfare and security. His latest book, *Internet & Computer Ethics for Kids (and Parents and Teachers Who Haven't Got a Clue,)* caught my interest as a resource worthy of review and discussion with children in grades three on up. This is not a “rule” book but a practical guide for the ethical navigation of cyberspace. The book provides information and tools to help parents and teachers communicate with children about the many ethical issues that they are likely to encounter when utilizing the Internet as a student, or later on when employed by a large corporation, a small business or the government. Designed to be read and discussed, the book fosters debate and open dialogue about applying ethics to technology.

The chapters are outlined to walk readers through the ethical questions that they should be asking their children and themselves, helping create guidelines and suggesting limits while explaining how the law actually works. The book begins with a discussion of what is “ethics?” Schwartau defines ethics as “the understanding about how your actions affect other people, knowing what is right and wrong, and taking personal responsibility for your actions, even if they are legal.” The chapters cover a range of topics from what does it mean to be a

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hacker, to annoying and illegal acts such as spamming, scams and hoaxes, plagiarism, flaming, sending hate mail, stalking and pornography. At the end of the book, Schwartau addresses the topics of ethics and the law and cyber parenting.

The book and the web site have prompted some concern. One concern is Schwartau's statement found in chapter one of the book, "Since Internet and Computer Ethics for Kids is for parents and businesses as well as kids, I declare no rules. Just like the Internet, we are all learning as we move along. So who am I to tell you how to behave?" Several discussion board participants on the web site expressed the concern that children need to have rules and that the book should at least present some guidelines for ethical behavior. For example, several messages were posted that expressed a need for youngsters to have a set of rules to abide by (i.e. spelled out as to what is right and what is wrong). I find it very interesting to note how many questions are also posted on this discussion board asking for information on "how to" hack into computers!

Recently I discussed the book with a high school teacher and an elementary teacher from Fairfax County, Virginia, and a Loudoun County, Virginia minister who is a parent of four children. I invited them to discuss with me their views in this article in order to stimulate thinking and debate on the issue of what we should and should not be doing to address cyber safety and cyber ethics with children. Our points and counter-point views are presented below:

Point:

Kids need rules. They need to know what is right and what is wrong. The book does not give a clear indication of how we should behave while using computer technology and when clearly unethical behaviors are described, the absence of clear reprimand tends to glorify the misbehavior. (High School Teacher)

Counter-points:

If you teach children to "just say no" when they are asked to perform an illegal or unethical behavior using computers, it is inadequate preparation for them making difficult decisions in their lives. Remember, in general there are no clear-cut answers when it comes to issues of ethics and morals. Schwartau clearly states that his book is designed to challenge you to think through ethical questions and dilemmas that kids, parents, and teachers face on the Internet every day. He stresses that ethics is a personal choice and responsibility. Schwartau states that cyber-ethics is very complicated and contains many gray areas. There are things that people do while using technology which are not so clear as to whether a crime has or has not been committed. He simply wants people to think about the consequences of their behaviors and the harm that their behaviors may cause." (Elementary Teacher)

While I agree kids and adults need to learn to think critically, as opposed to simply following a set of right and wrongs, I think the author was too quick to hide behind "who am I to impose my rules on other people." At minimum he could have further developed the "What does the law say?" and not simply left it at open-ended questions. With that said, if you follow through with his

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suggestions and truly discuss the questions with parents sharing their thoughts, the environment would be much safer for all involved. (Minister/parent)

Point:

The book invites kids to listen to others and determine a code of ethics that is right for them and encourages them to take responsibility for their actions. (Elementary Teacher)

Counter-point:

I am afraid students may think it is OK to have a code of ethics that violates ethical behavior as long as it seems right to them! (High School Teacher)

Point:

Let's look at hacking behavior. Can it ever be ethical? The book describes the many different reasons people hack into computers. Some of the reasons are legitimate, such as people hired to test the security of companies. Others perform illegal hacking activities such as 'crackers' who want to break into computers or networks that they have no business accessing. Won't the mere description of different types of hacking behaviors influence some kids to try to do the same kinds of things? I mean, just take a look at the discussion board. People are asking questions about "how to" hack into computers. (Diane Painter, Editor)

Counter-Point:

If the book seems overly descriptive in hacking, why all the questions on "how to" hack? I think the book is simply trying to indicate that some hacking behaviors are legitimate and useful for helping to protect our infrastructure, and other hacking behaviors are clearly illegitimate and are unethical. As Schwartau states, "Just because something can be done does not mean it should be done." (Chapter two) The book is to be used within families and teaching situations between students and professional educators. It is not meant to stand-alone. Why are we so hesitant to take responsibility for teaching our children right from wrong instead of expecting "experts" to influence and guide them in making the right decisions? (Elementary Teacher)

There is always a risk as information is presented. Does teaching sex education actually make kids more sexually active? In my judgment, the information is not necessarily the problem. Rather, what will we do with it is the key concern, and in answering that we are brought back to questions of ethics. We must couple the discussion of hacking with discussion of what we believe is ethical. (Minister/parent)

Point:

What about the annoying, nuisance behaviors addressed in the book such as morphing and special effects? I have kids at my school that would think it funny to try to morph a teacher and print it out or send it electronically

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throughout the school community. Schwartau states, "There is nothing illegal about using morphing and special effects software. It can be a lot of fun to put people's heads on an animal body, or make a picture more attractive."

He even states that his favorite tabloid cover is the President shaking hands with an alien. Some students may read the words "can be a lot of fun" and "personal favorite" as encouragement from an adult to engage in these nuisance behaviors. In addition, in the chapter on anonymity Schwartau states that these students can engage in these nuisance behaviors in anonymous ways. I think it is very-important for young people to feel the emotions and consequences of harm that can result from unkind and unethical uses of the computer. (High School Teacher)

Counter-Points:

While morphing is certainly a nuisance behavior, I would be reluctant to limit expression of free speech within broad limits. (I know there is disagreement on these "broad limits") The greater point in my mind is helping the kids and adults to think ethically and understand how their work impacts other people and take steps to build up, rather than tear down. (Minister/parent)

Define "nuisance behavior." What is artistic expression to some is trash to others. That's the point of the book. The reader, based on his or hers own personal belief system, needs to decide where the lines should be drawn. That is the beauty of the book. It fosters discussion and self-reflection, expecting the readers to think about ramifications for their actions and how they affect others. Hopefully, children along with the adults who read and discuss the book with them, will conclude that the golden rule, "do unto others as you would have others do unto you" applies to computer use as well as other areas of life. (Elementary School Teacher)

I will say that Schwartau does an excellent job discussing consequences of behaviors such as spoofing (chapter 13), scamming and hoaxes (chapter 16) and fraud (chapter 17). He clearly states that fraud is unacceptable behavior on or off the Internet. In chapter 21 Schwartau states that plagiarizing and violation of copyrights are unacceptable and unethical behaviors. (Diane Painter, Editor)

Point:

The author states early in the book that he is not planning to tell kids what is right and wrong, and throughout most of the book, he sticks to this. However, in the last chapter, he clearly does state right from wrong behaviors. I think if the last chapter were at the beginning of the book, I would have felt more trusting about the author's intentions to provide guiding information to parents and their children rather than telling them what is right and wrong.

I think the book title should be aimed at parents and teachers with the subtitle 'and kids who want to help them understand.' Children would help adults understand the "computer talk" contained in the book and this would lead to family and classroom dialogue about the ethical issues that go along with the



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"computer talk." This is particularly important in classrooms where these discussions are avoided by teachers who need help in understanding how computer ethics pertain to the use of technology in and out of the classroom. (High School Teacher)

Counter-Point:

I see the last chapter reinforcing what he says at the beginning of the book. He said he was not going to tell kids how to behave, just present points for discussion that hopefully will lead parents, teachers and children to a clear of understanding of "responsibility." As he states in the last chapter, "Kids are constantly faced with challenges and choices. They have to decide between right and wrong, and then deal with the consequences of their choices." Just telling kids the "rules" and expecting them to follow the rules does not always work. Children need to "buy into" those expectations. (Diane Painter, Editor)

If you are interested in reviewing Schwartau's materials, portions of the text from the book can be found on the Internet at www.nicekids.net. The section in PDF can be freely copied and distributed in both electronic and hard copy form as long as no content changes of any form are made and full credit is given. Additional fair use of the contents of the book includes pulling quotes, descriptive material, promotion and biographical information for review and commentary.

Customized versions of the book are also available for schools, educational institutions, corporations or government organizations. Contact Winn Schwartau for more information by calling 727-393-6600 or send an e-mail message to winn@nicekids.net. Reactions to this review are welcomed. I would love to hear from you. Please contact me at dpainter@vste.org.

References

- Schwartau, Winn (2001). Internet and Computer Ethics for Kids. Winn Schwartau & Interpact, Inc. Also available: www.nicekids.net. Contact 727-393-6600 for orders.

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