CyberEthics and Internet Downloads:
An Age-by-Age Guide to Teaching Children What They Need to Know

by Melanie G. Snyder

Twelve year-old Brianna Lahara had no idea she was breaking the law when she downloaded her favorite songs from the Internet. Neither did her mother – until her daughter was sued by the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) for copyright infringement.

Despite extensive media coverage of the issues, kids continue to engage in illegal downloading at alarming rates. The majority of 8-18 year olds surveyed last year by Harris Interactive were aware that movies, music, software and games available on the Internet were copyrighted, yet more than half admitted to downloading anyway. Three-quarters of them knew others who had downloaded copyrighted works. Their rationale? One third said it's okay because "lots of people do it." More recently, 94% of youth responding to an online cyberethics poll didn't think there would be any negative consequences to illegally copying copyrighted materials.

The potential cost of such misguided thinking is escalating for both parents and children. The consequences of illegal downloads are very real: from the risk of legal action to the likelihood of computer viruses, spyware, identity theft, and other threats from the peer-to-peer (P2P) file-sharing software typically used for downloading. Proposed new federal legislation calls for even steeper fines and possible jail sentences.

Now more than ever, kids need to adopt appropriate cyberethics about Internet downloads. Here's how to get the message across to kids of every age.

Starting the Conversation - Elementary School

"Parents can start by talking with young children about the things they create – from finger paintings and clay sculptures to songs, stories, and drawings," suggests Bob Kruger, who leads anti-piracy programs for the Business Software Alliance (BSA) (www.bsa.org and www.PlayItCyberSafe.com). "Acknowledge your child's hard work and ask how s/he would feel if others copied or took their creations without permission." Explain that things found on the Internet were created by other people and that copyright laws protect the creators from having others copy their work without permission.

By third grade, most students are taught copyright basics as they apply to copying text from books or Web sites for school research papers. Explain that the same rules apply to all copyrighted works. Be sure your child recognizes the copyright symbol: © Consider having your child agree to abide by a computer ethics contract or code of ethics (see sidebar).

Laurence Steinberg, Ph.D., Professor of Psychology at Temple University and author of *Ten Basic Principles of Good Parenting,* observes, "Generally speaking, kids are pretty black and white in their thinking until they are eleven or twelve." He suggests simply telling younger children that downloading copyrighted materials from the Internet is against the law and it's wrong to break the law.

Messages for Middle-Schoolers

For middle-schoolers enticed by the prospect of getting the latest goodies for free by downloading or copying from a friend, cyberethics discussions can be more challenging. Kids may rationalize downloading with arguments about the high cost of buying things they can download for free, saying it doesn't really hurt anyone and "everyone does it."

Kruger suggests countering such arguments by helping kids understand what goes into creating the movies, music, software and games they enjoy at home – from actors, musicians, graphic designers and programmers to the people who work for the manufacturing companies that produce and package the goods, the truck drivers who deliver them to stores, and the store staff who sell them.

"Most children understand that in the work world, people get paid for their hard work and creative ideas," observes Dr. Diane DeMott Painter, a technology educator in Centreville, Virginia. "Explain that the money we pay in a store for a video game or music CD or software package goes to all of the people who helped to create and distribute it – and when someone copies these things without paying for them, all of those people who helped to create them don't get the money they have earned."

Steinberg adds, "Point out that there are real people who are being hurt. Kids are less likely to steal when they can see a real person as the victim."

Many schools have "Acceptable Use of Technology" policies governing student use of school computers, including guidelines for appropriate uses of materials found on the Internet. Often, parents and students are required to sign a copy of the policies annually. Review school policies with your child and

discuss downloading do's and don'ts. Consider adopting an Internet use contract with your tween (see

sidebar).

When children conduct research for school projects, encourage them to request permission to use

materials they find on the Internet with this form: http://landmark-project.com/permission_student.php

Talking with Teens

Teens need to understand the risks associated with P2P software. Downloads through P2P

networks often infect computers with viruses, spyware and adware which can make a computer unusable

and require expensive clean-up work. P2P software, if improperly configured, makes your entire hard

drive accessible to anyone using the same software. Identity thieves may search your hard drive for

personal and financial information. Porn distributors can use your computer to store and distribute porn.

Teens also should understand the legal consequences of downloading copyrighted materials.

NetMonkey, an educational Web site created by former teen pirates, gives teens (and parents) the

lowdown here:

http://www.netmonkey.info/index.php?option=com_content&task=section&id=4&Itemid=45

Piracy can backfire on teens, too. When software developers and video game creators lose money

due to piracy, they may scale back on creating anything new, thereby reducing the availability of software

and games. Kruger observes, "This is a bleak prospect for most 21st century kids."

Adele Faber, author of *How to Talk so Teens will Listen and Listen so Teens will Talk*

(HarperCollins, August 2005), recommends engaging teens in thinking through downloading scenarios

and their impacts.

"Rather than lecturing about what is wrong with downloading, start by asking your teen, 'What

do you see as the good things about downloading?'," Faber suggests. "Allow your teen to enumerate the

advantages. Then, ask, 'What's bad about downloading?' By helping our teenagers to explore the pros

and cons, we encourage them to develop and strengthen their own ethical standards."

After clarifying the problems with illegal downloads, seek legal alternatives with your teen, like

establishing a movies/music/software/games allowance, subscribing to legal download Web sites, or

finding online sites where they can play without downloading.

Whatever approach you choose, adopting good cyberethics will help you and your child to stay

on the right side of copyright laws.

Melanie G. Snyder has written for over a dozen parenting magazines, children's magazines Cricket, Calliope and Guideposts for Kids, education publishers Harcourt, SIRS, and EducationNews, and others. See her website at: http://www.MelanieGSnyder.com

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Sidebar: Educational Resources for Every Age

Elementary:
PlayItCybersafe offers games for kids, resources for parents and teachers -
http://www.playitcybersafe.com/

Plagiarism activity and explanation -
http://www.cybersmartcurriculum.org/act_sheets/CY00_Stdnt_G45_L8.pdf

Copyright basics comic book from *Weekly Reader*:
http://www.playitcybersafe.com/pdfs/Curriculum-CC-2005.pdf

Code of Cyberethics - http://www.playitcybersafe.com/resources/EthicsCode.pdf

Tweens:
Downloading do's and don'ts -
http://www.isafe.org/channels/sub.php?ch=4&sub_id=2&content=includes/content/4/protecting_ip_tips.htm

Cyberethics mentors, celebrity interviews, clubhouse and chatroom: http://www.isafe.org/channels/?ch=2

Computer Learning Foundation's Code of Responsible Computing makes a good "contract" to use with tweens - http://www.computerlearning.org/respcode.htm

Cyberethics for Kids site - Computer Crime and Intellectual Property Section of the US Department of Justice - http://www.cybercrime.gov/rules/kidinternet.htm

Teens:
NetMonkey – cyberethics education site by former teen pirates and hackers - http://www.netmonkey.info/

Ten Commandments of Computer Ethics (serious messages/light touch) - Computer Ethics Institute -
http://www.brook.edu/dybdocroot/its/cei/overview/Ten_Commanments_of_Computer_Ethics.htm

Parents:
For the latest Internet, P2P & cyberethics news and developments, subscribe to these free newsletters:
- SafeKids/NetFamilyNewsletter: http://www.netfamilynews.org/subscribe.htm
- i-Safe Times: http://www.isafe.org/channels/sub.php?ch=4&sub_id=4a