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Observations of Chat Room Conversations on the Internet: Implications for Educators Addressing the Needs of Female Adolescents

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Observations of Chat Room Conversations on the Internet: Implications for Educators Addressing the Needs of Female Adolescents

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This qualitative study explored the meanings of chat room conversations through observations of teenagers using the Internet. Adolescent girls were a focus because of their shaky sense of self. Participants in ten chat rooms included 534 individuals. Six themes, emerging from analyzing 2526 utterances [descriptive statements], included (a) communicating with abbreviations and acronyms, (b) requesting/providing personal information, (c) requesting/providing pictures, (d) requesting/accepting private chats, (e) using profanity/vulgarity or sexual comments, and (f) using figurative language or sarcasm. Implications were outlined to assist educators addressing the needs of female adolescents.

During the past 25 years, a technological explosion has created opportunities for individuals to communicate throughout the world with just the click of a button. The Internet has created a means to conduct business, retrieve information, and communicate in ways that were previously unknown. E-mails, instant messages, and chat rooms are venues for individuals to keep in touch, share information, and establish relationships. Authors of a 2001 study focused on the use of the Internet reported that approximately 17 million youth between the ages of 12 and 17 use the Internet and 74% use instant messaging. The results from a sample of 754 youth indicated that most online teens use different screen names and e-mail

About the Authors

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accounts to manage their communications and the information that comes to them. Significant numbers said that they pretend to be different people and that they have been given false information by others. Close to 60% of teens have received an instant message or an e-mail from a stranger and 50% report e-mailing or instant messaging with someone they have not met before (Lenhart, Rainie, & Lewis, 2001).

Marriott (1998) reported that at least 40 to 50 million individuals communicate through chat rooms. Chat rooms offer an opportunity to interact and establish relationships with a vast number of people without having to reveal true identities. Users rely on a special language containing a kind of shorthand with many abbreviations (e.g., CU or "see you" and acronyms such as LOL or "laugh out loud"). Chat rooms provide opportunities for individuals to communicate practically instantaneously (referred to as "real time"). Typically, chats can be chaotic with comments appearing quickly and multiple conversations occurring simultaneously. Messages can be posted and read by groups of individuals or in private contexts (DiMarco & DiMarco, 2002; Leeper & Gotthoffer, 2001). Conversations occurring in private contexts cannot be observed by outside viewers but only by those participating in the exchange.

Prevalence statistics indicate that the use of Internet chat rooms by teenagers is increasing, and in some instances, is a concern for law enforcement authorities (Ellison, 2001; Huycke, 1997; Magid, 1998). Some Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) reports involving child victims suggest that children have been exploited and lured from home as a result of unsupervised meetings online with sexual predators. The reporting of Internet predatory crimes against children has increased by 1,200% nationwide, according to recent FBI reports (Madhani, 2003). Sausner (2001) reported that, according to a survey of 10,000 youths worldwide, more than 25% of teenage girls expressed feelings of uneasiness and fear arising from the sexual or personal nature of conversations during chat room sessions. A number of recent publications portray instances in which teenage girls were targeted as victims for cybercrime involving manipulative and dangerous online conversations (e.g., Baig, 2003; Baker, 2001; *BBC News*, 2003; *CBS News*, 2002).

Dangerous predators use chat rooms to meet, manipulate, and sometimes, seduce their victims. These dangerous cybercrime activities have been discussed by law enforcement officers and reported in cybercrime literature. For example, Douglas and Singular (2003), revealed that individuals can be lured into the dark underground of cybercrime through online seduction by criminal predators with relative ease. Similar to research published about vulnerable teenage girls, the authors emphasized how relationships devoid of physical contact have devastating outcomes for women. They described the story of John Robinson, the Internet's first known serial killer, who now sits in prison on three counts of homicide. After being released from prison in the mid-1990s for crimes unrelated to the Internet, Robinson began using the Internet and the World Wide Web to lure victims and exploit their weaknesses. He entered chat rooms and started conversations. These interactions were followed by relationships with vulnerable women who were looking for romance. He convinced these women to come to his home town by promising to help them; however, once these women arrived they were never seen or heard from again.

Though violent crime from online communications is disconcerting to all individuals, instances of cybercrime may have special implications for educators who are addressing the needs of all teenagers who have language and learning problems. Larson and McKinley (2003) documented that older students with language disorders experience difficulty with higher level syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. Ehren and Lenz (1989) reported that such students have problems when processing and producing language. Deficits in both understanding and producing complex vocabulary are often found among these older children. Students with language disorders display

problems in understanding different types of figurative language including slang, jokes, or dual meaning words or phrases (Larson & McKinley, 2003; Nippold, 1998, 2000). Understanding and responding to figurative language and abbreviations for words may present problems for students engaging in chat room conversations. Moreover, teenagers with language and learning problems have difficulties in both decoding and comprehending print (Butler & Silliman, 2002). These challenges may be of concern given that the various codes used in chat room interactions typically cause conversations appearing online to differ from typical interactions (Marriott, 1998).

It is unclear whether educators who serve youth with language and learning problems are aware of the types of conversations occurring in chat rooms. It is not known if the interactions in these settings contain information that would be difficult for vulnerable youth to understand. For example, are the messages in chat rooms clearly written and free of ambiguous information, or do they instead contain higher level language that is difficult to interpret? Are messages misleading with potentially dangerous outcomes? We speculated that understanding chat room interactions has implications for all students, furthermore it may have particular relevance for female teens with language and learning problems. Teenagers with language and learning problems are at-risk and need to understand how their own language problems could relate to their vulnerability during online interactions.

The purpose of this study was to explore the meanings of online chat room conversations through observations of teenagers using the Internet. These observations were the data base that led to the identification of the emerging themes from these communications. This information served as preliminary data to develop suggestions for educators. Suggestions were intended particularly to warn teenage girls of the potential dangers of online chat room conversations. Adolescent girls are targeted because of their still shaky sense of self and their on-going challenges in finding their identity (Pipher, 1994). Additionally, they have often been victims of sexual predators and are twice as likely as boys to have received unwanted sexual comments and requests for face-to-face meetings (Sausner, 2001).

Method

Participants

Two researchers independently observed on-line conversations in chat rooms intended for teenagers. Teenage chat rooms were randomly selected through a well-established Internet provider. Chat rooms were easily accessible and were viewed as representative of typical Internet settings. The names of the service provider and participants remain confidential to protect the identity of

those involved in the study. Participants included 534 individuals involved in chat room interactions. This number was obtained by counting the screen names present in each chat room during observations. The screen names were then used to retrieve background information from the chat room member directory. The submission of personal information to the directory was optional, hence we acknowledge it may have been falsified to camouflage identity. Despite the potential falsification of background member information, a review of available profiles provided descriptive information. Member profiles were available on 69% ($n = 370/534$) of the individuals. Of those who submitted a profile, 49% ($n = 264/370$) were males and 34% ($n = 180/370$) were females. Although all of the chat rooms were designated for teens only (i.e., 12-18 years of age and 13-19 years), these profiles indicated that the age of the participants ranged from 12 to 49 years.

Twenty-nine percent ($n = 109/370$) reported they were students. Of those, 39% ($n = 43/109$) were in grades 8 through 12. Less often, other chat room members mentioned they held occupations such as musicians, or were involved in management, security, sales, or lifeguarding. The most frequent hobbies listed by participants included hanging out with friends, sports, listening to music, talking on the phone, shopping, and chatting online. Forty-five percent ($n = 167/370$) indicated that they were single; only a few reported being "taken" [having a boyfriend/girlfriend] ($n = 20/370$; 5%) or married ($n = 9/370$; 2%). The majority of individuals also included a first name in the profile ($n = 228/370$; 62%).

Data Collection and Analysis

In order to access chat rooms, we downloaded software from an Internet service provider. Information about security, proper use, and etiquette was provided and used when interacting in the chat rooms. The researchers chose a screen name (nickname) that was used during chat room interactions and were given the option, but declined, to provide a profile that consisted of a brief description of oneself to other chat room users. Once these steps were completed, the graduate students practiced observing teen chat rooms prior to collecting observations. This was done to familiarize themselves with terms used and the rapid and random exchange of information. Following initial observations of chat rooms, only the students' screen names appeared on the discussion board. They did not engage in conversations with other group members.

Observations were collected in 30-minute increments from ten different chat rooms for a total of five hours of observation. Each chat room was randomly selected and accessed through the same Internet service provider. This service was obtained through a free promotional compact disc received

in the mail. The chat room conversations were available only to subscribers. Using the software from the service provider allowed researchers to copy sections of entire 30-minute conversations and paste them into a Word document. This provided researchers with an exact duplicate of all conversations.

Following retrieval of exact transcripts of on-line conversations, a modified qualitative procedure by Moustakas (1994) was used to analyze the data. First, we read through the chat room transcripts from participants to determine emerging patterns of communication behaviors. Second, notes on primary meanings of comments were made in the margins to determine reoccurring information/topics. This procedure included identification of all of the descriptive statements/ideas contained in participants' comments. Third, reoccurring ideas [descriptive statements] were grouped together. From these descriptive statements, themes of meaning were formed. Fourth, consensus was established to determine the core themes. Fifth, frequency data on the number of descriptive statements/comments included in each theme were calculated to determine the percent of statements from among the total comments (see Table 1).

Table 1
Percent of Descriptive Statements (n = 2526) from Ten Chat Rooms According to Theme

Theme	Descriptive Statements/Utterances	
	Frequency	Percent
Using Abbreviations/Acronyms/Contractions	1640	65.0
Requesting/ Providing Personal Information	1095	43.3
Requesting/ Providing Pictures	497	19.7
Requesting/ Accepting a Private Chat	403	16.0
Using Profanity/ Vulgarity/ Sexual Comments	322	12.7
Sexual Comments only	227	9.0
Using Figurative Language/Sarcasm	191	7.6
Other	1004	39.7
Greetings only	199	7.9

*Note: Total number of descriptive statements does not sum to 2526 since each descriptive statement could contain codes representative of more than one theme.

The data were verified by five procedures important to qualitative research analyses (Creswell, 1998). First, the researchers used extensive observations by examining chat room conversations in ten different chat room settings. Participants included 534 individuals whose interactions were observed during ten separate, 30-minute intervals. Second, triangulation was established by observing multiple chat room conversations, profiling 370 of the participants, and by comparing transcripts of interactions to relevant literature. Third, because exact duplicates of conversations were obtained, elaborate descriptions of interactions were available to analyze. Fourth, following the initial data analysis and determination of themes, we reanalyzed all data to arrive at consensus of themes. This was done in the spirit of interrater reliability for qualitative research (Creswell, 1998). Fifth, after analyzing ten chat room conversations, periodic reviews of ten other chat rooms were observed to verify whether data in the present study represented typical online conversations.

Chat room participants may have intended that their conversations be short-lived interactions, rather than viewed as permanent text. According to DiMarco and DiMarco (2002), this dilemma needs to be considered, but should not deter researchers from conducting this type of research. In this study, printing the observation transcripts allowed the researchers to analyze the exact occurrence of the utterances and establish reliability of qualitative data.

Results

Six themes emerged from analyzing 2526 utterances [descriptive statements] from conversational interactions among 534 male and female participants. Themes included (a) using abbreviations and acronyms, (b) requesting/providing personal information, (c) requesting/providing pictures, (d) requesting/accepting private chats, (e) using profanity/vulgarity or sexual comments, and (f) using figurative language or sarcasm. Table 1 displays the highest percentages of the themes by highest percentages of utterances. Respectively, these included using abbreviations and acronyms (65.0%), followed by requesting/providing personal information (43.3%), requesting/providing pictures (19.7%), requesting/accepting private chats (16.0%), using profanity/vulgarity or sexual comments (12.7%), and using figurative language and/or sarcasm (7.6%). To further clarify the theme of profanity/vulgarity or sexual comments, the number of sexual references was calculated and found to represent 70.5% of that theme. Though not considered as a theme, another category of frequently occurring utterances

(39.7%) included comments containing greetings and other miscellaneous information. Greetings were found to represent 19.8% of the total utterances in the category labeled “other.” Note from Table 1 that the total number and percent of descriptive statements in each theme and category labeled “other” does not equal the total number of utterances [2526] or 100%. Some utterances contained meanings that represented more than one theme. For example, even though the total number of utterances calculated in chat rooms was 2526, the sum of descriptive statements and multiple codes for the six themes and one category of “other” was 5152.

Examples of the utterances [descriptive statements] are provided to illustrate information contained within each theme. They are presented in this section as written by chat room participants.

Using Abbreviations and Acronyms

Participants frequently conveyed comments that included abbreviations and acronyms. For example, one chat room member wrote, “a/s/lpic pink toes” [age, sex, location and do you have pictures]. “Pink toes” represented a screen name. Many others wrote, “lol” [laugh out loud], “j/k” [just kidding], or “brb” [be right back]. Frequently, participants [members] indicated personal information, such as “im not bi” [I am not bisexual], or “17/m/il/pics” that referred to their age, sex, location of where they lived, and whether pictures of them were available. This information was commonly conveyed through the acronym “a/s/l.” Many participants assumed chat members were aware of the rule that “a/s/l” meant their age, sex, and where they lived and preceded their comments by the acronym. For example, one male indicated, “19/m/here im me” to represent that he was a 19 year old requesting someone to instant message him. These instant messages were frequently conveyed in order to talk with individuals in a “private chatroom,” where information was more confidential and not available for all members to read.

Requesting/Providing Personal Information

Participants frequently requested or provided personal information to other members of the chat room. Though requests involved comments about their interests, hobbies, and feelings, other utterances contained personal information. One member wrote, “asl every1” [age, sex, and location of all those participating in the room], to request personal information. Another wrote “17/m/fl” indicating his age (17), sex (male), and location (Florida). Other members expanded on basic personal information and provided more than just their age, sex, and location. For example, one chat room user wrote “15.f.ny blonde hair blue eyes 5’5 114 lbs cheerleader if u wanna talk im me

☺.” Some requests for personal information were sexual in nature. For example, one chat room user typed, “who in here loves sex?”

Requesting/Providing Pictures

Twenty percent of the total chat room utterances contained information concerning pictures. Frequently, interactions indicated chat room members wanted to trade photos. For example, individuals wrote, “kellie wanna trade?”, “any 1 tradin?”, “hi all, trading webcam pics of fems and selfs of me 30 m Tx”, and “17-m-st.louis-pix hit 314 to trade.” Others included requests with sexual connotations such as, “17/m/nudepic whats up ladies im me.”

Requesting/Accepting Private Chats

Approximately 15% of the conversations occurring in the chat rooms were further expanded in private chat rooms. Frequently, participants conveyed messages such as, “16/f/va if any guyz want to chat IM me,” “17 M Mass ne girl wanna chat im me or press 777,” or “IM me.” Alternatively, others appeared to convey that the private chat would contain more sexual information. Commonly, these utterances were represented by information such as, “any horny girls in here wanna chat? Press 23 or IM me.” Another member wrote, “any fine ladies in southern california want to hook up for what ever u want im me now.”

Using Profanity/Vulgarity or Sexual Comments

Utterances involved severe profanity and vulgar comments that were calculated and analyzed, but were not used to illustrate examples within the theme due to the offensive nature of the language. It was common to also observe less offensive interactions such as, “well get off your lazy ass,” “juicy girl u got any thong or nude pix,” “18m, girls into phone press 555,” or “trading oral sex pics if interested im me thanks.” However, as previously mentioned, it was not unusual to observe very alarming and provocative language in comments containing a high degree of vulgarity.

Using Figurative Language or Sarcasm

Eight percent of the interactions coded within this theme tended to contain examples of figurative language. Some commonly occurring utterances with abstract language included, “any hot chicks that’s 18-20,” “f19 trade hot pics,” “its cool,” or “holla at ya gurl.” Other statements such as, “oh that stinks,” “aiint n0c0dy sweatn u f0ol!” or “well im out like a fat gurl in dodge ball..Peace!!” also were conveyed and interspersed within conversations.

Category Coded as "Other" Types of Information

Though not considered one of the six themes, another category contained utterances that were grouped and labeled as "other." These comments represented 1004 of 2526 (39.7%) of the total utterances analyzed. They included comments or responses such as, "yes," "no," or "ok." Words such as "hahah" representing laughter were contained in this group. Additionally, greetings such as "hello," "hi room," or "hey everone" were coded within this category. These types of comments often appeared throughout interactions. Overall, utterances that did not involve requesting, providing, or accepting personal information, but rather contained miscellaneous comments were considered in this category.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the meanings of chat room conversations through observations of teenagers using the Internet. Information from the six themes containing 2562 utterances from 534 chat room participants are discussed. This discussion section is presented in four parts. First, we present an example of a chat room interaction and raise questions about the codes and language used in these online settings. Information from the themes illustrates how chat rooms differ from face-to-face conversations. Falsification of information is discussed as it adds to the challenges that particularly face youth with language and learning problems. Second, problems found among teens with language and learning disorders are related to examples from chat room conversations. Themes characterizing abbreviations and acronyms, requesting and providing personal information and pictures, accepting private chats, using sexual comments and examples of figurative language are included. Third, the findings beg the question of whether teens with language and learning problems even interact in chat rooms. To address this concern, prevalence data are presented on chat room use by female incarcerated teens who have been found to have a high incidence of language and learning problems. Fourth, suggestions are offered to educators.

Category Coded as "Other" Types of Information

Consider the following typical chat room conversation:

- ✓ **Hotguy12:** "wassup room a/s/l"
- ✓ **Kellie145:** "14/f/ma"
- ✓ **Hotguy12:** "ne gurls wanna chat with a hot 16-m-oh press 69 or im me"

- ✓ **Sassy47:** "69"
- ✓ **Ktgurl:** "18/f/va/pics"
- ✓ **Dan34:** "lol"
- ✓ **Dan34:** "Who wants my pic im me or press 1212"
- ✓ **Hotguy12:** "send me your pics Ktgurl"
- ✓ **Wildcat2:** "1212"
- ✓ **Citrus33:** "ne horny girls wanna chat im me"

These interactions illustrate how the six themes are represented in typical chat room conversations. Teens with language and learning problems engaging in these conversations might not understand the codes and language needed to "safely" communicate.

Observational findings from conversations in ten chat rooms suggest that these types of communications take on a much different form than talking with a person face-to-face. They support the findings of other researchers who have described conversations in chat rooms (Marriott, 1998). A chat room user must become familiar with the special language used in a chat room, otherwise users will have difficulty interpreting the meaning of chat room interactions. They must understand how to communicate using a type of shorthand that includes abbreviations (e.g., CU for "see you") and acronyms (e.g., LOL for "laugh out loud," BRB for "be right back," SETE for "smiling ear to ear," BTW for "by the way"). Individuals who are not familiar with the specific linguistic codes used in chat rooms find it difficult and almost impossible to understand and participate in a chat room conversation.

Teenagers with language and learning problems may not be aware that the codes and language used in these settings may be difficult to understand, and that individuals can falsify information. For example, it is important that vulnerable teens are aware that chat rooms provide an opportunity for an individual to possibly fabricate everything including his or her age, name, looks, occupation, race, gender, sexual orientation, personal history, and personality. Though this can be disadvantageous for individuals who are honest and who may be seeking meaningful interactions and relationships, it may be considered as an advantage for those who intend to lure and mislead vulnerable individuals into dangerous situations. Interactions without physical contact and devoid of verbal and nonverbal cues lack important communication information for partners. The absence of this information makes it difficult to know if the message is truthful, sincere, relevant, and accurate. However, it is the absence of these cues that allows individuals to be who they want to be, falsify information, and potentially "hide" as a dangerous predator to meet, manipulate, and sometimes seduce their victims

(Douglas & Singular, 2003). Falsification of information, complicated codes, messages asking for personal information, frequent use of profanity and sexual comments, and higher level figurative language occurring at a fast pace may be particularly troublesome for vulnerable youth with language and learning problems who engage in online chats.

Problems Found Among Teens With Language and Learning Disabilities and Related Examples From Observing Chat Room Conversations

A number of researchers (DeKemel, 2003; Ehren & Lenz, 1989; Larson & McKinley, 2003; Nippold, 2000) have pointed out the types of problems that students with language disorders have in understanding semantics and meanings of messages. The problems described by researchers in understanding new vocabulary, and abstract, or figurative language resemble the challenges that may confront individuals engaging in teen chat room conversations. Teenagers with language and learning problems who interact in these settings are particularly vulnerable to understanding the high percent of chat room comments containing abbreviations and novel language such as “addie” for address, or “nick” for nickname, and “TOY” for thinking of you. Possibly, these “at-risk learners” are not aware of implications of providing personal information or pictures when engaging in chats. Moreover, it is questionable if vulnerable teens understand the implications of responding to requests in public or private chat rooms that involve sexual behaviors. For example, one participant comments, “daddy is home alone. Where are my pretty little girls?” Immediately following this utterance is another chat room member who comments, “hi all dad 38 here daughters are 15 and 10.” A teen with a language disorder might have trouble distinguishing between two very different types of “dads.” “Daddy” could be a sexual connotation and the “pretty little girls” are assumed to be his sexual partners. The second utterance appears to be a genuine father monitoring his children’s computer use.

Though conversations involving figurative language occurred less often (191/2526; 7.6%) than utterances about personal information or providing a picture, the multiple meanings of words could be troublesome for those with language and learning problems. It is questionable if these teens would understand the meaning of, “well Im out like a fat gurl in dodge ball..Peace.”

Prevalence Data on Incarcerated Teenage Girls Interacting in Chat Rooms

Chat room use is steadily increasing and a growing concern of law enforcement officials (Ellison, 2001; Madhani, 2003; Marriott, 1998). In an

attempt to understand the opinions of teenagers' about their interactions in chat rooms, we obtained data from female incarcerated teens. In part, this population was sampled because they represent at-risk youth and have been found to exhibit a high incidence of language problems (Sanger, Creswell, Dworak, & Schultz, 2000; Sanger, Moore-Brown, Magnuson, & Svoboda, 2001). However, we had no specific knowledge of the language and/or learning problems of the teens sampled. A survey of 62 female teenagers who resided in a correctional facility was conducted on their use of the Internet to communicate in chat rooms (Sanger, Long, Ritzman, Stofer, & Davis, 2004). Survey findings revealed 54 of 62 girls (87.1%) with a mean age of 16.72 years communicated in chat rooms. The vast majority used a computer in their home as well as at their friend's house ($n = 47$), with four others using their school or library computers. Forty-seven of the 54 using chat rooms (87%) revealed that they spent an average of 9.85 hours per week interacting. Thirty-eight of the 54 girls using chat rooms (70.4%) had been asked to be involved in sexual experiences. Most participants (44 of 54; 81.5%) acknowledged they were aware of the dangers of using chat rooms and offered suggestions for other teens. Despite their helpful suggestions to teens in the general population, the adjudicated girls revealed using chat rooms could be "fun!"

Suggestions for Educators to Consider: Implications for Female Adolescents

Observations of conversations of chat room interactions suggest that educators need to be sensitive to yet another challenge as they address the needs of female adolescents, but particularly for those who are more likely to not understand chat room conversations. It is possible that even teens without language and learning problems may be misled by conversations appearing in these settings. Study findings support that chat room interactions differ from face-to-face conversations, and that falsification of information may occur. The high percent of information involving abbreviations and acronyms, figurative language with multiple meanings, and messages containing sexual connotations adds to the ambiguity of information presented in these settings. Without question, the advantages of the Internet are far greater than the disadvantages. However, cybercrime is increasing and many teens are engaging in chat room conversations. Suggestions for educators addressing the needs of female adolescents include:

- ✓ Discuss with students and each other that typical communication involves both verbal and nonverbal cues to provide the conversational partners valuable information on the truth of the

information. Information is limited about the communication partner in chat room conversations because of the absence of nonverbal signals such as facial expression, eye contact, proximity, and other body language. The lack of verbal cues including stress, intonation, pausing, and voice quality further limit awareness of the true identity of the speaker and listener.

- ✓ Warn teens that the lack of nonverbal and verbal clues helps chat room members to distort communications and hide their true identity.
- ✓ Provide opportunities to inform teenagers that the interactions in chat rooms may be different than in face-to-face interactions.
- ✓ Familiarize teens interacting in the chat rooms with the various types of chat rooms, the language used, and to be aware that some involve more profanity and topics with sexual connotations. Findings from chat room conversations revealed that 13% ($n = 322/2526$) of the utterances analyzed contained profanity, vulgarity, and sexual comments. In chat rooms, individuals can say anything they want to with minimal consequences. For example, in the present study, many utterances analyzed were very vulgar and contained language that could not be reported. Teens need to realize that although only a few interactions will result in fatal outcomes, such as the one involving John Robinson, it is important to know that cybercrime incidents are steadily increasing. They need to remember that, according to teens who were surveyed in a correctional facility, confronting danger in chat rooms is a real concern.
- ✓ Remind teens that it is important to be careful about how much personal information is given out in chat conversations. For example, in this study 43.3% ($n = 1095/2526$) of the utterances involved requesting or providing personal information while 19.7% ($n = 497/2526$) included asking or providing personal pictures. In a related study, 22% of teenagers online used instant messages and shared their e-mail password with a friend (Lenhart et al., 2001). To avoid potentially dangerous encounters, teens should consider not providing personal information such as passwords, telephone numbers, addresses, places to meet, and credit card or other financial information.
- ✓ Emphasize that educational leaders must become familiar with chat room conversations. Increasingly, statistics reveal that individuals are communicating through chat rooms (Marriott, 1998). The researchers in the present study admit that they were initially somewhat unaware of the nature of the language patterns used in

these settings. Hence, it is possible that, in general, educators are not totally aware of the implications of these interactions. Stress that understanding the ease at which chat rooms can be accessed, the types of language, codes, ambiguous messages, and the potential dangers of these online conversations so that all school staff be sensitive to warning youth about these settings.

- ✓ Raise the awareness among faculty, staff, counselors, computer specialists, librarians, parents and students, etc., could be accomplished through the use of newsletters, bulletins, and school meetings.
- ✓ Hold discussions at staff meetings to allow opportunities to review safety issues concerning chat rooms. Staff development opportunities might include discussing the prevalence of children and youth who engage in these conversations, describing cases in which predators use chat rooms to prey on children and youth, reviewing policies pertaining to computer use, and discussing potential collaborations with the media to provide messages related to safety.
- ✓ Emphasize how collaborations with community agencies could be established to improve the safety programming for youth who may be participating in chat room conversations. By becoming aware of the potential dangers involved in chat room interactions, school staff can collaborate and implement Internet safety policies addressing safe use of school computers among students. Additionally, these policies can encourage safe interactions at home. Though it is recognized that many schools have safety features on their computers to prevent students from selected types of information, this is not the case for Internet usage in homes.
- ✓ Consider discussing potential dangers in chat room interactions with parents during conferences, in-service presentations, or PTA meetings.

Millions of individuals use the Internet to communicate in chat rooms about a variety of topics such as sports or the stock market, but messages may not contain the same types of information as described in this study. Though the accessibility of computers has provided many advantages to individuals, teens' use of the Internet and chat rooms after school or when parents are not home remains a concern particularly if teens are seeking out sexually oriented materials. Cybercrime incidents are increasing and the potential danger from interactions with predators continues to be yet another growing concern of parents and educators. Perhaps predators recognize vulnerable individuals and can spot those they can take advantage of and mislead. If

educators, are aware of vulnerable adolescents [or any adolescents] engaging in chat room interactions on a frequent basis, they need to provide the youth with suggestions about the dangers of chat room interactions. This type of information may help adolescents to avoid dangerous interactions during online conversations.

Notes

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