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CRIME (IMYC) AT THE YOUTH.NET: UNDERSTANDING AND
GUIDING THE Y-IREG GENERATION CONFERENCE ON 12 AUGUST
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CENTRE**

Distinguished Guests

Ladies and Gentlemen

Good morning.

I am happy to be here with all of you at this conference on “Youth.Net: Understanding and Guiding the Y-ired Generation”. It is good to see so many of you today at this conference to share experiences and exchange views on how we can press on with in our efforts to better understand and guide our youths in the cyber age.

2. The rise of the Internet has affected us in many ways. Internet is a vehicle to create wealth, to educate, to communicate. It has also changed the way governments function. It has become an integral part of our culture. While the Internet has accelerated changes in our lifestyle, it is itself constantly evolving because of technological developments. Even as I speak now, the Net continues to expand, diversify and evolve.

The Internet and Our Youth

3. No doubt, the Internet plays a pivotal role in the lives of youths today. Besides being a technology to play, learn and communicate, the Internet has changed how our youths socialise. Internet-Relay Chats (IRC), instant messaging, chat-boards for example are among the commonly used vehicles that our cyber savvy youths use to expand their social networks and form relationships. This is the Net-Generation who grew up surrounded by the digital media, where computers in homes, schools, factory and office are commonplace.

4. However, it bears reminding that the Internet is a double-edged sword. While educating our youths, it is at the same time increasing the risk of them encountering questionable characters and getting into other risqué situations. Our youths must be taught how best to use this rich information source, while protecting themselves from being pulled into the quicksand of cyber pornography, violence in Internet Gaming, cyber crimes, or worse - IRC date rapes.

Current Internet Related Youth Crime Statistics

5. The number of youths warned or prosecuted in Court for Computer Misuse Act (CMA) offences decreased by 58 percent, from 50 offenders in 2001 to 21 offenders last year. CMA offences include offences like hacking, using computers to commit further crime and unauthorised use of Internet accounts. The most common type of CMA offences committed by youths are unauthorised use of Internet accounts which accounted for 81 percent of all youth offenders who were warned or prosecuted in the years 2000, 2001 and 2002. There were 8 such cases in the first 6 months of 2003. We must keep up our efforts to reduce the number of youths involved in CMA offences.

6. Besides committing offences under the Computer Misuse Act, some perpetrators also use the Internet to commit sexual or cheating-related offences. Youth involvement in such offences however, is still lower compared to their involvement in traditional crime like shop theft or rioting. While there were no cases of youth arrests for outrage of modesty and carnal connection arising from Internet relay chats, there were 3 cases of youth arrests for rape in the first half of 2003. During this period, there was also 1 case of cheating over the Internet involving youths.

Protecting Our Youths

7. Apart from keeping our youths from committing such offences, we must also take steps to ensure that they do not become victims of cyber crime. Youths can be susceptible to negative influences on the Internet as they are vulnerable to deception tactics by criminals. In February 2003, an assistant engineer who used an Internet chatroom to find young girls to rape was sentenced to 23 years jail. Pretending to be a heartbroken teenager, the 26 year-old man posted messages on the IRC offering money to girls to be his temporary girlfriend. Three young victims under the age of 16 who had responded to his message were taken to secluded locations and raped.

8. This could have been prevented. Parents and caregivers can help our youths stay away from cyber crimes and prevent them from becoming cyber victims by:

- a. Learning more about the Internet
- b. Surfing websites together with youths
- c. Discussing dangers of Internet surfing
- d. Installing Internet surfing filtering software

- e. Keeping the computer in a common-area in the home

The IMYC and Preventive Programmes on Internet

9. In comparison to the overall crime statistics, the number of cyber crimes and cyber victims are still low. We should try to make sure that it remains low. This can only be done through the combined efforts of parents, schools and the community.

10. As early as 1999, the Inter-Ministry Committee on Youth Crime (IMYC) was quick to spot that the Internet has and will create new youth issues and concerns. Hence, the Committee with its partners and the community, implemented innovative programmes to guide the development of our cyber youths. These programmes include

The Family Life Education Package on Parenting Teenagers on the Internet Age

IMYC commissioned a manual “Family Life Education Package on Parenting Teenagers on the Internet Age” for community-based youth workers, teachers and parents, which was developed by TOUCH Community Services. The manual, produced in December 2000, provides information about the Internet and parenting tips on managing teenagers growing up in the Internet-age.

Project CRuSH

In September 2001, IMYC, again in partnership with TOUCH Community Services, launched Project CRuSH, or 'Cyberspace Risks and where U can Seek Help'. This series of roadshows at secondary schools aims to raise awareness among youths on the risks of using the Internet so as to encourage safe surfing. The roadshows are then followed by a six-week e-mentoring programme in selected schools where youths are trained to become Internet mentors and provide peer guidance and support to their friends surfing through cyberspace. Since its launch over a short 2-year period, more than 33,000 students from 35 schools have participated in these roadshows. About 3,444 students have also been trained as e-mentors under Project CRuSH.

Plans are in the pipeline to expand Project CRuSH to address other potential problems such as compulsive LAN gaming and negative influence from violent computer games.

11 Let me share one story as to how a youth was helped through Project CRuSH. David (not his real name) was your regular Secondary 1 boy who loves to surf the net on all topics. But his favourite was pornography. David was not really a bad boy. While he felt a sense of guilt and shame whenever he visited these sites, he just could not stop going to these sites. This went on until he attended a Project CRuSH lesson "Hard Core Truth on Porn". During the lesson, he was taught that pornography affects the mind and through time, can lead to negative consequences. The articles on sexual crimes discussed during the lessons convinced him that he did not want to end up in crime.

12. So convinced about the harmful impacts of pornography, he even tried on one occasion to destroy the Internet Explorer function in his computer. But coming out of the dark was not an easy process for David. He then took a bold step by deciding that he wanted to be accountable to an older e-mentor through Project CRuSH. This meant that every time he visited a porn site again, he would have to sms his e-mentor, who would advise him or even scold him for putting himself in tempting situations.

13. David knew that this struggle would be an ongoing one. But lessons learnt and being accountable to people helped him to become more optimistic and realistic in overcoming the lure of pornography. I commend him for his determination and wish him success in his aim to kick this vice.

Using the Internet for Outreach

14. IMYC also rides on the wave of digital change and Internet to reach out to our youths. For example, IMYC supported the development of the cyber counselling programme “Me2you” which was piloted by Marine Parade Family Service Centre in 2000. The site was the first in Singapore to offer cyber-counselling chat. With this service, youths are engaged in a one-to-one interactive online counselling session with a cyber-counsellor in real-time.

15. The cyber counselling service was launched with the aim to exploit the communication technology, namely the Internet and provide an alternative avenue of counselling services for the youth population. The anonymity of both parties is highly observed as they are only identified by nicknames. This approach appeals to the youths given their inclination to remain anonymous at times. To date, the Me2you

programme has reached out to more than 4900 students from 4 schools through about 2000 on-line counselling sessions.

Role of Parents

16. While IMYC works with various agencies and community partners to ensure that our youths are not left to grapple with the temptations in the cyber world on their own, the role of parents cannot be over-emphasized.

17. Many parents are reeling from the challenges of raising confident, plugged-in and digital-savvy children who know more about technology than they do. It is not easy for parents to know what materials and values their children are viewing and assimilating through the Internet. However, they must try. I urge parents to spend time with their children and seek help when they encounter any problems or are suspicious about their child's behaviour on the Internet. Parents can get in touch with the National Youth Council, which serves as IMYC's Secretariat, at Tel: 68399168 or visit the IMYC's website at www.imyc.org.sg.

For a brighter future ahead

18. Today, we have lined up a host of international and local speakers and facilitators who have a good knowledge of the global and local Internet scene and their impact on youths. I thank our international speakers from Pew Internet and American Life Project, Mr Harrison Lee Rainie, and Professor Leo Sang-Min Whang from Yonsei University, South Korea. I also thank our local speakers, workshop presenters and facilitators for their participation in the conference today.

19. On this note, I wish all participants a fruitful conference ahead. May all of us learn from each other so that the Youth.Net Generation will have a brighter future ahead.

Thank you
