

**Comments for Fondazione Centesimus Annus Meeting
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Any discussion regarding education for parents and children in this digital age must begin with a basic reality. The abuse and exploitation of children online has exploded far beyond what anyone thought was possible.

Thirty years ago, when we discussed education for parents and children about how to stay safe, we taught them not to talk to strangers. However, strangers were never the greatest threat. Leading researchers cited “The Myth of the Stranger.” Overwhelmingly, those who preyed upon children were those closest to the child – family, friends, neighbors and those in positions of trust with easy and legitimate access to and influence over the child; i.e., teachers, coaches, youth group volunteers, physicians, religious figures, etc.

These were acts of seduction in which an offender would utilize his power, authority or control. First, he had to win a child’s confidence. Then he would abuse that confidence. He would literally “groom” the child and make the child feel responsible. These acts were rarely reported.

Also cited was “The Myth of the Dirty Old Man;” i.e., perpetrators must be elderly or with diminished mental capacity. We assumed that a normal, rational person would not do this. However, we learned that those who prey upon children are overwhelmingly young. In 1985 the US National Institute of Mental Health reported that the typical offender is male, begins molesting by age 15, seeks legitimate access to children, and victimizes an average of 117 different children during his lifetime, most of whom do not report the offense. In addition, the typical offender is of normal or higher IQ. This is not an aberration, it is a life-style. Finally, while girls are the primary victims overall, offenders who target boys tend to have the largest number of victims.

I headed the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children in the United States for 28 years. In 1999 we undertook the first Youth Internet Safety Study (YISS), conducted by the Crimes Against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire. It found that in the preceding year 1 in 5 youth were sexually solicited online (5 million kids). It also found that 1 in 33 were aggressively solicited, involving contacts by mail, phone or attempts to meet in real life (700,000 kids). The study also found that less than 10% of the solicitations were reported to police, an ISP or a hotline.

In many ways this was still before the advent of the modern internet; i.e., less than one year after the founding of Google, eight years before the first iPhone, and seven years before the beginning of Facebook’s global expansion. This was still a time of Prodigy, Genie, Compuserve, etc., companies which have since disappeared from the scene, and primarily involved targeting kids in chatrooms.

The research told us that the kids targeted were primarily teenagers, 52% were 13 – 15. By 2010 our third iteration of the YISS research found that 58% of these solicitations occurred on social media. The 2010 research also reported that just 6% of these incidents were reported to police, an ISP or a hotline. The vast majority of the victims were (and are) hidden victims.

I am honored to serve as Chairman of the WePROTECT Global Alliance. Last month at our Global Summit in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, held in partnership with the African Union, WePROTECT issued its latest Global Threat Assessment. We assessed that “the scale of the problem, both in absolute terms and in terms of reports to law enforcement and civil society, is increasing at an alarming rate. And behind every one of these cases there is a child who needs to be safeguarded and supported.”

In his opening address to the November 2019 conference, the Holy Father said, *“Tragically, the use of digital technology to organize, commission and engage in child abuse at a distance, cutting across national borders, is outstripping the efforts and resources of the institutions and security agencies charged with combating such abuse; as a result, it becomes quite difficult to fight these horrific crimes effectively. The spread of images of abuse or the exploitation of minors is increasing exponentially, involving ever more serious and violent forms of abuse and ever younger children.”*

While a primary focus of our efforts to date has been child sexual abuse material, a problem that has exploded worldwide, we are also addressing other exploitation issues including online grooming of children for abuse, live-streaming abuse to paying customers around the world, manipulating a child into performing sexually over a webcam, and much more. We found that this problem has increased dramatically and become a global crisis. A 2019 report from the Journal of the American Medical Association Pediatrics found that 1 in 4 teens receive sexually explicit texts or emails, and that 1 in 7 have sent them.

How? Why?

New technologies have fundamentally changed the “Myth of the Stranger.” While the fundamental premise remains accurate; i.e., that those who prey upon children first seek legitimate access, cease to be strangers, still try win a child’s confidence and then seduce their victims, today that access doesn’t any longer need to be in-person at a school, youth organization, etc. New technologies make accessing children easier than ever. Today kids don’t access the internet in the family room at home under the watchful eyes of their parents. They carry the internet around in their hands. Today, there are 5 billion users of mobile devices; 4 billion internet users; and 3.5 billion users of social media.

There are also new venues for accessing kids, including gaming with chat. On multi-player video games and chat apps, offenders often pose as other kids in order to win a child’s confidence. These are spaces in which adults and kids interact and in which kids are particularly vulnerable to sextortion. Pew Research reports that 97% of boys play video games, and 83% of girls.

We used to tell kids not to talk to strangers. Now, the message on one leading gaming site is “Talk to Strangers.” Thanks to technology, stranger danger is no longer a myth. Strangers with sexual interest in children are using new technologies to gain access to and manipulate kids, and kids are using these new technologies at younger and younger ages.

As you discuss education in this digital era, my message is that it is not enough just to educate parents and children on ways how to use these complex, new tools safely, though we should certainly continue to do that. Such an approach shifts the burden from the provider of the technology to the user. The technology today is far more complex than it was even a few years ago. Placing the burden on the parent is simply not likely to be effective.

As I said at the November 2019 conference at the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, this global crisis is not the fault of the children. It is a technology problem. It requires technology solutions. We need to create new technologies which maximize user privacy while ensuring that they do not provide absolute, impenetrable protection for exploiters and abusers. We have begun to do that, but we need to do much more.

Finally, we need to counter the massive and growing misuse of existing technologies. Frequently, we hear that the crisis of online child sexual exploitation is a result of unintended consequences, the misuse of technology that is overwhelmingly positive for humanity. In my view we must begin to anticipate such consequences and fix them in advance, not just react to them after the fact.

Much of that obligation must fall upon the technology companies themselves. We must do more to address the massive attempt of growing numbers of offenders to access, target, seduce and exploit kids online.