

Reducing online dangers for youngsters

WHERE dangers used to lurk in the real-world playground, these days, virtual playrooms seem to pose the bigger danger, with risks from paedophiles online or children stumbling upon cybersmut.

One group of IT professionals want to make cyberspace safer for children.

The Internet Industry Association of Singapore was formed last year, comprising more than 20 companies dealing with IT services, such as Microsoft, Yahoo and eBay.

It will launch a portal within the next week to provide advice and Internet software protection.

Mr Anton Ravindran, 46, who chairs the association, believes companies which offer IT services have a responsibility to help consumers, especially families, cope with online dangers.

The businessman who runs Genovate Solutions, an IT company, says: "Internet penetration is going up by the minute, but we don't have enough awareness out there."

There are "faceless predators" in cyberspace, he says.

Figures bear this out: Two in 10 children encounter a sexual approach or solicitation online.

Almost three in 10 are exposed to pictures of naked people or people having sex.

These findings are from several surveys done in the United States, which show that it is very easy for children to stumble onto such undesirable sites.

Most view such sites while doing their regular surfing, visiting chatrooms, or when they misspell websites.

A Singapore study in 2004 found that 16 per cent of youths have met offline the strangers



PHOTO: STEPHANIE YEOW

KEEPING SMUT OUT: Even with IT help from the association, the onus is still on parents to monitor what their kids do online, says Mr Ravindran.

they met online. And 22 per cent who did so went alone.

Singapore has formed committees to look into issues of Internet safety for children. There was also non-profit group Parents Advisory Group for the Internet (PAGi), which has been merged into a bigger Community Advisory Committee this year.

One issue that surfaced recently is whether schools' curriculum should include safe surfing on the Internet.

Another perennial concern is the need for tighter regulation. The association is in regular contact with the Government to discuss such issues, he says, adding:

"We should not be overly concerned about allocating responsibility to the authorities. Instead,

people should get involved in doing something about the issue."

This community spirit led the association to come up with its portal, which will offer Internet safety software, Cyberpatrol, free for at least three months.

It also intends to organise seminars and workshops.

The software works by providing families with "profiles", where children are forbidden to enter certain sites or use credit cards online.

But he admits that such "blocking and filtering" is not foolproof. The onus is still on parents to monitor what their children are doing online.

"With more than one million websites launched each year, it is impossible to block all inappropriate sites," he says.