

Parry Aftab (WiredSafety) Statement - OSTWG Report (full version – aftab.com/ostwg)

It has been an honor to serve on the OSTWG, a varied and stellar group. Each brings something special to the table. Because WiredSafety and my experience, especially our work with victims, parents and young people, differs from that of many working group members¹, while we concur with most of the conclusions reached in the Report, we differ on several others.

The most significant differences relate to the importance of law enforcement and the scope and prevalence of cyberbullying (where one minor uses digital technologies as a weapon to hurt another minor), “sexting” (taking, sending or possessing nude or sexual images of minors by minors, including of themselves) and sexual exploitation of minors by adults that is facilitated by digital technology. Based upon our 15 years in the field, we believe that more minors are victimized, victimizing each other and putting themselves at risk than the Report reflects. Things that are obvious face-to-face are less obvious online. While we agree that the education of young people about safe and responsible digital technology use is critical, under the right set of circumstances even a well-educated child could become an unwitting victim. It is the role of our police to keep this from happening. That is why we shouldn’t lose track of the importance of well-trained and equipped law enforcement agencies and their role in our children’s safety online and off.

At the same time, we recognize that the public (and parents, in particular) often over-estimate the risks children face online, especially when sexual predators are involved. (We fear what we don’t understand, which is why parental education is so important.) While we have to correct their misconceptions, under-estimating the risks is not the answer. In our opinion, the Report leaves the impression that our young people are less at risk than our experience leads us to believe. How serious are the risks? Sadly, we can only guess. When it comes to cyberbullying, sexting and sexual exploitation of minors facilitated by digital technologies, we don’t really understand the facts. We don’t know how often they occur, to whom they occur and the seriousness of the victimization/harm. Why? Because our children often don’t understand that they have been victimized, intentionally hide the victimization from us or don’t share the truth when asked by researchers conducting academic surveys. (Only 5% of students polled told us that they would tell their parents if cyberbullied.) While under-reporting is an offline reality, it is worse when young people feel they have been complicit in some part of the digital abuse.

We are among the experts who believe that cyberbullying is at “epidemic levels” especially in middle school, and that more minors and at increasingly younger ages are engaged in taking, sending or receiving nude or sexual images. (Our survey of children 10 -12 disclosed that 5% had sent a sexually provocative, nude or sexual image and 6% had received one. Teenangels.org/sexting.) The MTV/AP survey conducted for the digital abuse prevention campaign, athinline.org (for which one of my Teenangels and I are advisory board members), shows a higher incidence of sexting than reflected in the Report, as well. This is particularly concerning, as those admitting to sending a “sext” also admitted to being more than 3 times more likely to consider suicide. The more we know, the better job we will be able to do. For that we have to engage young people, ask the right questions and demand better answers.

¹ WiredSafety served on the Harvard Berkman Center’s ISTTF. It and I bring knowledge of cybercrime, law, privacy, best practices, victim-assistance, youth leadership and peer-education, parent education, mommy blogging and issues involving cyberbullying and the digital technology social and sexual conduct of minors. (To learn more visit WiredSafety.org.)