Adolescents who have engaged in past risky online behavior such as providing personal information and befriending strangers are much more likely to repeat such behavior in the future, according to new research that suggests risk information should be tailored to different age groups.

Washington, D.C.—Adolescents who have engaged in past risky online behavior are much more likely than older young adults to repeat the behavior in the future, according to a new study by researchers seeking to understand the psychological mechanisms contributing to young people’s online risk taking.

The behaviors—such as disclosing personal information to strangers and befriending strangers on social networking sites—are seen as increasingly important as parents and educators worry about young people being victimized as a result of engaging in risky online behavior.

Novel insights from the research suggest that information about risky online behavior should be tailored to different age groups, according to the study by Claire White, Dr. Yaniv Hanoch and Dr. Michaela Gummerum of Plymouth University’s School of Psychology in the United Kingdom. Their article, “Adolescents’ and Young Adults’ Online Risk Taking: The Role of Gist and Verbatim Representations,” recently appeared in the online version of Risk Analysis, a publication of the Society for Risk Analysis.

Adolescents ranging in age from 13 to 18 years who perceive online risks based on a type of reasoning that psychologists call “verbatim” were especially likely to participate in future risky online behavior. Verbatim risk reasoning uses details and quantitative information about past risk experiences, with one example statement featured in the report being “I am likely to be bullied or harassed online in the next six months by a person I do not know offline.”

That is in contrast with what psychologists call “gist” reasoning, or representations of risk that rely on personal values and beliefs to create a qualitative, intuitive understanding of risks. Examples of this include “Better to be safe online than sorry” or “Better to never give out my personal information online than risk having my identity stolen.” Adolescents and young people who relied on “gist” representations of risk were less open to taking future online risks.
The two types of reasoning are part of Fuzzy Trace Theory, which “has emerged as one of the major alternative paradigms to successfully explain adolescents’ and adults’ risk taking in domains such as health and sexual behaviors,” according to the authors. The theory relies on the distinctions between verbatim and gist reasoning.

Study participants were students from three educational establishments in the Southwest of England. They included 122 adolescents (ages 13-18) and 172 young adults (ages 18-24). The students were asked about their past online risk-taking activities, their intentions to engage in future risky online behavior, and gist and verbatim representations of the risks.

Among those students, adolescents and young people who relied on gist measures of online risk-taking were more “protective” when asked about their intentions of engaging in future risky online behavior. Adolescents who used verbatim reasoning were found to have higher online risk intentions. The authors suggest that the differences in reasoning about risks could be important factors to consider when designing online training and education for both preventative and protective measures.

The authors state that “developing and imparting more gist-based knowledge, to engage more intuitive thinking about online risk taking, may well help to protect young people against some of the dangers involved in certain online activities.”

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