

Child Rights Campaign Celebrates Universal Children's Day and 25th Anniversary of the Child Rights Convention with Capitol Hill Briefing

The Child Rights Campaign, www.childrightscampaign.org, joined as sponsors by the US Fund for UNICEF, www.unicefusa.org, the Child Welfare League of America, www.cwla.org, and First Focus, www.firstfocus.org, co-sponsored a briefing, *Child Rights and Child Risks in the Digital Age: Global and U.S. Perspectives on Youth Access to the Internet*, on Thursday, November 13, 2014, at the Reserve Officers' Association, 1 Constitution Ave., N.E., Washington, DC. The CWLA President/CEO, Chris James Brown, moderated the panel of speakers. The panel consisted of:

- John Carr, Senior Expert Advisor to the UN on Internet Safety and Secretary of UK's Children's Charities Coalition on Internet Safety;
- Holly Hawkins, Vice President of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) www.missingkids.com;
- Ellen Blackler, Vice President for Global Public Policy of Disney, Inc., www.thewaltdisneycompany.com; and
- Brooklyn Young, formerly a homeless youth, representing the Youth Empowerment Program of Ohio, www.cohio.org/programs.

Brown introduced the briefing by introducing members of the Child Rights Campaign's Steering Committee, then the panelists. She noted that this event celebrates the accomplishments and work still to be done to implement the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) on the 25th anniversary of its approval by the United Nations. The Internet, which has become a common feature of people's lives only since the CRC's adoption, has brought great gifts to children, as well as significant perils. The CRC itself has made it possible for huge gains, such as reductions in infant mortality and increases in girls' education throughout the world. Much remains to be done for the world to meet the CRC's standards to protect and nurture children and their families. She noted that Representative Schiff (D-CA) is an advocate for protections for children, and she read a short statement from him to the audience.

John Carr, who works with End Child Prostitution, Child Pornography, and Trafficking of Children for Sexual Purposes (ECPAT International), www.ecpat.net, focuses his efforts on ending the sexual exploitation of youth and sex tourism, especially in developing countries. He emphasized that for most youth the Internet is helpful in finding out about things, keeping connected with friends and trends, and being entertained. The Internet helps to promote children's rights of access to information, self-expression, education, and asserting their own rights. He also explained how dramatically the freedom of access to the Internet has facilitated the now-widespread images of child abuse, including child pornography, as well as the exploitation of vulnerable children through their social networks and information sharing. These bad effects of Internet use can be controlled, reduced, and almost eliminated by public education efforts, just as driving deaths and tobacco use

have been limited. We must not accept them as normal. In the US, however, the Child Abuse Protection Act does not require providers of Internet sites to verify the asserted age of children.

Most of the huge numbers of child abuse images on the Internet are obtained, disseminated and collected by males, and arrests cannot keep up with the volume of offenders. Research, mostly in the US, is finding new ways to control and reduce the flow, but the distributors are finding new ways to get around them too. Internet hosts, such as Google, ATT and Verizon, have some ability to detect, control, and delete these images, but they, and their government regulators, are not doing enough to close down the easy pathways to access and distribution. The depravity of the images has become extreme, and adult and child images have been conflated. Psychologists have been reporting that girls have been under pressure to act like porn stars through sexting and similar activities. Many boys, under the influence of pornography, have grown unable to relate normally to girls. Carr recommended an age verification system for access to adult sites, such as is used in the U.K. and much of Europe.

Holly Hawkins shared with us the efforts of the NCMEC to prevent the negative risks children and youth face when using the Internet. Their hotline, 1-800-TheLost, their cyber-tip line, and their reports on suspected child exploiters and exploitation methods, all address the need to make the Internet safer for children and youth. The risks they face include Internet content, contacts, and conduct. Content risks include inappropriate violence, sex, or immorality, including cyberbullying, sexting, privacy abuse, ID theft, hacking, and scams. Internet service providers (ISPs) are required by Federal law to report pornography through their servers, and in the past two years that has resulted in a reduction that those images are online from 9 days to 4.5 days. Through 2013, NCMEC has received 2.2 million reports of online exploitation of vulnerable youth. NCMEC has been working with law enforcement and ISPs to offset predator tricks, such as sextortion, blackmail, etc. Prevention efforts seek to engage parents to protect and empower their children. They teach digital citizenship, industry responsibility, and age-appropriate programming. Children need to be given a solid understanding of the kinds of risks they face. NCMEC's Netsmart website emphasizes that it's okay to tell trusted adults about scary experiences on the Internet. The website, www.kidsmartz.org, provides age-appropriate resources for children, their parents and teachers on Internet risk management.

Ellen Blackler spoke about what Disney is doing for its audiences to keep kids safe and give parents the tools they need. Club Penguin, designed for 8-10 year olds, has a code of conduct and other ways of ensuring that children have safe adventures in a virtual world, with privacy protected and inappropriate conduct prevented through moderators, rewards, and suspension for inappropriate conduct. Disney also works with partners such as Scholastic to get Internet safety messages to teachers. She emphasized that the task before

us is to get all the entities responsible for Internet management to act responsibly.

Brooklyn Young spoke movingly of how homeless children often lack trustworthy adults to whom they can turn to avoid or report Internet abuse. They focus on food, shelter, and clothing to survive, and the Internet is often a luxury. She urged communities and schools to develop attitudes and programs to provide these necessities to homeless children, including access to the Internet so that they can learn and exercise their rights in that context as well. She emphasized that vulnerable children depend on school, especially teachers, to give them the trust and help that Web citizenship requires.

In the discussions that followed, John Carr noted that there is some discussion in the UN about amending the CRC to provide children a right to Internet access when local adults have it. In less developed countries, where most of the world's children live but only one-fifth of the child Internet users live, children are even more at risk from the Internet than they are in developed countries. In response to a question, he noted that the .kids domain is likely to be auctioned to Google or Amazon for possible commercial exploitation unless those who wish it to be a safe domain for children to use can convince them to include safety measures in their bids for the domain.

Cory Lynch of the National Education Association noted that a drive to require Internet filters for programming going to young children was gathering support in Congress. Carr noted that this filtering is useful for young children, but becomes less so by age 9-11. He also emphasized that much of the leadership internationally in protecting children on the Internet is coming from OECD countries, although some others, such as Ghana and Egypt have good practices. The speakers ended with a conclusion that, although under the CRC we have made much progress in protecting children from the negative risks of using the Internet, we have a long way to go.