

Internet safety: How vulnerable are our children and what can we do to protect them?

Our children represent the future, but they are also the most vulnerable members of society. Protecting our children against crime and from becoming victims of crime must be a priority. The same advances in computer and telecommunication technology that allow our children to reach out to new sources of knowledge and cultural experiences are, unfortunately, also leaving them vulnerable to exploitation and harm by others.

Although there have been some highly publicized cases of abuse involving the Internet and online services, reported cases are relatively infrequent. Of course, like most crimes against children, many cases go unreported, especially if the child is engaged in an activity that he or she does not want to discuss with a parent.

The fact that crimes are being committed online, however, is not a reason to avoid using these services. To tell children to stop using these services would be like telling them to forgo attending school because students are sometimes victimized there.

A better strategy would be to instruct children about both the benefits and dangers of cyberspace and for them to learn how to be "street smart" in order to better safeguard themselves in any potentially dangerous situation.

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Unfortunately, the anonymity of Internet access allows some individuals to seduce young people through the use of attention, affection, kindness, and even gifts. These individuals are often willing to devote considerable amounts of time listening to and empathising with the problems of children. They are usually aware of the latest music, hobbies, and interests of children. These individuals attempt to lower children's inhibitions by slowly introducing sexual context and content into their conversations.

There are also other individuals, however, who immediately engage in explicit conversation with children. Some offenders primarily collect and trade child-pornographic images, while others seek face-to-face meetings with children via online contacts. It is important for parents to understand that children can be indirectly victimised through conversation, i.e. "chat," as well as the transfer of sexually explicit information and material.

Computer-sex offenders may also be evaluating children they come in contact with online for future face-to-face contact and direct victimization. Parents and children should remember that a computer-sex offender can be any age or sex. The person does not have to fit commonly held perceptions of someone who could harm a child.

Children, especially adolescents, are interested in and curious about sexuality and sexually explicit material has its own lure. They may be moving away from the total control of parents and seeking to establish new relationships outside their family. Sex offenders targeting children will use and exploit these characteristics and needs. Some adolescent children may also be attracted to and lured by online offenders closer to their age who, although not technically child molesters, may be dangerous. Nevertheless, they have been seduced and manipulated by a clever offender and do not fully understand or recognise the potential danger of these contacts.

Because of the reach of the Internet, the issue of Internet safety is not a localised problem. Any child accessing the Internet is at risk. The information presented in this document is available in a paper prepared by the U.S. Department of Justice. The full document, with a glossary of terms is available online at:

<http://www.fbi.gov/publications/pguide/pguidee.htm>

www.safekids.com and www.safeteens.com are two excellent web sites addressing the safety of children and teenagers accessing the Internet, and providing guidelines for both parents and children.

Students should, as part of their schooling, undertake exercises that require them to determine appropriate and safe use of computers, especially when using the Internet. One of the major aspects of appropriate use should include looking at the dangers of giving out personal details whilst using the Internet, especially chat rooms. Nonetheless, there remains the need for vigilance in the home and elsewhere where children might have access to the Internet and online resources.

What are the signs that your child might be at risk online:

- Your child spends large amounts of time online, especially at night.
- You find pornography on your child's computer.
- Your child receives phone calls from adults you don't know or is making calls to numbers you don't recognise.
- Your child receives mail (or e-mail) from someone you don't know.
- Your child turns the computer monitor off or quickly changes the screen on the monitor when you come into the room.
- Your child becomes withdrawn from the family.
- Your child is using an online account belonging to someone else.

What can you do to minimise the chances of an online exploiter victimizing your child?

- Communicate, and talk to your child about sexual victimization and potential online danger.
- Spend time with your children online. Have them teach you about their favourite online destinations.
- Keep the computer in a common room in the house, not in your child's bedroom. It is much more difficult for a computer-sex offender to communicate with a child when the computer screen is visible to a parent or another member of the household.
- Utilise parental controls provided by your service provider and/or blocking software. While electronic chat can be a great place for children to make new friends and discuss various topics of interest, it is also prowled by computer-sex offenders. Use of chat rooms, in particular, should be heavily monitored. While parents should utilise these mechanisms, they should not totally rely on them.
- Always maintain access to your child's online account and randomly check his/her e-mail. Be up front with your child about your access and reasons why.
- Teach your child the responsible use of the resources online. There is much more to the online experience than chat rooms.
- Find out what computer safeguards are utilised by the public library, and at the homes of your child's friends. These are all places, outside your normal supervision, where your child could encounter an online predator.
- Understand, even if your child was a willing participant in any form of sexual exploitation, that he/she is not at fault and is the victim. The offender always bears the complete responsibility for his or her actions.

Instruct your children:

- never to arrange a face-to-face meeting with someone they meet on-line;
- never to upload (post) pictures of themselves onto the Internet or online service to people they do not personally know;
- never to give out identifying information such as their name, home address, school name, or telephone number;
- never to download pictures from an unknown source, as there is a good chance there could be sexually explicit images;
- never to respond to messages or bulletin board postings that are suggestive, obscene, belligerent, or harassing;