

Online Predators

Sexual predators do exist and are a very real threat. They target both boys and girls of all ages and use the anonymity of the Internet to their advantage since they can be whomever they want. Many are master manipulators with skills that can cripple any child's sense of awareness. This is known as the grooming process and predators look for children that are more technically savvy than their parents. They look for children that are emotionally vulnerable which can be related to personal issues derived from problems at school or home. They use these issues to befriend the victim and empathize with them while building a pseudo friendship and trust. If a child indicates frustration with parents or teachers at school the predator might suggest the child's parents are way too strict or their teacher is being unfair and this plays right into the adolescent mind as they look for people to verify their feelings.

With the presence of searchable user profiles when dealing with Instant Messaging and Chat Rooms as well as Social Networking profiles, predators can easily find information about potential victims since many naive children list personal information with no regard for safety. Even simple statements listed on a profile such as school attended, sport played, or even what jersey number worn can allow predators to target them. A 16 year old girl who innocently posts a picture of her new car in front of her house for her friends to see is also providing information for potential predators such as what her car looks like, her license plate number, house address, what her house looks like etc.

Once a predator Instant Messages or Chats with a victim and gains their trust they often send pornographic pictures via the IM session or e-mail and sometimes gifts through the mail. They might even have a toll free phone number for the victim to call or mail a cell phone so it will not show up on their parent's phone bill. If the victim tries to cut off communication, predators will often convince them that they will tell their parents what they have been doing online and that they have viewed pornographic pictures, etc. and scare the victim into continuing the relationship.

The Internet is a worldwide network that stretches far beyond the grasp of the US judicial system. Technology moves so fast the slow progression of our law making process will never fully address the problem. Therefore, parents must be on guard to protect their families. There are many organizations and government agencies designed to assist parents with issues such as these. Internet searching for information will also provide many links and web sites to help.

Predator Grooming

- Chat Rooms (based on interest)
- Look for child oriented screen names
- Search through SN profiles
- Strike up a conversation
- Show interest and gain their trust
- Build them up (be their friend)

Predator Warning Signs

- Spends a lot of time online
- Find porn on the computer
- Receive phone calls, mail, gifts from people you do not know
- Withdraws from normal activity
- Switches screen quickly (Alt+Tab)
- Uses other accounts for e-mail or Instant Messaging

Some Helpful Web Sites for More Information:

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

<http://www.ic3.gov>
<http://www.missingkids.com>
<http://www.netSMART.org>
<http://www.staysafe.org>
<http://www.isafe.org/>