

## Don't get tangled in the World Wide Web

# Keeping kids safe on the Information Superhighway

Owning a computer is no longer a luxury but a necessity in our society. Computers are everywhere in businesses, schools and at home. Children as young as preschool age are learning to use computers as an educational tool and a link to limitless information as well as for entertainment. Unfortunately, they may also pose a great danger.

Young children and teenagers have traditionally been prime targets for criminal acts. Children are particularly vulnerable because of their trusting nature and their thirst for attention and affection. With more than 45 million kids expected to be surfing the Web by 2002, Internet safety is a paramount concern for parents and law enforcement.

The Sexual Assault Response Center, a United Way of Benton and Franklin Counties agency, has released results of a survey funded by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. The survey found that:

- One in five kids between the ages of 10 and 17 received sexual solicitations online in the past year.
- Only 25 percent of those told a parent about the incident.

- One in four of the kids was unwillingly exposed to photographs of naked people or people having sex. Forty percent of these children told a parent.

- One in 17 kids was harassed or threatened while online.

- Seventy-seven percent of the youth targeted were age 14 or older.

- Nearly half of the offenders were other youth.

Something even more disturbing is the small number of incidents being reported to authorities. According to the survey, only 11 percent of the parents knew of a specific

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### Internet safety tips for children

- Never arrange to meet in person someone you've met online.
- Never post pictures of yourself on the Internet.
- Never give identifying information such as name, address or phone number.
- Never download pictures or respond to e-mails from unknown sources.
- Never respond to messages that are suggestive or obscene.
- Remember that things you read online may not be true.

### What parents should watch out for

- Children spending large amounts of time online, especially at night.
- Pornography on your child's computer.
- Phone calls to your child from adults you don't know
- Calls from your phone to numbers you don't know, sometimes long distance.
- Mail, gifts or packages to your child from someone you don't know.
- A child turning off the computer monitor quickly when you enter the room.
- A child who becomes withdrawn from the family.
- A child using an online account belonging to someone else.

### What you can do

- Talk to your kids about sex offenders online.
- Spend time with your children online.
- Keep the computer in a common room of the house.
- Use the parental controls set up by your Internet provider.
- Access your child's account and monitor his or her e-mails periodically.

## Keeping kids safe on the Information Superhighway, cont.

authority to report Internet crimes.

In order to keep our children safe from cyber predators, we need to educate our children, educate ourselves in order to recognize a child at risk and report these crimes to the proper authorities.

The cyber sex offender uses the Internet to prey on innocent victims. While the traditional pedophile searches for victims on playgrounds and in shopping malls, the online predator can target children from the comfort of his or her own home. The Internet criminal has the added luxury of remaining completely anonymous.

No matter the venue, the process an offender uses is the same — to “groom” a victim and sometimes the victim’s family into believing he is a friend or confidant, perhaps harmlessly chatting about things they have in common and sending pictures or gifts in order to gain the interest and trust of the victim. Once the relationship is established, the abuse begins.

Sexual exploitation may begin with “sex chat” or exchanging photographs, and then escalate to a face-to-face meeting. But even if the two never meet, there could be other crimes going on through the Internet without the victim’s knowledge. Internet crime investigations have uncovered hundreds of victims who have been exploited through photographs. Until the investigators contacted the victims, these victims had no clue they were involved.

It is extremely important to instruct children about the dangers of Internet predators. Every family should have a set of Internet rules and software safeguards in order to be safe. It is important to communicate anything unusual and report any incidents to the proper authorities.

To report Internet crimes, contact your Internet service provider and the Cyber Tipline at **[www.missingkids.com/cybertip](http://www.missingkids.com/cybertip)**, or call 1-800-843-5678.

The education program at the Sexual Assault Response Center now offers an Internet safety program for kids and parents. For more information or to schedule a presentation, call 374-5391. ♦