

Parents Underinformed of Children's Internet Activities

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The plague of sexual predators preying on the youth of our planet continues to spread, even as public awareness and pro-active attempts by law enforcement to stem these types of activities is increasing. Case in point, a 35 year old man (posing as a 15 year old named Jake) who used the Internet portal "MySpace.com" to prey on young teenage girls and convince them to have sex with him. A pedophile may engage in more than 100 acts before being caught and convicted, and with more than 1.2 million people in anonymous chat rooms at any given moment (most of them children), predators have a "huge pond to fish in".

One of the common denominators I've noticed as I've studied a number of recent sexual predator reports is the lack of supervision by parents surrounding their children's Internet activities. Whether parents realize it or not, the failure to supervise their children's Internet activities may attribute to chance meetings with predators online. At any given moment, there are more than 50,000 sexual predators online perusing anonymous chat rooms seeking to connect with their next victim.

A recent study by Symantec, a leader in Internet security, found a significant divide between parents and cyber-savvy children. The June 2007 study showed that parents of children under 18 who access the Internet believed their child is online only three hours a week, but children ages 8-17 admit to spending an average of seven hours a week online. This 23% of group also admitted to doing things online their parents would not condone.

While parents have much to learn about what their kids are doing online, Internet safety is a top concern for them. According to the June 2007 Symantec poll, nearly nine in ten parents (88 percent) express concern about keeping their child safe when he/she is online and about three in four (76 percent) are specifically concerned about their child being approached with inappropriate content or solicitations online.

As part of the same poll, youth reported the following:

- Twenty-one percent of children have reported having an experience with inappropriate material via the Internet that made them feel uncomfortable
- Eighteen percent of children have had an experience with cyber-bullying or cyber-pranks (such as receiving messages, images or videos intended as a joke or prank)
- Twenty-three percent of children have had an encounter with a stranger on the Internet, including seven percent of children who reported having met someone in the real world from the Internet
- Twenty percent of children wish their parents were more interested in using the Internet

Parents are for the most part unaware of their kid's activities on social networking sites, like MySpace, Facebook, or Friendster. While nearly half of the youth participants in the Symantec study reported having a social networking site, many had not thought about the consequences of posting personal information on social networking sites.

"I wasn't aware kids were posting their entire profiles online," said Bill, father of two young boys who attended the Norton Connected and Protected Town Hall. "Including their name, location, photos and contact information."

Predators routinely search for this information in their ongoing attempts to satisfy their twisted sexual fantasies. And without active parental involvement and supervision of a child's Internet activities, children may learn of the dangers of the World Wide Web in a personally damaging way.

Scripture reminds us a child left to himself brings shame to his parents (Proverbs 29:15). Children are a gift from God, and we (as parents) have a moral responsibility to protect our children from those who seek to do

them harm. If we fail to do so, and they are harmed as a result of our negligence, then we too must share in the blame.

We've recently updated the Links section of our website, www.rivervalleykidsafe.com. We offer a FREE Internet filter (with parental controls), as well as a number of educational links and resources to help parents take a more pro-active role in protecting their children while online. The Internet is a great tool, but it can be a dangerous place without proper safeguards in place.

Know where your children are going on the World Wide Web, who they are chatting with, and review any content they may be publishing on their own personal pages. The life you save may just be that of your own child.

John Terry is a Regional Director and certified Kid-Safe and Women-Safe consultant with the National Security Alliance. He is also a Chaplain with the Martial Arts Chaplains Association, a member of the Christian Black Belt Association and co-owner of River Valley Martial Arts. Through the NSA, John offers "kid-safe" and "women-safe" educational workshops on danger awareness to local schools, civic, community and church groups. He is also a regional coordinator for the NSA's Rapid Child Search program. For details, visit www.rivervalleykidsafe.com. To schedule an educational workshop, John may be reached at 968-1708 or rivervalleykidsafe@imga.com.