

Ask ERS?

Dear ERS Advisor:

I have to admit that I'm out of my element when it comes to researching stuff on the internet. I never have a clue about what site has good, reputable information versus a site that contains a bunch of hearsay and rumors! How can I tell the difference?

Confused on the Internet

Dear Confused,

It can be a tough job sorting out the reputable from the not-so-reputable websites. Especially when a search engine like Google can yield more than 10,000 possible links! Don't panic. There are some great guidelines you can use to sort out the useful sites from the misleading ones.

1. Look at the URL. This is the "address" of the site and usually starts with the three www's. Educational sites or governmental sites will often have URL's that end in ".edu" or ".gov." Commercial businesses typically have websites that end in ".com", however, this guideline isn't strictly followed so don't rule anything out yet because of it.
2. Consider who publishes the site. At the bottom of the home page, it will usually say something about the organization or person who created and runs the site. See if there is an "About Us" section that will tell you more about the group who runs the site and what their purpose or agenda is.
3. See if the information is up-to-date. It's easy for something that was posted to sit around and become inaccurate and out-of-date so see if you can find a "last updated" notice on the information you're reviewing.
4. What other links are given? Often a reputable site will be linked to other reputable sites, so look for a "links" section on the site you're reviewing. It's more reassuring to find a link to Web M.D.'s site rather than a link to Joe Schmo's site for photos of Big Foot, unless that's what you're looking for!

I'm confident that once you "surf" around the internet a while you will become quite familiar with the indicators of reputable sites. Before you know it, you'll be coaching others on what to look for!

Good luck!

ERS Advisor

**Interested in submitting a question or comment?
Send an e-mail to aharkleroad@ers-usa.org.**

Keeping Your Kids Safe on the Internet

Scott Chyna, LCSW

There is no question that we live in an era where technology plays an integral part of our lives. Cell phones are a common accessory. Phrases such as *texting*, *blogging* and *downloading* are part of our daily vocabulary. An entire music collection can be held in the palm of a hand with the use of an MP3 player. While modern technology may have made life a bit easier, it has not come without new dangers that threaten the well-being and safety of our children.

Today, most kids and teens possess a technical savvy that makes astonished parents want to throw up their slide rules in disbelief! The internet allows the world to be expanded in ways that can be a powerful and positive learning tool for children. A worldwide web visitor can be taken to a variety of places without ever leaving his or her computer desk. While the internet can serve as a vast repository of information, unlike other research tools, the internet allows strangers to interact with one another. Often, communication takes place in "chat rooms" or on social networking sites such as MySpace.com or Facebook.com. Typically the communication on these sites is friendly conversation that allows like-minded people to connect with each other. On occasion, though, these forums can be carefully targeted by predators looking to exploit and take advantage of children.

In a March 2007 report compiled by internetworkworldstats.com, it was suggested that 87% of American teenagers (ages 12-17) use the internet. Most children have access to the internet either in their own homes, at school or through their peers and often their internet usage is unsupervised. The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children reports that "approximately one in seven youth online (10 to 17-years-old) has received a sexual solicitation or approach over the Internet." Knowing who your children communicate with via the internet is an important question to be asked. It is possible that the safe confines of home and school may be breached by online offenders, predators who may be courting their next underage victim with the purpose of some type of sexual interaction.

The types and methods of online offenders vary. The goal

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of some offenders may include the dissemination of pornographic images and content while other offenders seek face-to-face meetings with children. Some offenders take deliberate steps in targeting their victims and the process is gradual. Initially, the offender may provide emotional support for an unhappy teenager, often siding with the child against authority figures such as parents or teachers. As the online relationship develops, the offender and minor may spend hours “chatting” about topics relevant to the child – popular music, television or movies. As the dynamic becomes less inhibited, the offender will begin to introduce sexual innuendo or content in the dialogue. Other offenders may immediately engage in sexually explicit language and conversation with children. It is important to realize that children **can** be victimized by suggestive conversation and exposure to pornographic images.

Since the internet allows for anonymity, an internet offender has the added advantage that he can pose as whatever persona he chooses to fabricate. The “peer” that a child or adolescent is chatting online with may actually be an adult with ulterior motives. While experts agree that most internet predators are male, it is important to keep in mind that an internet offender, just as any other offender of minors, does not fit any specific “type” or persona. They can be any age, race, occupation or gender.

According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, there are



“What, exactly, is the internet? Basically it is a global network exchanging digitized data in such a way that any computer, anywhere, that is equipped with a device called a 'modem', can make a noise like a duck choking on a kazoo”

– Dave Barry

certain signs your child may be at risk online. They include:

■ **Your child spends large amounts of time online, especially at night.**

Most children who are victimized by online offenders spend large amounts of time online, especially in chat rooms. While offenders may be online at any time, most work during the day and spend their evenings on the internet trying to locate or connect with children. As a result, children who are online in the evenings are at greater risk of being victimized.

■ **Pornography is on your child’s computer.**

Children, especially adolescents, may be interested and curious about sexuality. It is important to recognize that this is a normal developmental process as children mature and differentiate themselves from their parents and families. Online offenders often exploit the child’s curiosity by using pornography to initiate sexual discussion or attempt seduction. Child pornography may be transmitted to demonstrate that sex between children and adults is “normal” from the predator’s point of view. Parents should keep in mind that the adult offender has used a significant amount of skill and deception in manipulating the child into any seeming “cooperation.”

■ **Your child receives phone calls from people you don’t recognize.**

An offender may want the relationship to “progress” beyond computer chat and offer to speak to a child over the telephone. Often, the offender will initiate sexual discussion or attempt to set up an actual in-person meeting for sex. Some offenders may willingly give a child their phone number as the victim will be reluctant to provide their number. Caller ID may allow the offender to obtain a child’s number. Some offenders have even obtained toll free 800 numbers so that potential victims can call without their parents finding out. Some children and adolescents may have their own cell phones that parents do not have access to.

■ **Your child receives gifts, mail or packages from someone you don’t know.**

An offender may attempt to seduce a child with letters or gifts in order to gain trust and emotional intimacy from a potential victim. There have been instances when an offender has sent bus or plane tickets to a victim in order for the child to travel across country for a face-to-face meeting.

■ **Your child becomes secretive about his/her online activity.**

A child who is looking at pornographic images or having

sexually explicit conversations may turn the computer monitor off or quickly change the screen when a parent comes into the room.

■ **Your child becomes withdrawn from the family.** Offenders often deliberately drive a wedge between children and their family; this allows the offender to establish a pretense of unconditional support and trust. Offenders will often accentuate or exaggerate any minor problems a child may have at home.

If your child has been sexually solicited, received sexually explicit content or been sent child pornography online by someone who is aware he or she is a minor, immediately contact your local or state law enforcement agency.

The most important method to ensure the safety of your child is to have an open discussion about the dangers of internet use. Educate your child on the risks involved in chat rooms. Most parents are well-versed in telling their children to not go with a stranger who approaches them in a shopping mall or a parking lot. The same school of thought should be applied to internet use and safety. Here are tips parents should utilize with their children in encouraging safe and responsible internet use:

- **Spend time with your children online.** Ask them to show you their favorite web sites or their profiles on MySpace.com and similar networking websites. Investigate what identifying information your children have posted on their profiles; ask to see the profiles of their “online friends.” Enforce rules and guidelines of what your child can and cannot post online. Remind your child that identifying information such as his or her picture, address, telephone number, name and location of his or her school can pose risks.
- **Periodically monitor your child’s internet usage.** Maintain access to your child’s online account and reserve the right to randomly check his or her e-mail account. Be upfront with your child about the reasons for such access.
- **Keep the computer in a common room in the house.** Do not place the computer in your child’s bedroom. It is difficult for a computer sex offender to communicate with a child when the computer screen is visible to a parent or other household member.
- **Consider utilizing parental controls and/or blocking software.** Parents can obtain information from their internet service providers about various methods that may be employed in preventing children from logging onto inappropriate websites.

- Investigate what computer safeguards are utilized by your children’s school, public library, after-school program and at the homes of their peers. These outside locations are potential places a child can encounter an online predator.
- Instruct your child to alert you to any inappropriate solicitation or contact while online. Further instruct children to never respond to messages or postings that are suggestive, obscene or harassing.

There are dangers in every part of society and the proactive involvement of parents and other responsible adults can prevent children from becoming victimized and exploited – not just within the confines of the internet. If you would like more information or assistance in safeguarding your family, contact the Employee Assistance Program at 1-800-292-2780.

Scott Chyna, LCSW, is an EAP counselor at Employee Resource Systems, Inc. He has worked in a number of mental health and substance abuse treatment settings. Scott also maintains a private practice where he provides counseling services to individuals, couples and families.

just the FACTS.

- In the May 2007 edition of the journal *Pediatrics*, researchers found that one-fifth of infants and toddlers under age 2 have a television in their bedrooms so that other televisions would be freed up for family members to watch their own television shows.
- The World Bank estimates that there are over a billion personal computers world-wide. Number of personal computers, http://maps.grida.no/go/graphic/number_of_personal_computers (Last visited June 1, 2007).
- From 1997 to 2007, it is estimated that 500 million personal computers – two for each person in the country – will become obsolete. (National Recycling Coalition, 1999) Electronic waste from obsolete computers, printers, and cell phones are quickly becoming an issue for our nation’s landfills as this type of waste contains a number of hazardous materials. Research your local options for recycling your old personal computers or consider donating an old printer or fax machine to a local school or charity.

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Sites to See



<http://www.netsmartz.org/>

"The NetSmartz Workshop is an interactive, educational safety resource from the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children® (NCMEC) and Boys & Girls Clubs of America (BGCA) for children aged 5 to 17, parents, guardians, educators, and law enforcement that uses age-appropriate, 3-D activities to teach children how to stay safer on the Internet." This website has creative videos for the kids and a variety of educational and training materials for adults too. It even includes a helpful definitions section, so if you don't know your "blog" from your "browser" you'll soon become an internet expert!

<http://safetynet.aap.org/>

The American Academy of Pediatrics offers free software called "Family Safety" that you can download from their site, which will enable you to set personalized rules for your kids to browse online and monitoring of the sites they do visit. This site includes recommendations for the level of security settings you should based upon the ages of your children.

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The Employee/Member Assistance Program is a free benefit focused upon supporting you or your family members whenever you feel stressed, angry or overwhelmed with life's demands. Call 1-800-292-2780 to find out more about our confidential services.

Editor Andrea Harkleroad

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