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Teens & Internet Safety[1]

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This publication is part of a series of discussions on understanding teen sexuality.

Introduction: Teens Navigating Cyberspace

If you believe e-mail, blogs, and instant messaging are a completely harmless way for teens to communicate, think again! Many teens have Internet access—often private communication in the form of blogs, chat rooms, and forums. These online communication aids are not themselves a problem. But the ever-present threat of being sexually solicited or bullied while on the Internet is a big problem.

While online, teens may be persuaded to do things or share information that they do not want to, to be sexually solicited, and/or to experience public humiliation. Justin Berry's testimony before Congress in April 2006, alerted the public to online sexual solicitation of teens. However, parents and youth workers may be less aware of "cyber-bullying" in which peers viciously attack one another. This article will define online sexual solicitation and cyber-bullying, explain the risk factors and negative effects of these communications, and outline ways to protect youth from harm.

Online Sexual Solicitation

Online sexual solicitation is a form of sexual harassment that occurs over the internet. Incidents of online sexual solicitation include: exposure to pornography; being asked to discuss sex online and/or do something sexual; or requests to disclose personal information. This can start when an adult or peer initiates an online nonsexual relationship with a child or adolescent, builds trust, and seduces him or her into sexual acts. Several studies have found that:

- 30% of teen girls who used the Internet frequently had been sexually harassed while they were in a chat room.

- 37% of teens (male and female) received links to sexually explicit content online.

- 30% of teens have talked about meeting someone they met online.

- 19% knew a friend who was harassed or asked about sex online by a stranger.

- 33% of teen girls and 18% of teen boys had been asked about sexual topics online. (Dewey, 2002; Polly Klaas Foundation, 2006)

There are several signs—traits, life circumstances, and actions—that parents and adults should be aware of in order to keep teens from online communication with sexual predators. Studies find that teens at the greatest risk for online sexual solicitation are:

- females between the ages of 14 and 17 years.

- teens with major depressive symptoms and/or who have experienced negative life transitions (moving to a new neighborhood, a death or divorce in their family) are especially vulnerable.

- teens who use the Internet more frequently, for four or more days a week at two or more hours a day.

- teens who engage in high online risk behavior (including cyber-bullying and discussing sex online with strangers).

Research has found that about 25% of youth who are sexually solicited felt "extremely afraid or upset" in response to the incident. Preteens to early adolescent (aged 10-13), youth who were solicited more aggressively, and youth who had been sexually solicited on a computer in another persons home, were the most upset and affected (Mitchell et al., 2001). Youth with major symptoms of depression are twice as likely to become emotionally distressed by online solicitation than their peers who report no or few symptoms of depression. These reactions, in addition to the more blatant dangers of teens meeting in person with online predators, point to the need to prevent preteens and teens from exposure to online solicitation.

Cyber-bullying

Bullying, defined as aggression on a continual basis between peers where one has a power advantage over another, is common among children and adolescents. Cyber-bullying involves using electronic communication to:

- put others down.

- play pranks.

- share personal information publicly

- stalk someone.

- commit other overt attacks upon a person.

Teens who cyber-bully may feel that cyberspace is an impersonal place to vent, and, therefore, consider it less harmful than face-to-face bullying. However, cyber-bullying can be very destructive. For example, middle school teens may start a poll with their classmates and cast online votes for the ugliest girl in the school. In an incident in Japan, cell phone photos were taken of an undressed overweight boy in a locker room and e-mailed to his peers. Also, death threats or hateful words travel easily through cyberspace in e-mails or cell phone calls from apparent strangers.

Recent research on nearly 300 students from three junior high schools reveals some alarming facts about cyber-bullying:

- 22% of teen males and 12% of teen females committed acts of cyber-bullying.

- About half of cyber-bullies had admitted to using electronic devices to harass someone three or more times.

- 25% of teens reported being victims of cyber-bullying.

- Over half of students knew of someone who had been cyber-bullied.

- Although 64% of students believed that adults in school would try to stop the cyber-bullying, only about 30% of teens who knew about it happening would let an adult know about it. Females were more likely to tell adults than males (Li, 2006).

Solutions: Ways to Keep Your Teens Safe

The following research-based tips can help you to keep your teens from being victims or perpetrators of online sexual solicitation and cyber-bullying:

- Keep computers with Internet access in a centralized location in the home, not in your childs bedroom.

- Educate your teen about potential dangers of online communication and help them to role play effective ways to respond to online sexual solicitation.

- As a parent, you can learn about Internet use from older teens. And, because teens are often more likely to learn from older teens than from their parents you can, in turn, ask those older teens to pass safety information to younger teens.

- Encourage your teen to report incidents of online sexual solicitation or cyber-bullying to adults and reinforce their beliefs that action will be taken in response to the event.

- Set a family internet policy. Define the ground rules for internet such as scheduled times, permissible websites, and limiting online communication to familiar peers.

- When setting Internet use rules, consider how vulnerable your child might be to online solicitation/cyber-bullying. Base your decision on his or her life circumstances as well as age and stage of development. For example, rules for Internet use for children should be more restrictive than those set for adolescents.

- Encourage your teen to be involved in face-to-face activities as alternatives to interaction on the Internet. Youth who are vulnerable, lonely, and low on social skills are most likely candidates for excessive Internet use, increasing the risk for exposure to cyber-bullying and online sexual solicitation.

- Get access to "parental block" software that protects your child from exploring websites that you find inappropriate. There are many options you can find by simply typing in "Internet parental blocks" in a search engine (for example, Google)

- Check your childs Internet use computer history. (Visit the following website for further information:)

- Because they value privacy, be prepared to detect teens infractions of "family Internet policy" (for example, teens can erase their history of websites visited) and setting appropriate limits and consequences.

Parents must be alert to the way their children use electronic communications. Talk to your children about the risks involved. Although there is a big scary cyberworld out there, the family and home can and needs to be a safe haven for children and teens.

Resources on Internet Safety for Parents

"http://www.cybertipline.com/" http://www.cybertipline.com/

"http://familyinternet.about.com/cs/internethelp/a/blhistory.htm" http://familyinternet.about.com/cs/internethelp/a/blhistory.htm

"http://www.missingkids.com/missingkids/servlet/PageServlet?LanguageCountry=en_US&PageId=207"

http://www.missingkids.com/missingkids/servlet/PageServlet?LanguageCountry=en_US&PageId=207

"http://www.wiredsafety.org/" http://www.wiredsafety.org/

Popular Social-Networking Sites for Teens (for parents & teens to look at together)

MySpace.com

Facebook.com

HI5.com

Tagged.com

Imbee.com

LiveJournal.com

Bebo.com

MyYearbook.com

Friendster.com

Spaces.MSN.com

Xanga.com

Resources on Internet Safety for Teens

http://www.safeteens.com/

http://www.safekids.com/

http://kidshealth.org/teen/safety/safebasics/internet_safety.html

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