

WEBSAFE

How To Avoid Internet Predators -A Guide for Youth-



**The Community Resource Centre (Killaloe) Inc.
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and Correctional Services**

How to Avoid Internet Predators

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What's an Internet Predator? And why should I care?

An internet predator is someone who develops 'friendships' online for the specific purpose of sexually exploiting his 'friends'. They're not the only dangerous or unpleasant people out there, of course - there are online bullies who aren't predators, there are predators who don't use the internet, and there are thieves and con artists everywhere. But young adolescents are especially likely to be targeted by internet predators, for several reasons. Tweens and teens:

Are confident online

Youths are usually technically competent and not intimidated by their computers. They often know more than their parents about viruses, spyware, and other technical risks. This is great; but it may make both parents and teens overestimate the teens' ability to deal with social dangers online. Knowing html is not the same as knowing what information is safe to put on a website.

Spend more time online

Most kids spend hours online, and are often interested in finding people who share their interests and have time to hang out.

May not recognize the early stages of an abusive relationship

Most teenagers have little experience with manipulative, dishonest adults (while parents and teachers do try to control teenagers, they are usually up-front about what they want).

Are exploring their sexuality

While adults usually have a clear idea of what they are comfortable with when it comes to physical intimacy and relationships, teenagers are exploring possibilities. They may be pressured into doing things they aren't really into.

Have a support network consisting of other teens

When an online relationship starts turning weird, a teenager may not have any adults that they are comfortable confiding in, and their friends may not know how to help.

You can see that none of these reasons have to do with whether the victim is stupid or behaving badly - a successful internet predator is a skilled and experienced con artist.

So what can I do?

With a little information, you can have fun online without putting yourself at risk. Read this booklet for tips on protecting your personal information, avoiding and dealing with harassment, and recognizing signs that an online friend may actually be a predator. Then talk to your parents about what you've learned and how they can help you stay safe.

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Protecting your privacy

Choose your usernames and email address carefully

They shouldn't include your name, age, birthday, or sex; predators prefer to target people who are obviously the age and gender they want.

Keep contact information on a need-to-know basis

No one online needs to know your mailing address, your street address, what school you go to, your real name, or your phone number. If you want people in a forum or visitors to your site to be able to contact you, provide an email address only.

Registration forms and user profiles are a good exercise in creative writing

Again, your name, age, and contact information are no one's business. If you have to say anything, say you're a 90-year-old ferret-breeder from Cambodia. Get a fake email address for registration forms that require one; they're probably going to spam you.

Be careful with pictures

It's best not to post any pictures of yourself online. If you do want to, look over each picture with your parents. Are you standing in front of a sign or wearing a shirt that might give away your hometown? Would a pedophile find the image provocative? Does it show friends who might not want their pictures to be online?

Be even more careful with your webcam

Only use it with people you know offline, and make sure you turn it off when you're done.

Check that your friends are safe too

You can go over your website with a fine-toothed comb making sure there is no personal information on it; if you trade links with your school friends, a predator might be able to gather a lot of information about you from their sites! Look over your friends' sites before agreeing to swap links.

Hanging out

Stick to public, monitored chatrooms

This is the simplest way to avoid being harassed, as anyone making inappropriate comments should be booted immediately. Don't go into a private room with just anyone; and remember you can always leave a private room if you don't like how people are acting.

Use a buddy system

Meet your school friends online for chat or gaming sessions; it's easier to stay in control of conversations when there are two or more of you together.

Follow your interests

If you want to make friends online, go to chat rooms and forums that deal specifically with things you're interested in, the more unusual the better. It might seem weird that (appropriate) adult sites are safer than ones aimed at teens, but think about it: If you were a predator, where would you look for victims - an online chess tournament, a teen chat room, or a forum on auto repair? Right. Predators can easily fit in on sites where people are just hanging out and joking around; faking a detailed interest in origami or lacrosse is too much work.

Dealing with harassment

No matter how careful you are, you will sometimes have to deal with jerks - most of them aren't dangerous, but some may be.

Ignore the ignorant

Don't respond to rude comments, or to anyone who asks for your sex and age. Even when you ignore them, some people will keep pestering you. There are several ways of dealing with this:

- * Keep your cool. Don't be tempted into responding to juvenile insults or teasing.
- * Most chat rooms let you block messages from certain users; ask your parents or look in the help if you don't know how to do this.
- * Complain to the site authority that this user is harassing people.
- * Stop going to any site where you frequently get bothered.

Avoid porn

Don't open pictures or follow links that a stranger gives you in a chat room. Even if the name looks harmless, it may be pornography. If you do open something like this, tell your parents right away; they won't be angry if they know it was an accident.

Know when it's more than harassment

If someone is threatening you or seems to have personal information about you, save a copy of the conversation and tell an adult immediately. It may be appropriate to go to the police.

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Danger signs

Even if they seem perfectly normal at first, even if you've known them for a long time, remember that anyone you met online could be a predator. Here are some warning signs to help you figure out how serious a situation is. Here's what to do if an online friend...

Told you they were a teenager but you know or suspect that they are older

There's no good reason for an adult to pretend to be a teenager. Cut off contact with the person, and let your parents know.

Makes inappropriate sexual comments

Inappropriate is a matter of opinion - your parents might disapprove of things that you find funny. The real warning signs are comments that make you uncomfortable, or a friend who often tries to talk/joke about sex when you're not really interested. Even if the person isn't a predator, why hang out with someone who's consistently boring or obnoxious? Tell them to knock it off, and if they don't, find someone who's more fun.

Requests that you send photos

Even if they've sent you some, the pictures could be of anyone - it doesn't prove you're really talking to another teen. It's best to say no, or tell them you need to check with your parents. If you do send pictures, follow the guidelines for posting images on your site (page 3).

Wants you to lie to your parents - about anything

No, your parents don't need to know about every detail of everything you do. But that's your business; a real online friend has no reason to be afraid of your parents, while an internet predator will be very concerned that your parents not find out about him. Also, even a relatively harmless lie can be used to blackmail you later on.

Offers you gifts or money

Never give out your mailing address without permission from your parents. If your friend offers to give you gifts in a way that doesn't require an address (ie through Paypal or Amazon), you still need to be cautious. Why are they so eager to buy you something? Are they asking you to do something in return, or assuming you won't tell your parents where you got the gift?

Wants to meet you, over the phone or in person

Always ask your parents about this sort of thing. Just knowing your phone number can let a predator find your home address; and thanks to call display or *69, they can get your phone number even if you call them! And, for obvious reasons, meeting in person is also risky. A real friend will not have a problem with meeting you and your parents in a public place.

Internet Glossary

Browser - A client program that gets html pages from a web server and displays them on your computer, ie Internet Explorer, Firefox, or Netscape.

Chat room - A webpage where people gather to talk. Anyone in the room can type a message and it will instantly be displayed on the computers of everyone else in the room. Some are monitored - they have one or more supervisors who can 'boot' people out of the chatroom for saying inappropriate things.

Client - A program on your computer that interacts with a server over the internet. For example, a mail client like Outlook or Eudora can get your email directly from your mail server (if the server allows them to), so you don't need to open a browser to read it.

Directory - A search service that uses people to collect and organize information about webpages by category. Directories tend to give more relevant results than search engines, but they're much less comprehensive and take longer to find new webpages as they go up.

Email - A way of sending messages to people whether they are online or not; slower than chat or IM but better for long messages or messages the person might want to save.

Host - A web server that stores people's sites. If you kept your webpage on your computer, people would only be able to see it when you were online.

HTML - HyperText Markup Language. A set of tags that tells a browser how to display webpages. For example, a tag means, "show the following text in bold."

IM - Instant Messaging. An IM client (like AIM, Yahoo Instant Messenger, or MSN) keeps a list of people you know who have the same client (a 'buddy' list) and lets you know when they are online. When you're both online, you can have a conversation in real time - it works like a two person private chat room, but displayed by the IM client rather than a browser.

Internet - A global computer network.

ISP - Internet Service Provider. A company that provides internet access, usually for a fee. You contact their server, which is always connected to the internet, through your phone line (or a DSL line, a wireless connection, satellite, etc.).

P2P - Peer to Peer networking. A way to transfer files between computers without using a server (or where each computer acts as a server, whichever you like). Often used to get pirated music or videos; examples include KaZaa and LimeWire.

Protocol - A standard way of transferring certain types of information between two networked computers, usually server to server or server to client. HTTP (HyperText

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Transfer Protocol) is the protocol for webpages; email clients often use POP3 for checking messages and SMTP for sending messages; FTP is a fast way of transferring many or large files between computers; chat rooms use IRC; VoIP is for sending sound in realtime, and so on.

Search engine - A program that searches the web for pages that contain certain keywords. Unlike directories, search engines can find very up-to-date information, but have no human judgment to filter out irrelevant results.

Server - A computer or program that is set up to interact with clients and sometimes other servers. For example, an email server keeps track of all its users' account information (password, inbox, saved drafts, etc.) and sends this information in a form that the client program can understand. Most email servers will make the information into a webpage, so you can use your browser as the client; that's called webmail, and it's often free. Some email services will also let you use a specially designed email client (ie Eudora or Outlook), but they usually charge for this.

Spam - Junk email. Sites that require an email address to sign up often sell their mailing lists to spammers. Programs called crawlers can quickly search through websites and forums to find carelessly posted email addresses. Any message from someone you don't know is most likely spam. Never respond to it, even if they offer to take you off their list (they won't); responding to spam just confirms that your address is valid and encourages them to send more! Delete spam without reading it, and see if your mail provider offers a filtering service.

Spyware - A program that stays on your computer and collects information about you, then sends it to whoever wrote the program. May be used to sell you stuff, steal your passwords, or even for identity theft.

Virus - A program intended to hurt your computer. Never open email attachments unless you know and trust the *original* source - since not all viruses do immediate damage, your friends could forward you a contaminated file without knowing. If you want to download a program, don't follow a link that anyone gives you in a forum, as the link could be to a site that looks legitimate but isn't. Instead, go to a search engine and find a reputable download site (preferably the company that originally made the program).

Web - The most popular use of the internet; a big, constantly changing tangle of interlinked webpages.

Webpage, website - A webpage is a chunk of text, images, and sometimes scripting that's available online. A website is a set of related, interlinked webpages, all hosted on the same server and often made by one person or organization. So Wikipedia is a site, but any one definition on Wikipedia is a page.

How to...

Save a copy of a chat / IM conversation

Select the portion of the conversation you want to save, then copy it to the clipboard (by going Edit → Copy or hitting Ctrl-c). Then open up a word processing program (like Works, Word, Wordperfect, Wordpad, or Notepad) and paste the conversation from the clipboard (by going Edit → Paste or hitting Ctrl-v). Save the file in My Documents or on the Desktop so it's easy to find later.

Search effectively

Using search engines takes practice. Here are a few tips:

Use more than one search tool - if google just isn't doing it, try yahoo. You might have even better luck with a less well-known engine, like www.ixquick.com or www.clusty.com, or a directory, like www.about.com

Use specific keywords - don't waste your time searching for sites with 'the' or 'by' on them. Just enter in a list of words that would be found only on the kind of site you're looking for. Nouns are generally better than verbs or adjectives for this.

Use four or five keywords - two keywords will probably give you way too many hits, most of which won't be very useful. On the other hand, ten words is too specific - you'll miss out on perfectly good sites that don't happen to have one or two of them.

Check out the advanced options - if you know very specifically what you're looking for, most search engines will let you do a boolean search.

Cheque yore spilling - if you're really not getting good results, try an alternate spelling or look the word up in the dictionary

Bookmark a site

A bookmark is just a way of storing links in your browser. It can save typing out the address or searching for sites that you go to often.

In Internet Explorer - go to the site you want to bookmark. Go up to Favorites → Add to Favorites. If you're on a shared computer, make a folder to keep your links in.

In Netscape - go to the site, then go up to Bookmark → Add. Again, you'll want a separate folder for your links if anyone else is using the computer.

Useful Sites

Research / reference

en.wikipedia.org - a user-edited encyclopedia - anyone can edit any entry!

encarta.msn.com - a more conventional encyclopedia which is also free.

www.howstuffworks.com - has understandable but reasonably detailed articles on everything from carburetors to cd drives to muscles.

www.dictionary.com - guess what this is. Go on, you'll never guess.

www.epinions.com - consumer product ratings - look before you buy

www.straightdope.com - debunks (and sometimes confirms) myths, urban legends, and other dubious stories

www.odci.gov/cia/publications/factbook/index.html - detailed statistics and reports on every country in the world. Put out by the CIA.

Free email

mail.yahoo.com

www.inbox.com

www.hotmail.com

www.mail.com

www.gmail.com

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Fun & entertainment

www.rottentomatoes.com - compiles movie reviews from all over the internet, and lets members post their own reviews

www.comics.com - a collection of popular newspaper comics, with free access to one month of archives

www.gamespot.com - walkthroughs, reviews and previews of video games.