

“There is massive consumer demand in this country for sex with kids. And it has never been more blatant or more normalized than today in this era of the Internet. We are paying a price as a society because of it.”

~Ernie Allen President & CEO, National Center for Missing & Exploited Children



A Parent’s Guide to Online Safety

(Much of this material has been provided by the U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. The information was prepared from actual investigations involving child victims, as well as investigations where law enforcement officers posed as children.)

Online exploration opens a world of possibilities for children; however, it also makes them vulnerable to being exploited sexually. There are individuals who attempt to sexually exploit children through the use of online services and the internet. Parents and children should remember that a computer-sex offender can be any age or sex: the person does not have to fit the caricature of a dirty, unkempt, older man wearing a raincoat to be someone who could harm a child.

Some of these individuals gradually seduce their targets through the use of attention, affection, kindness, and even gifts. These individuals are often willing to devote considerable amounts of time, money, and energy in this process. They listen to and empathize with the problems of children. They will be aware of the latest music, hobbies, and interests of children. These individuals attempt to gradually lower children’s inhibitions by slowly introducing sexual context and content into their conversations.

There are other individuals, however, who immediately engage in sexually explicit conversation with children. Some offenders primarily collect and trade child-pornographic images, while others seek face-to-face meetings with children via online contacts. It is important for parents to understand that children can be indirectly victimized through conversation, i.e. “chat,” as well as the transfer of sexually explicit information and material.

Children, especially adolescents, are sometimes interested in and curious about sexuality and sexually explicit material. Because they may be curious, children/adolescents sometimes use their online access to actively seek out such materials and individuals. Sex offenders targeting children will use and exploit these characteristics and needs. Some adolescent children may also be attracted to and lured by online offenders closer to their age who, although not technically child molesters, may be dangerous. Nevertheless, they have been seduced and manipulated by a clever offender and do not fully understand or recognize the potential danger of these contacts.

Minimize the Chances of an Online Predator Victimizing Your Child

1. Talk to your child about sexual victimization and potential online danger. Warn children about potentially dangerous people who may try to befriend them online.

2. Set guidelines for how your child uses the computer and cellphone. At a minimum, guidelines should include:

Instruct your children:

- ✓ Recognize that I will be checking your email, Instagram (etc.), contact list, chat room conversations regularly, with and without you being present, not because I don’t trust you, rather because I don’t trust those who seek to harm you through taking advantage of your innocence and your momentary lapses in judgment.
- ✓ Turn off the computer when you aren't using it.
- ✓ Cover your webcam when not in use.

- ✓ Be suspicious. Don't open attachments without independently verifying that they were sent from someone you know.
- ✓ If your computer has been compromised and you are receiving extortion threats, don't be afraid to talk to me.
- ✓ Never arrange a face-to-face meeting with someone you meet online without my permission.
- ✓ Never post pictures of yourself through the internet or cellphone to people you do not personally know. And, never post a picture to anyone that you would not want the whole world to see—once it leaves your cellphone or computer, anyone has access to it.
- ✓ Never give out identifying information, such as your name, home address, school name, or telephone number to anyone whom you have never met personally.
- ✓ Never download pictures from an unknown source, as there is a good chance there could be sexually explicit images.
- ✓ Never respond to messages or postings that are suggestive, obscene, belligerent, or harassing.
- ✓ And, ALWAYS remember that whatever you are told online may not be true.

3. Keep the computer in a public space in your house, not your child's bedroom. It is much more difficult for a computer-sex offender to communicate with a child when the computer screen is visible to a parent or another member of the household.

4. Use parental controls provided by your service provider or blocking software. GetNetWise.com is provided as a public service by Internet corporations and public interest organizations. It offers search engines for kids that don't bring up unwanted sites, free downloadable filtering software, and information about kid-safe browsers. *While parents should utilize these mechanisms, they should not totally rely on them.*

6. Electronic chat rooms are prowled by computer-sex offenders. Use of chat rooms, in particular, should be heavily monitored.

7. Spend time with your children online. Have them teach you about their favorite online destinations. Same for their cellphones: review with them their contacts—do you know them all? Actively review with them the apps on their phones. Always maintain access to your child's online account and cellphone accounts.

8. Find out what computer safeguards are utilized by your child's school, the public library, and at the homes of your child's friends. These are all places, outside your normal supervision, where your child could encounter an online predator.

Understand, even if your child was a willing participant in any form of sexual exploitation, that he/she is not at fault and is the victim. The offender always bears the complete responsibility for his or her actions.

You can learn more at these sites:

<https://sos.fbi.gov>

<http://www.netsmartz.org>

<http://www.nimby.me/protecting-our-children>

You can help stop human sex trafficking in the Lehigh Valley by becoming involved with VAST; visit our website: www.vast.ngo