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Online predators: What you can do to minimize the risk

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When children use Internet communication tools such as [chat rooms](#), e-mail, and [instant messaging](#) they risk interaction with online predators. The anonymity of the Internet means that trust and intimacy can develop quickly online. Predators take advantage of this anonymity to build online relationships with inexperienced young people. You can help protect your kids if you are

aware of the risks related to online communication and if you're involved in your kids' Internet activities.

Continue reading to get answers to your questions about how online predators work, who is at risk of being victimized by online predators, how you can help to reduce the risk of your child becoming a target, and more.

Related Links

- [Are your kids addicted to the Internet?](#)
- [Help your kids deal with hateful content on the Internet](#)
- [A parent's guide to online safety: Ages and stages](#)
- [10 things you can teach kids to improve their Web safety](#)

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How do online predators work?

Predators establish contact with kids through conversations in chat rooms, instant messaging, e-mail, or discussion boards. Many teens use peer support online forums to deal with their problems. Predators often go to these online areas to look for vulnerable victims.

Online predators try to gradually seduce their targets through attention, affection, kindness, and even gifts, and often devote considerable time, money, and energy to this effort. They're aware of the latest music and hobbies likely to interest kids. They listen to and sympathize with kids' problems. To try to ease young people's inhibitions, they gradually introduce sexual content into their conversation or show sexually explicit material.

Some predators work faster than others and engage in sexually explicit conversations immediately. This more direct approach may include harassment or the predator might stalk the victim. Predators might also evaluate the kids they meet online for future face-to-face contact.

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Which young people are at risk?

Young adolescents are the most vulnerable age group and are at high risk from online predators. Young adolescents tend to explore their sexuality, move away from parental control, and look for new relationships outside the family. Under the guise of anonymity, they are more likely to take risks online even if they don't fully understand the possible implications.

Young people who are most vulnerable to online predators tend to be:

- new to online activity and unfamiliar with netiquette
- aggressive computer users
- the type to try new, edgy activities in life
- actively seeking attention or affection
- rebellious
- isolated or lonely
- curious
- confused regarding sexual identity
- easily tricked by adults
- attracted by subcultures apart from their parents' world

Kids feel they are aware of the dangers of predators, but in reality, they are quite naive about online relationships.

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How can parents minimize the risk of a child becoming a victim?

- Talk to your kids about sexual predators and potential online dangers.
- Young children should not use chat rooms—the dangers are too great. As children get older, direct them towards well-monitored kids' chat rooms. Encourage even your teens to use monitored chat rooms.
- If your children take part in chat rooms, make sure you know which ones they visit and with whom they talk. Monitor the chat areas yourself to see what kind of conversations take place.
- Instruct your children to never leave the chat room's public area. Many chat rooms offer private areas where users can have one-on-one chats with other users—chat monitors can't read these conversations. These are often referred to as "whisper" areas.
- Keep the Internet-connected computer in a common area of the house, never in a child's bedroom. It is much more difficult for a predator to establish a relationship with your child if the computer screen is easily visible. Even when the computer is in a public area of your home, sit with your child when he is online.
- When your children are young, they should share the family e-mail address rather than have their own e-mail accounts. As they get older, you can ask your Internet Service Provider (ISP) to set up a separate e-mail address, but your children's mail can still reside in your account.
- Tell your children to never respond to instant messaging or e-mails from strangers. If your children use computers in places outside your supervision—public library, school, or friends' homes—find out what computer safeguards are used.
- If all precautions fail and your kids do meet an online predator, don't blame them. The offender always bears full responsibility. Take decisive action to stop your child from any further contact with this person.

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How can your kids reduce the risk of being victimized?

There are a number of precautions that kids can take, which include:

- Never download images from an unknown source—they could be sexually explicit.
- Use [e-mail filters](#).
- Tell an adult immediately if anything that happens online makes a child feel uncomfortable or

frightened.

- Choose a gender-neutral screen name that doesn't contain sexually suggestive words or reveal personal information.
- Never reveal personal information about themselves (including age and gender) or information about their family to anyone online; never fill out online personal profiles.
- Stop any e-mail communication, instant messaging conversations, or chats if anyone starts to ask questions that are too personal or sexually suggestive.
- Post the family online agreement near the computer to remind children to protect their privacy on the Internet.

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How can you tell if your child is being targeted?

It is possible that your child is the target of an online predator if:

- **Your child or teen spends a great deal of time online.** Most children who are victims of online predators spend a lot of time online, particularly in chat rooms, and may close the doors to their rooms and be secretive about what they do when they go work on their computer.
- **You find pornography on the family computer.** Predators often use pornography to sexually victimize children—predators can supply things such as Web sites, photos, and sexual e-mail messages as a way to open sexual discussions with potential victims. Predators might use photos of child pornography to convince a child that it is normal for adults to have sex with children. You should be aware that your child may hide pornographic files on disks, especially if other family members use the computer.
- **Your child or teen receives phone calls from people you don't know, or makes calls (sometimes long distance) to numbers you don't recognize.** After a predator establishes contact with your child online, some online predators might try to contact young people to engage in phone sex or to try to set up a real-world, face-to-face meeting. If children hesitate to give out their home phone number, online sex offenders will provide theirs. Some even have toll-free 1-800 numbers, so potential victims can call them without their parents' knowledge. Others will tell children to call collect—and then, with Caller ID or Call Display, the predators can easily determine the child's phone number. Do not allow your child to meet a stranger they have met online, in person, without your supervision.
- **Your child or teen receives mail, gifts, or packages from someone you don't know.** It's common for offenders to send letters, photographs, and gifts to potential victims. Online sex offenders even send airline tickets to entice a child or teen to meet them in person.
- **Your child or teen withdraws from family and friends, or quickly turns the computer monitor off or changes the screen if an adult enters the room.** Online predators work hard to drive wedges between kids and their families and often exaggerate minor problems at home. Sexually victimized children tend to become withdrawn and depressed.
- **Your child is using someone else's online account.** Even kids who don't have access to the Internet at home might meet an offender while online at a friend's house or at another public place, even the library. Predators sometimes provide victims with a computer account so they can communicate.

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What can you do if your child is targeted?

- If your child receives sexually explicit photos from an online correspondent, or if she or he is solicited sexually in e-mail, instant messaging, or some other way online, contact your local police. Save any documentation including e-mail addresses, Web site addresses, and chat logs to share with the police.
- Check your computer for pornographic files or any type of sexual communication—these are often warning signs.

Monitor your child's access to all live electronic communications, such as chat rooms, instant

- messaging, and e-mail. Online predators usually meet potential victims in chat rooms at first, and then continue communicating with them through e-mail or instant messaging.

Source: Some of the above information was adapted, with permission, from the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation publication A Parent's Guide to Internet Safety.

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