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Internet Safety: What Educators Need to Know

Educators must help parents understand the potential dangers that exist on the Internet and provide the same degree of oversight they would provide for any other activity in which their child is involved.

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by Charles Favata

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It's an unfortunate reality: With each new form of technology that emerges come people who wish to exploit it. And although the Internet may seem safe and anonymous, it is anything but that for unsuspecting young people.

From Main Street to the Shopping Mall

I can think back to the time when, as a child, I went shopping with my parents. We traveled downtown to a store on Main Street. We parked in front and entered through the front (and only) door. There were familiar faces all around the store. I played in the toy section while my parents shopped, and when they were finished they called for me. I came running and we went home.

Fast forward to today's vastly different world: That store on Main Street has been replaced with a shopping mall. There are multiple entrances, large parking lots, and superhighways close by. And rather than familiar faces, there are strangers all around. Can you imagine allowing your child to go play while you shop in this setting?

Of course not! What parent isn't all too aware that, in a sea of strangers, a predator can be anywhere?

Unfortunately, however, too many parents do not understand that the Internet is the cyberspace equivalent of a shopping mall, and their middle school son or daughter may well be the predator's target.

During the past year we have read and heard of many cases involving youngsters falling prey to unscrupulous people who they have met in chat rooms. Between fiscal years 1996 and 2005, the FBI's Innocent Images National Initiative database reported a 2,026 percent increase (yes, that number is correct!) in the number of cases opened. As educators, we have a responsibility to help parents learn to take ownership of their children's online activities and to help young people understand the dangers that lurk online.

What Parents Need to Know

Seemingly benign conversations on the Internet can be anything but benign. A simple

phrase can give a predator all the information he or she needs to trace a victim. Every youngster knows not to give personal information to strangers, but this message has been lost when it comes to using the Internet. A predator knows this, and therein lays the danger.

When it comes to changing attitudes we can act individually, locally, or nationally. With the explosion in the number of cases where adolescents are exploited on the Internet, we need to consider a national paradigm shift—a shift from a climate of unawareness to one of ownership. Parents everywhere must understand that they can no longer adopt an attitude of “technology is not my thing.” The attitude today must be, “technology is an ever-present part of my life and to not be aware of the problems it can cause for my child constitutes negligence on my part.”

Electronic White Pages for Predators. Gathering new members at the rate of 150,000 teens a day, the Web site MySpace.com is now the top gun when it comes to online postings. Unfortunately, many of the young people who post on this site think that only their friends will be looking at their information. The reality is, with 50,000 predators online at any given time, it is not a stretch to label this site as the electronic version of the white pages for predators.

The age-old practice of taking pictures, having them developed, hiding them from parents, and showing them only to friends has been replaced. Now students use a digital camera or cell phone to take pictures and then post them on the Internet for everyone to see. While “www” is short for World Wide Web, an equally accurate translation might be the Whole World is Watching.

The Primary Targets. The most targeted person on the Internet is a 15-year-old girl. That’s because 15-year-olds are old enough to venture out on their own to meet someone, but they are not old enough to have a means of escape, such as a car.

Everywhere I speak, students share the same top two reasons why they believe they will not be “caught” by an Internet predator:

1. I put down bogus information; and
2. I made my site private.

Unfortunately, predators know the format used for creating such supposed bogus information. Girls—the primary target of predators by an almost two-to-one margin—lie about their age, adding an average of three years. Boys do the same. Youths also are not consistent in their fabrications. They may give a false place of residence but list the name of their school, or they might lie about their age but provide their actual date of birth or current grade level.

Anything but Anonymous. As far as making their listing private, most youngsters fail to realize that the URL listing contains their name or the screen name they used when they registered. Some students will actually use their first and last names—or more commonly their AIM screen name. This name can be tracked and, more often than not, leads to other sites such as friendster.com and xanga.com, where information cannot be blocked. In addition, even when a search leads to a blocked site, the cached information to be found there is not blocked.

Other youths who think they have avoided including anything personal will do just that by including, for example, a picture of them wearing clothing that identifies their school, a sports team, or some other organization to which they belong. These little mistakes can provide predators with all the information they need to begin tracking their target.

What Parents Need to Do

On more than one occasion, parents have told me that their child claims they are invading his or her privacy when they look at what he or she has posted online. The reality is that, by posting on a site like MySpace.com, youngsters have given up all rights to privacy. In addition, parents should know that they can register on MySpace.com and use the "Help" menu to find instructions on how to delete or modify what their child has posted.

Needless to say, the first and best approach parents can take is to sit down with their child, talk about the real dangers that exist in cyberspace, and make modifications to what appears on the Web site together.

It also can be useful to go to the Megan's Law listing for their area (to find state listings visit the KlaasKids Foundation Web site at <http://klaaskids.org/pg-legmeg.htm>) so their child can see the number of sex offenders living in their immediate area. Parents cannot emphasize enough to their child the fact that while the Internet can be fun it also can be dangerous. When a youngster posts on a site such as MySpace.com, it's not just his or her friends who are looking. The Whole World is Watching.

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For more information, go to www.chuckfavata.com.

Also at NAESP.org:

- **Principals See Risk in Popular Social Networking Web Sites**

Recent reports about teens and even preteens being stalked or abducted by predators who obtained personal information that the students provided on Web sites such as MySpace.com, Xanga.com, and LiveJournal.com have many elementary and middle school officials worried about the safety of their students.

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