

How do online predators work?

from <http://www.bewebaware.ca/english/OnlinePredators.aspx>

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, however, 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 are aware of the latest music and hobbies likely to interest kids. They listen to and sympathize with kids' problems. They also try to ease young people's inhibitions by gradually introducing sexual content into their conversations or by showing them sexually explicit material.

Some predators work faster than others, engaging in sexually explicit conversations immediately. This more direct approach may include harassment or stalking. Predators may also evaluate the kids they meet online for future face-to-face contact.

Which young people are at risk?

Young adolescents are the most vulnerable age group and are at high risk of being approached by online predators. They are exploring their sexuality, moving away from parental control and looking for new relationships outside the family. Under the guise of anonymity, they are more likely to take risks online without fully understanding the possible implications.

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

- new to online activity and unfamiliar with "Netiquette"
- 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. In focus groups conducted by the Media Awareness Network, girls aged 11 to 14 initially said they disguised their identities in chat rooms. They admitted, however, that it was impossible to maintain a false identity for long and eventually revealed personal information when they felt they could "trust a person."

Building this "trust" took from 15 minutes to several weeks - not a long time for a skillful predator to wait.

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

- Get involved; talk to your kids about sexual predators and potential online dangers.
- Young children shouldn't use chat rooms, period - the dangers are too great. As children get older, direct them towards well-monitored kids' chat rooms. Even your teens should be encouraged 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. Chat rooms offer users one-on-one chats with other users - so chat monitors and other users can't read these conversations.
- 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.
- 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.
- For places outside your supervision - public library, school, or friends' homes - find out what computer safeguards are used.
- Make sure you have rules about meeting Internet friends in person; a parent must be told if a meeting is being planned and a parent should be in attendance at the meeting. Rules do make a difference. Research by the Media Awareness Network in 2005 shows having a rule about meeting online acquaintances (which 74 per cent of households have) reduces the likelihood of this happening by one-half.
- If all precautions fail and your kids do meet an online predator, don't blame them. The offender always bears full responsibility.

How can your kids reduce the risk of being victimized?

There are a number of precautions to take, including:

- never downloading images from an unknown source - they could be sexually explicit
- telling an adult immediately if anything happens online that makes them feel uncomfortable or frightened
- choosing a gender-neutral screen name that doesn't contain sexually suggestive words or reveal personal information
- never revealing personal information (including age and gender) to anyone online and not filling out online personal profiles

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.
- *You find pornography on the family computer*
Predators often use pornography to sexually victimize children - supplying it to open sexual discussions with potential victims. Predators may use child pornography to convince a child that adults having sex with children is "normal." You should be aware that your child may hide pornographic files on diskettes, 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*
Online predators may try to contact young people to engage in "phone sex," or to try to set up a real-world meeting. If kids hesitate giving 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, they can easily determine the phone number.
- *Your child or teen receives mail, gifts or packages from someone you don't know*
It is common for offenders to send letters, photographs and gifts to potential victims. Computer sex offenders even send airline tickets to entice a child or teen to meet them.
- *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, often exaggerating 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 may meet an offender while online at a friend's house or the library. Predators sometimes provide victims with a computer account so they can communicate.

What can you do if your child is being targeted?

- If your child receives sexually explicit images from an online correspondent, or if she or he is solicited sexually, contact your local police. You can also report incidents to the Cybertip! hotline at <http://www.cybertip.ca>. For more information, see the Reporting Trouble section of our Web site.
- 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 messages and e-mail. Online predators usually meet potential victims in chat rooms at first, and then continue communicating with them through e-mail.

Does Canadian law protect children from online predators?

Some forms of online harassment are criminal acts under Canadian law. Under the Criminal Code, it is a crime to communicate repeatedly with someone if your communication causes them to fear for their safety or the safety of others. In 2002, Canada enacted legislation targeting criminals who use the Internet to lure and exploit children for sexual purposes.

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. It has been rewritten for Canadian audiences with the assistance of the Ottawa-Carleton Regional Police Service's High Tech Crime Team.