

Internet Safety (Predators)

The term “online predator” often conjures up the image of a creepy older man at a computer screen waiting to lure an unsuspecting child. The media reinforces this depiction, which is problematic because it does not fit with the kinds of risky relationships that are more common for kids and teens or necessarily follow Internet safety statistics. In reality, when online sexual solicitation does occur, it’s more likely to be between two teens, or between a teen and a young adult. The following information serves to clear up these misconceptions and helps to showcase some of the Internet safety facts by providing information for teachers about the myths and realities of online sexual solicitation, as well as guidance on how to approach this sensitive topic.

Thinking Beyond “Online Predators” & How to be Safe on the Internet

1. Teens, not children, are most likely to receive online sexual solicitations. Online solicitors rarely target younger kids. This happens more frequently to younger teens (ages 14 to 17). People who solicit online are often upfront about their intentions. They may ask teens to talk about sex, to give out personal sexual information, to send sexy photos online, or to meet offline for a possible sexual encounter.
2. A teen is more likely to be solicited online by another teen or a young adult. Contrary to popular belief, teens are more likely to be solicited online by similarly aged peers. It is true, however, that a very high majority of sexual solicitations online come from boys or men. Guiding teens to think more generally about avoiding risky online relationships, rather than telling them to fear predators, prepares them for the wider breadth of situations they may have to deal with online—not only the extreme cases.
3. The “predator-prey” label gives the wrong impression. There is a range of behaviors that are not made clear by the predator-prey label. The behaviors can range from “not as risky” (i.e. receive inappropriate spam through email and immediately send to their junk mail) to “very risky,” (i.e. seek companionship or friendship on an online chat room, and develop an ongoing, risky relationship with a stranger).

In the most extreme cases of online solicitation – those involving older adults and teens – targets are usually aware of their solicitor’s true age and intentions. For the small percentage of teens who find themselves in this kind of situation, simply warning them against “unwanted contact” is not an effective strategy because they have likely grown to be comfortable with, and perhaps even dependent upon, their solicitor. Instead, we need to help teens understand why

it is risky to flirt with people they meet online, how to recognize warning signs, and more broadly, why romantic relationships between teens and adults are unhealthy.

The Truth About Risky Online Relationships

Many adults fear that kids use the Internet to connect with strangers. In reality, most kids and teens use the Internet to keep in touch with people they already know offline, or to explore topics that interest them. Studies show that it is most often teens who are psychologically or socially vulnerable that tend to take more risks online (Subrahmanyam and Šmahel, 2011; Ybarra et al., 2007). These at-risk teens might seek reassurance, friendship, or acceptance through relationships that they develop online — in chat rooms, online forums, etc. The term “grooming” is sometimes used to describe the process of an older adult coaxing a young person into sexual situations. For cases involving children, grooming may involve befriending the child, showing interest in his or her hobbies, exposing the child to sexually explicit material, and manipulating a child into a sexual encounter (Lanning, 2010). The term is less commonly used for cases between teens, or between a teen and a young adult. Research also shows that teens who flirt and engage in online sexual talk with strangers— especially in chat rooms – are more likely to be solicited for sex (Ybarra et al., 2007).

What Should Kids and Teens Know if Online Strangers Contact Them?

Elementary School:

Discuss with kids what it’s like to have a “gut feeling” about an uncomfortable situation. You can use a traffic light analogy (green = okay, yellow = iffy, red = risky) to help kids assess different online scenarios (e.g., if someone asks for a photo, talks about inappropriate things, asks them to keep anything a secret, bothers them, says something that makes them feel sad or upset). You might be tempted to lean on typical “stranger danger” messaging here, but do consider that these situations may also happen with people kids know or sort of know. Emphasize to students that they have the power to end conversations and log off the Internet at any time, and to not let shyness or embarrassment prevent them from talking to a parent or family member if they get into an iffy or risky situation. This approach can apply beyond grooming to issues like cyberbullying and online scams, too.

Middle School and High School:

We recommend avoiding fear-based messages with teens, as research indicates that teens are less responsive to this approach (Lanning, 2010). Teens are not likely to buy into the idea that they should avoid all contact with anyone they do not know online. After all, it is nearly impossible to connect with others online without talking to some people who are strangers. Rather than telling teens to never talk with strangers, it is more effective to have conversations about why certain online relationships are risky, and about how to avoid them. The number one thing for teens to remember is that they should avoid flirting with or regularly talking to online strangers or online acquaintances, especially – but not only – if the person they are chatting with is older than they are. Teens should also reflect on these questions if they communicate with someone they meet online:

- Has this person asked to keep anything about our relationship a secret?
- Has this person hinted at or asked about anything sexual?
- Have I felt pressured or manipulated by this person?
- Do I feel true to myself – sticking to my values – when I communicate with this person?

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