Advice for Parents

Common sense and vigilance on the part of parents, says Jim McLaughlin, will go a long way toward ensuring that your child does not fall prey to an abuser on the Internet.

First, parents need to know which children are most likely to be at risk. Adolescents in general are more vulnerable than younger children because, in their typical quest for identity and independence, they are less apt to accept parental oversight. In addition, children with few friends or relatively little involvement in sports or other extracurricular activities are more likely to be vulnerable.

Beyond these, there are some specific guidelines for parents that may be helpful in reducing the risks:

· Come to a clear agreement with your child about computer use. This should include a clearly stated limit on the hours of use, a well-understood restriction on access to chat lines (the most common venues for offenders), and a strict rule against revealing personal or family information (addresses, phone numbers, etc.) or -especially - any photographs of the child. Check your local school's Web pages to make certain your child's photo is not published there without your permission; as such photos have been abused by offenders in the past.

· Do not rely on computer software (like the commonly used Net Nanny) designed to filter out offensive material. These systems are not adequate to keep up with the proliferation of new sites and can often be disabled by a computer-savvy child.

· Make it clear to your child that reporting unwanted or suspicious solicitations will not lead to further restrictions on computer use.

· Be aware that restricting your child's e-mail correspondents to a prescribed list of friends and schoolmates is no guarantee against abuse. There is no sure way of knowing, at any given time, who may be sitting behind the keyboard at the other end.

· Be aware of, and do your best to monitor, the restrictions that apply at locations other than your home where your child may have computer access: school, the library, a friends home.

· Take note of the warning signs that an offender may be manipulating your child. These include secretive use of the computer, any evidence that computer histories are being deleted, unexplained telephone charges, hang-up calls, unexpected mail, and any signs that your home may be under surveillance by an offender.

· Finally, if you are not computer-savvy, you may want to take an introductory course so you'll know enough to monitor your child's Internet use.

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