

## **Internet Safety**

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*As appeared in a forensic newsletter (2010).*

Let me start off by taking you back to the “good ole days,” or at least what members of the older generation call that period of time they grew up, including me. A time when our jeans were big around the ankles (bell bottoms) and not the waist. A time when we wore our jeans around our belly button and not on the southern hemisphere of our buttocks. A time when you could see the child molester approaching and not some hidden person on the other side of a computer screen.

We all know long lists of safety tips which we learned when we were children and we in turn have taught our children. We look both ways before crossing the street. We buckle our seat belts before we start moving. (I am sure everyone reading this always buckles up before moving.) Don’t touch a hot stove. Don’t talk to or take candy from strangers. The list goes on and on.

Because of the world we live in now, there is another safety lesson which is imperative we teach our children. This is how to properly and safely use the internet. The internet can be a wonderful thing and can make life much easier than it was in “the good ole days.” Along with the good things provided by the internet, there are also many dangers associated with the internet.

I recently talked to a large group of kids ranging from the ages of nine to twelve. I talked about the internet and social networks like Facebook. They were already very knowledgeable about the internet and a lot of them already had Facebook and MySpace accounts, even though you are not allowed to have a page until you are fourteen years of age. On the same token, they were not aware of many of the potential dangers of the internet.

In this article I will be talking about safety items to think about when using the internet. Hopefully, some of the items will not only be useful to your children, but will be useful to you as well. At the end of the article, I will also recount a true story on which I worked; and, with a bit of luck, the story will drive home the point of safety on the internet.

The first thing to remember is what the “www” stands for when we go to any web site. The “www” stands for “world wide web.” This implies exactly that, once something is put on the internet, it is accessible to the whole world. Anything that is put on the internet can never be taken back. It will be out there forever, even if it is erased from your computer. A child needs to understand if they send a picture over the internet they can never get it back. They might send it to certain people, but the picture can still be

accessed by anyone who puts any effort into the task. Do not send anything you would not want the whole world to see.

For adults and children, you should be cautious about posting information on the internet. Remember anything on the internet is stored somewhere and can be used in the future. A child should never post their date of birth, social security number, and other indentifying information. The DOB, social security number, and other informational items about the child can actually be used for the bad guy to steal their identity. This has become common place because the bad guy is taking fewer chances of getting caught. By the time the child is old enough to realize someone has stolen their identity and ruined their credit, the bad guy is long gone. The child now has to start out his/her independence by fighting to restore what he/she never had.

The fact to drive home is that the internet is the new way for predators to meet children. They can now do this from the privacy of their home and not be hanging out at the playground in a trench coat. The bad guys are very patient and can wait months to meet a child. They will go through the grooming phase with the child. During this time they will learn as much as they can. They will tell a child whatever they want to hear. When the child talks about his/her parents being evil, the bad guy will, of course, agree with the child and tell the child they would never make them clean their room.

The child should be cautioned about putting additional information about themselves on the internet, such as the school they are attending. This is hard because we want them to take pride in their school, but if the bad guy is trying to find the child then they now have more information by which to locate the child. Also, when the child puts pictures on the internet, they need to look at the picture closely to make sure there is no indentifying information. An example of this would be the child playing out in the front yard of their house with their parents. The child is proud of the picture and wants to put it on Facebook. Seems innocent enough, but by reviewing the picture the house number also appears in the picture. The bad guy now has more ways of finding the child. You get the picture.

My personal recommendation is to stay out of the chat rooms. This is the easiest way for the bad guy to get access to your child. Chat rooms are designed for people with like interests to talk to each other and in principal is a good way to meet new people. The bad guy knows this and also hangs in the chat rooms where the child might be searching for a new friend. The parents can also be in chat rooms or on Facebook giving out too much information. Bad guys use parents to get information because parents love to talk about their children.

Awhile back I attended a class about catching on-line predators. After learning how to work this type of case, we basically hung out in chat rooms waiting for someone to make contact with us. There were eight students in the class. We all had upwards of fifteen chat rooms opened at a time. The first question asked by the bad guy was a/s/l. This is slang for age, sex, location. All of us were playing the role of a 13-year old girl, or

younger. The fifteen chat rooms for each of us were people who continued to talk to us after we told them we were juvenile females.

I had one person who talked to me for over five hours. During this time he told me all kinds of unmentionable things he wanted to do to me or who he thought was a 13-year old female. We finally set a time and place to meet. It is not unusual for kids to agree to meet face to face with a person they met on-line. There are many statistics and horror stories which illustrate this activity.

When my bad guy showed up he was arrested for the things he said to me or me as a child, on-line. The great thing was telling him I was the person he had been talking to for the entire chat. The person thought he was meeting a 13-year old female; and, after he was arrested, we located handcuffs, ropes, and blindfolds in his car. He had intended to kidnap who he thought was a young girl.

The point to make is that it does not matter how many times a child talks to another person on-line and it does not matter what the person says on-line. The person on the other side of the computer is still a stranger until that first meeting. We have to make sure no meeting like the one above occurs.

You can find more information and statistics to make it easier to talk to a child about internet safety just by going, where else, the internet. You can also obtain tools from the internet which will monitor and report to the parent any unusual or possibly dangerous internet usage. The internet is a great tool for us all, but just like anything else we have to teach our children to be safe, even if we are not around.

Remember the four R's to tell your children -

- Recognize techniques used by online predators to deceive their victims
- Refuse requests for personal information
- Respond assertively if you are ever in an uncomfortable situation while online – exit the program, log off or turn off the computer
- Report to a parent or other trusted adults any suspicious or dangerous contact that makes you uncomfortable