



What you don't know can hurt kids

Parents must understand online tools to protect their children

By Bob Sullivan
MSNBC

Many safety guides for children using the Net read as if they were written by Robert Fulghum. Everything I ever needed to know to stay safe in the virtual world, I learned in the real world. Don't go scary places by yourself. If someone is making you uncomfortable, just leave, and tell your parents. Don't look at pornographic pictures, and you won't have to worry about them. But most important — don't talk to strangers, and never give them personal information.

Unfortunately, it's not that simple.

If it were simple, you wouldn't hear repeated stories of FBI raids collaring dozens of pedophiles who swap files — and hunt for children — online. There wouldn't be thousands of cases of Internet-related child luring tracked by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. And 1 in 5 children wouldn't be telling the Justice Department that they'd received an unwanted sexual advance in surveys.

It's not simple because strangers online are hard to identify, since the Net is the land of make-believe. And just as kids are often better than their parents at playing make believe, they're often better at keeping up with technology, too. They speak a language -- the text message language -- their parents can't understand. And so, they can get away with murder, and, tragically, so can Internet predators.

What to look out for

Some parents are tempted to dismiss the problem as no different from your teen-age son sneaking a peek at Playboy — on paper, or online. It's just a chance to see explicit images. No big deal.

Partly true, experts say. The problem is not nudie Web sites. Most of those require credit card numbers, anyway.

"Pictures don't hurt kids," said Parry Aftab, author of "A Parent's Guide to the Internet." Aftab also runs WiredSafety.org. "People hurt kids As long as parents think the only real risk is the kids will see adult sex content, they won't do anything."

The real threat to children is people who lurk in chat rooms and Internet Relay Chat (IRC) channels who hope to lure your child into having online sex or a face-to-face meeting. It's impossible to say how many pedophiles there are lurking on the Net, but if you doubt the severity of the problem, log on to almost any IRC channel. You're unlikely to last 60 seconds without being propositioned.

Former U.S. customs agent Marcus Lawson once pretended to be young boys or girls for a living. He arrested about 30 pedophiles a year — as big a caseload as he could handle. When MSNBC interviewed him, he was working an IRC "dad-daughter sex" channel. There were 73 users. ("Hmm. He wants to know if my daughter has breasts yet. I'll tell him no.")

"I don't think the Internet has created more pedophiles. It's removed the societal stigma that kind of kept people in check," he said. "Before the Net, pedophilia was a lonely business. Now 24 hours a day, seven days a week, you can validate yourself, find hundreds and hundreds of people who

will tell you there's nothing wrong with having sex with children."

So the real trouble for your kids begins not with information coming into your computer but with what goes out of your computer. The problem is what your child says in e-mail, posts to a bulletin board or writes in a chat room.

And Aftab says parents have an entirely new set of online issues to worry about. She calls it cyber-bullying, and it works like this: a vengeful classmate might sneak a compromising photo of someone else -- perhaps illegally drinking at a party -- with a camera-equipped cell phone, then threaten to put it on the Internet unless some form of payment is made.

In other cases, Aftab says, victims of real-world bullying turn the tables, and publish explicit materials about others online. In one situation, Aftab consulted with a mother who found pictures of her 9-year-old twin daughters posted on a sex-related Internet site. The poster was angry at the mother and seeking revenge.

"It's the kind of thing we used to do on bathroom walls, only this bathroom is seen by 700 million people," Aftab said.

Use technology to fight technology

Many authorities suggest using technology to combat technology. Aftab recommends parents regularly Google their children's names, nicknames, even addresses, to see if anything unsavory has been posted about them. Others recommend filtering software which limits the things kids can do online, and the information they can reveal about themselves.

About 75 percent of the parents responding to an informal MSNBC survey conducted three years ago said they'd consider using software to limit their child's ability to communicate with others over the Internet. Filtering software like NetNanny, for example, can be set to prevent children from even typing personal information such as their name, address and phone number. But users were evenly split over whether they'd read their child's e-mail, as the FBI suggests in its Parent's Guide to the Internet.

"I HONESTLY wonder if most of you realize what you are saying when you say read your kids e-mail," said David Weaver on bulletin board that was hosted by MSNBC.com. "Reading a kid's e-mail is like: Reading normal mail they send Eavesdropping on all their conversations Picking up another phone line when they are on the phone."

One response: "Hands off parenting is not the answer. Blind trust and faith are why you see kids pictures on the back of milk cartons. Now, keep in mind I am not going to go through all their mail every night. They should just be prepared to answer for anything if and when I do."

But while three-quarters of MSNBC respondents said they'd consider technological help, few parents actually use it -- under 5 percent, according to some surveys. These programs work in a variety of ways, but generally either block your computer from a predetermined set of yucky Web sites; limit your computer to a predetermined list of Web sites; or block individual Web pages with offensive words. It's easy to see the limitations of all three, and apparently parents have, too.

Aftab, who thinks filtering software can be an aid for parents, says some mistakenly believe the software is too technical to use or easy for clever kids to foil. Or they shrug and say, "I trust my kid."

But experts say parents often aren't really aware of the extent of the trouble their kids can get in on the Internet. That's why Seattle police detective Leanne Shirey starts her seminars for parents by posing as a 14-year-old girl in an AOL chat room. She then lets parents watch as a pedophile "grooms" her. There's never a need to fake the demonstration.

"The problem is we educated kids before we educated the parents," Shirey said. "Some of these

people I see have never turned on a computer. They have to understand that even if they don't have a computer at home, they have to have rules."

Baltimore County Public Schools Internet safety coordinator Della Curtis said a survey of parents in the 104,000-family district showed that most don't know what their children are doing in school with the Internet, and that lack of information is a chief cause of anxiety.

"I know of one parent who ... took the keyboard with her when she left the home," Curtis said. You might call that filtering hardware.

Not terribly constructive. Here's a collection of suggestions from several experts that's a little more practical:

There is no substitute for keeping up with the technology. Don't shrug or say it's beyond you. If it is, ask your children to train you. That will make sure you keep up with them.

Learn how to examine your Web browser's "History" files, or cache. Even if you don't do it, make sure your children know it's possible for you to know where they've been.

Look around your desktop, start menu or applications folder for suspicious programs.

Keep abreast of all your child's e-mail accounts; understand that free Web e-mail may allow your child to have plenty of e-mail accounts you don't know about.

If your child will chat, take some time to come up with an alias, or fake name. Aftab even suggests you give them a fake address and phone number so, if they're being harassed, they have a way of vacating the situation.

Play around in Usenet and IRC chat rooms so you can talk to your children intelligently about them, and perhaps decide to ban their use. Contact your Internet provider to see what kind of Usenet groups are available.

Of course, the Robert Fulghum-style advice is useful. Do the things you would normally do in the real world. Get to know your children's cyberfriends — certainly don't let them meet anyone in person without your attendance. Because in the end, computers don't hurt kids: People hurt kids.

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