

## Protecting Your Child from Sexual Predators

- Dr. Yvonne K. Fulbright

Is your child vulnerable? With over 21 million under-18-year olds online (Pew Internet study, 2005), virtual reality has become a haven for the estimated 50,000 sex predators crawling the internet at any given time (NetSafe). Their goal: to seduce your child for sex. And they've been a busy bunch in their appetite for the underage. Total sales of child sexual abuse images for 2004 alone were estimated at \$20 billion.

So how do you protect your children from internet perverts? Can a sexual predator's profile work to your advantage? And what are the warning signs that your child is being played upon?

The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children holds that 1:5 youth are the victim of an indecent online proposition. And it's likely more. Less than 10% of unwanted advances actually get reported to authorities. A major component of this is disconnect in the home.

Seventy percent of unwanted sexual solicitations occur on a youth's home computer, according to a Youth Internet Safety Survey. Over 75% of these are not reported to the child's parents. How is this so? While 71% of parents think their youth's internet surfing is for academic purposes, according to NetAlert, only 23% of teens confirm such. They're busy doing other things online.

Almost all unwanted sexual solicitations involving teens take place in a chatroom or via instant messaging. The child who makes for easy prey is the one who...

- is vulnerable, depressed, feeling isolated, and lonely.
- feels disconnected from you, the parent.
- is emotionally or intellectually lagging in maturity.
- has poor grades.
- has been the victim of prior sexual abuse.

So who's doing the soliciting? When I think sex predator, I have this stereotype of the creepy looking pizza delivery man. You know, the dim, greasy-haired, slob with thick glasses and a poor complexion, who likely spends most of his off-hours playing video games or watching porn. Unfortunately, it's not that easy to spot who has predator potential. It could be almost anybody, and male or female for that matter.

At a 2005 Congressional hearing, an FBI Behavioral Sciences agent testified that sex predators tend to be white men in their thirties and forties with above average intelligence (that last factor kills the pizza guy presumption). A combination of other factors should also raise a red flag, like premature separation from the military or limited dating experiences. Unfortunately, in knowing nothing about these strangers, it is difficult for us

to assess these popular profile characteristics. So you need to be proactive in protecting your child.

You need to train your child to spot trouble. You need to talk about sex predators *before* your child is approached. You begin this discussion by letting your youth know that there are people who make up lots of things and who want to touch their body and hurt them. Explain that you don't really "know" the people you meet online – that everyone is a stranger and that you *never* give your contact information. You also want to highlight the tactics sexual predators use in interacting with youth online.

According to Stephen Dean of "Sexual Predators," major warning signs are that:

**Predators lie about their age.**

Most predators will say that they are in their thirties. This age range makes them less intimidating to youth. They're not as old as the youngster's parents. Rather they're closer in age to one of their icons. The predator will also likely state that s/he is too old to be chatting with a kid, even suggesting that the child should be talking to someone her own age. The age difference will often be justified, however, with the claim that the predator is a school bus driver or teacher, making them "safe."

**Predators will "groom" their prey.**

In grooming, a predator is friendly and uses flattery and statements of support in gaining the child's trust. They will compliment the child's appearance, focusing on specific physical attributes. Many are careful, using a subtle approach, e.g., offering them money and gifts. They are willing to take weeks or months to win over a victim, often grooming several at the same time.

**Predators will play on one's self-esteem.**

Predators realize that kids feel insecure, self-absorbed, and vain. So they try to build a youth's self-esteem, fighting teen anxieties by giving them a great deal of attention. They also focus on things kids like, taking an interest in hobbies that appeal to kids.

**Predators will not post or send their pictures.**

And if they do, then their heads are conveniently chopped off. They will, however, ask the child to post pictures of themselves. They may also show your youth pornographic images.

**Predators ask inappropriate questions.**

They want to know if your child is a virgin. They will ask how far your teen has gone sexually with a partner. They'll ask if your kid has ever seen someone have sex or masturbate in front of a webcam. More "innocently," they'll ask if your child has a sibling or if there's the off chance your child is really a police officer or working with the police.

**Predators will talk about sex.**

They boast about sexual techniques and promise to “teach” their victim. Know that their main goal in the first exchanges is to keep the child talking. In doing so, they’ll change the subject often, but will continually revisit sex. They’ll also focus on oral sex if intercourse is too threatening.

**Predators will propose meeting offline.**

A predator will first express interest in calling or exchanging text messages instead of pubic chats. They will then ask if your child’s parents are home or when the child will be alone. If things go awry, they will often threaten to “tell on you.” A youth needs to be reassured that it is safe for them to tell their parent or a trusted adult that they have been threatened in this way.

Even after outlining all of this to your youth, you need to constantly pay attention to their online activities and exchanges with others. Look out for situations like your child:

- Getting suspicious gifts or money.
- Having unexplained phone or credit card charges.
- Displaying secretive or changed social behavior.
- Turning the computer monitor off quickly when you approach.
- Taking an excessive number of sick days.
- Giving sudden importance to a non-relative adult, e.g., is frequently offered rides.

In further protecting your youth, keep your computer in an open area of the home, not in your child’s bedroom. Instruct your teen not to post their schedule on the internet. No one should know his routine. Take issue with your teen having an older boyfriend or girlfriend. Make it unacceptable that they would get involved with an adult.

Exercise a level of control over your youth’s use of the phone and email. Check print outs of his phone history or her text messages. When it comes to the internet, realize that kids may have multiple user names and email accounts. Many parents only know of one to inspect.

Lastly, maintain open communication with the parents of your child’s friends, even if you don’t like them. All of you need to work together on monitoring your children’s activities and whereabouts.

I know this piece has an alarmist tone, but this is not an issue to take lightly. Your child is your most treasured gift and you need to do everything you can to protect your child. The intense experience of virtual reality can feel real to a youngster. They can succumb to somebody posing as a friend, somebody who wants to harm them. While this is a tough issue to talk about, it is by far one of the most important conversations you’ll ever have with your child.

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