

Using the Internet

The internet is a valuable resource that allows us to access knowledge and information from all over the world. The internet has also made it easier and cheaper for people to communicate with each other. However, along with these great uses of cyberspace (the internet), there are some risks and dangers involved for children, youth and adults.

What Are The Risks?

The Media Awareness Network conducted a survey in 2005 that found that, although parents tend to view the internet as a source of information, youth use it as an interactive communication tool. This means that parents aren't always aware of the potential risks of Internet use.

Social Networking sites

Websites that build communities and connect people with others are known as "social networking sites." Examples include LiveJournal, Blogspot, Facebook, MySpace, Nexopia, Bebo, Hi5, Orkut and more. Most of these websites include a standard "profile" page where people put up information about themselves, such as their birthday, interests, activities, pictures, journal entries, etc. Using these sites can be a lot of fun and a great way to communicate with friends. Unfortunately, these sites also carry certain risks which users should be aware of:

- ~ Pictures can be in cyberspace forever. People can easily save your online pictures onto their computer, even if you think they're only online for a couple of days
- ~ Social networking sites, such as Facebook, keep your profile information on their server, including messages you send with friends (nothing is private!)
- ~ Facebook states, "We cannot and do not guarantee that the 'User Content' you post on the Site will not be viewed by unauthorized persons."¹ This means that anyone can access your profile, even if you set it to "private" (Nexopia, Bebo, Blogspot, MySpace and other sites have similar privacy policies)
- ~ "By using Facebook, you are consenting to have your personal data transferred to and processed in the United States."²
- ~ These sites can collect information about you from other sources
- ~ Sites you use collect your IP address and make this address available to other users (An IP address is a set of numbers that each computer that uses the Internet has. When people know your IP address, they can trace what city you live in and even specifically where your computer is.)

Many users believe they can protect themselves from these risks by making sure their profiles are "private," that is, viewable by only specific people. Even the most diligent social network user, however, is vulnerable to these risks. As Facebook's policy states, "no security measures are perfect or impenetrable."³

Internet Predators

Online predators try to gradually seduce youth through giving them attention, affection, kindness and even gifts. Through this process (also known as "grooming"), predators often spend a considerable amount time, money, and energy. They're aware of the latest music and hobbies likely to interest kids. They listen to and sympathize with kids' problems. Often, teens use "peer support" online forums to deal with their problems. Predators may lurk in these online areas to look for their next vulnerable victim.

They also try to ease young people's inhibitions by gradually introducing sexual content into their conversations or by showing them sexually explicit material.⁴

Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying is using technology to deliberately hurt other people. It can include insulting someone through email, instant messages, web sites or blogs, stealing passwords and pretending to be someone else, and building websites to target specific people.

Many examples of cyberbullying, such as stealing passwords and building entire websites to hurt someone, are against the law. People who are caught cyberbullying others can be charged, suspended or expelled from school.

Staying Safer

The following are some guidelines youth and their parent figures may wish to follow to keep themselves safer on the internet.

For parents and other caring adults:

- ~ Keep the computer in an open, shared space.
- ~ Do not revoke internet privileges. This will only prevent your children from sharing information with you.
- ~ Talk to your children about their internet use - what sites do they use and why.
- ~ Acknowledge that there are many advantages to using the internet.
- ~ Know that when it comes to internet predators, the best way to protect youth is by talking to them about romance and sexuality, and particularly about healthy/unhealthy relationships.⁵
- ~ Develop a list of "rules" for online behaviour with your children. When developing this list, avoid making rules your children must follow. Instead, open a conversation with children about what rules they think are fair. Ask them to sign the rules after they are made and use them as a "contract" for behaviour that everyone in the family, including you, must follow. Some examples of "rules" may include:
 - ~ don't post anything you wouldn't want anyone else in the family to see;
 - ~ don't post pictures you'd be uncomfortable with anyone in the world having;
 - ~ don't send any emails that contain gossip or rumours about other people;
 - ~ ask for permission before posting photos of people online;
 - ~ do not give your password out to anyone;
 - ~ other rules which you brainstorm with your children.

Reporting

If you suspect you may be speaking with an internet predator, you can make a report to your local police department by asking to speak to a detective from the Internet Child Exploitation Division. You can also make a report to the website, cybertip.ca. This website is Canada's National Tip Line for reporting the online sexual exploitation of children.

Who to talk to

If you experience cyberbullying or internet exploitation, it may help to talk to someone you trust. There are other resources you can access:

SACE 24-Hour Sexual Assault Crisis Line:

780- 423- 4121

Distress Line (24 Hours): 780-482-HELP (4357)

Edmonton Police Service: 780-423-4567

Further Information for Educators

For more information or an internet safety presentation, contact the Sexual Assault Centre of Edmonton at 780-423-4102 during business hours.

1 <http://www.facebook.com/policy.php?ref=pf> (accessed 2008)

2 <http://www.facebook.com/policy.php?ref=pf> (accessed 2008)

3 <http://www.facebook.com/policy.php?ref=pf> (accessed 2008)

4 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Online_predator#cite_note-myths-1 (accessed 2008)

5 "Online 'Predators' and Their Victims: Myths, Realities, and Implications for Prevention and Treatment" by Janis Wolak, David David Finkelhor, and Kimberly J. Mitchell (American Psychologist, 2008)

