

# Internet Safety

Article courtesy of the National Child Safety Council of Jackson, MI

## **Predators**

Although the Internet did not create child predators, it has significantly increased the opportunities predators have to meet victims while minimizing detection. They can communicate with children anonymously through instant messaging, social networking sites, chat rooms, message boards, and even cell phones.

Online predators do not fit any one mold or stereotype; seemingly upstanding citizens have been caught enticing children for sexual acts. Contrary to popular belief, most online predators are not pedophiles. Pedophiles target pre-pubescent children, while online predators typically target adolescents who engage in risky online behavior.

## **Grooming:**

Predators take advantage of children's natural vulnerabilities, such as their desire to appear adult or their need for attention. "Grooming" is the process through which predators play on these vulnerabilities by offering children gifts and attention.

It does not happen overnight. Grooming can be a long process that a patient, tenacious predator has planned and perfected to gain a child's trust. This grooming may lead to the child's willingness to meet the person with whom he or she is chatting. Offenders will often entice a child into a face-to-face meeting by

- Exploiting a child's natural curiosity about sex
- Lowering the child's inhibitions by gradually introducing explicit images and child sex abuse images
- Using his or her adult status to influence and control a child's behavior
- Offering attention and affection
- Betraying a child's trust by manipulating his or her emotions and insecurities

## Guarding Against Predators

Children who experience online victimization may not share personal details with their parent or guardian right away, but there are warning signs that can help identify a child who has faced a situation of online victimization. Parents and guardians should keep in mind that not all children are being groomed by older predators; children may have sexual encounters with peers and older teens. However, any adult seeking a sexual encounter with a minor is considered a predator. If a child comes to you with a disclosure of exploitation, reassure him or her that talking to an adult is the right action to take and divert any blame away from the victim.

## Warning Signs of Grooming or Exploitation in your Child

- Spends an excessive amount of time on the computer
- Becomes angry when he or she cannot get on the computer
- Withdraws from family and friends
- Minimizes the screen or turns off the monitor when you come into the room
- Inappropriate images or websites on the computer
- Strange phone numbers on your telephone bill
- Gifts in the mail from someone you don't know, such as webcams or cell phones

## **TIPS**

Help protect children from predators

There is no greater risk to a child's safety than an online predator who wishes to meet in person. Help teach your children to identify predators' methods for online enticement.

- Your child should NEVER meet face-to-face with anyone they first met online without your permission and/or attendance.
- Take an interest in your child's online activities and know with whom he or she is communicating.
- Teach your child to refrain from talking about sex with anyone they meet online.
- Do not hesitate to ask questions, especially if your child is acting suspiciously.
- Teach your child not to reveal personal information.
- Approve all photos and videos before your child posts them online. Make sure they do not reveal identifying information and are not sexually provocative or inappropriate.
- Look for warning signs. If you feel your child is in danger, make a report to [www.cybertipline.com](http://www.cybertipline.com) and contact your local law-enforcement agency immediately.

## **DISCUSSION STARTERS**

Start a discussion with your child

Use these discussion starters to get an Internet safety conversation going with your children. The more often you talk to them about online safety, the easier it will get, so don't get discouraged if they don't respond immediately!

- What do you know about online predators?
- Have you ever met anyone online who asked you to meet face-to-face?
- What would/did you do if someone asked to meet you in person?
- Has anyone ever tried talking to you online about inappropriate or sexual things? What did you do?
- How might someone online try to gain your trust?
- Why might someone online want to gain your trust? What are the possible risks of trusting them?
- Why is it important that you come to me if someone makes you feel uncomfortable online?

You can find more facts and topics at [www.netismartz.org](http://www.netismartz.org)