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**Internet Predators: Parents, Monitor Your Children!**

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Internet sexual exploitation of children is a growing risk. Parents must be alert and take action to monitor their child's safety. At times, parents may worry that they are sending out a message to their child that they don't trust them. Not true! Monitoring their iPhone or computer usage is not an invasion of privacy -- it's protecting your child from adults who are aggressively trying to manipulate, seduce and harm them. Parents *do* know better. Three recent sexual assault cases involved [adults posing as teenagers](#) and sending inappropriate or sexually explicit messages to children, two girls and a boy. The police authorities have advised parents to review the social apps that their child uses and the chat rooms that they visit to ensure their safety.

Online exploration opens many possibilities for children as they navigate the worldwide web. Children are often more computer savvy than their parents, making supervision a challenge. Parents need to be aware that there are individuals who attempt to sexually exploit children through the use of the internet. These individuals may be any age or sex. Some of these individuals try to seduce children through the use of attention, affection, kindness and even gifts. They listen to and empathize with the problems of children. They are in tune with the latest songs and games. These predators gradually try to lower children's inhibitions by slowly introducing sexual content into their conversations. Other predators immediately engage in sexually explicit conversation with children. They may try to solicit pornographic images or seek face-to-face meetings. Internet offenders manipulate young people into criminal sexual relationships by appealing to their desire to be appreciated, understood, take risks and find out about sex.

Younger teenagers are a particularly vulnerable population, as they are beginning to explore their own sexuality and have an interest in sex, romance, adventure and independence. According to the Crimes Against Children Research Center, each year, [1 in every 25 children receives an online sexual solicitation](#) where the solicitor tried to make offline contact.

**Signs that your child may be at risk:**

- Your child spends large amounts of time online, particularly at night

- You find pornography on your child's computer or iphone
- Your child receives phone calls from adults you don't know, or is making calls to numbers you don't recognize
- Your child receives gifts from someone you don't know
- Your child turns the monitor off or changes the screen when you come into the room
- Your child becomes withdrawn from the family

### **What A Parent Can Do to Help:**

- Talk to your child about the sexual victimization and online danger. Keep the conversation going; use media cases as "teachable moments" to reinforce your concerns about their safety
- Keep the computer in a common room in the house, not the bedroom
- Utilize parental controls and blocking software
- Find out what computer safeguards are used in their schools, library and in their friends' homes
- Understand that even if your child was victimized, it is not their fault. The offender bears complete responsibility for their actions

### **Special Tips for Teens**

- Be smart about what you post on the Web and what you say to others. It is a lot more public than it seems
- Provocative and sexy names and pictures can draw attention from people you don't want in your life
- Posting or sending sexy photos of yourself can get you into big trouble with the law. If you are underage, they may be considered child pornography, a serious crime. You also have no control over where the photos are sent once you send them
- Be careful what you download or look at. Some images are extreme, and once you see it it's in your mind forever
- Adults who talk to you about sex online are committing a crime. So are adults who meet underage teens for sex. Some teens may think it's fun but it is serious trouble and best to report it to the police
- Be careful if you go to meet someone you met on the internet. You may think you know them well, but you don't. Go with a friend; tell your parents. Meet in a public place. Make sure you have your cell phone and an exit plan

Keeping children safe on the internet is challenging. The best strategy is to work with your child on making good choices. Should you think your child is being targeted you should contact your local or state law enforcement agency, the FBI or the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children for help. For more information visit: [http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/investigate/vc\\_majorthefts/cac/crimes\\_against\\_children/](http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/investigate/vc_majorthefts/cac/crimes_against_children/). The Guardian Angels published a Cyber Safety Guide for Parents that I highly recommend. You can access it at [www.cyberangels.org](http://www.cyberangels.org). For more information about keeping your child safe visit [www.nyspcc.org](http://www.nyspcc.org).