

Dangers Overblown for Teens Using Social Media 6.4.07

BY ANASTASIA GOODSTEIN, 11:57AM

I remember the first time I watched Dateline NBC's *To Catch a Predator*, a TV series where they snared sexual predators using online venues. It was a train wreck — the kind you can't keep your eyes off of. These predators were so creepy and so dumb. Some of them were lured into the trap more than once by the "Dateline" decoy. I also remember thinking, "If I was a parent, this would scare the crap out of me."

Even before "To Catch a Predator," I began seeing stories about schools blocking blogging site Xanga. Yep, before MySpace became the media's target, teens were getting into trouble on Xanga and other sites. The stories were always the same — the media would write a story about how much information teens put online and talk about cyber-bullying causing parents to panic.

The main source of this panic was fear of stranger-danger. Law enforcement or some other well meaning Internet safety educator would then be brought in to talk to parents. Most of these talks

would focus on Internet risks and stress the importance of not posting any personal or revealing information. Parents would go home and talk to their teens, especially girls, and scare them into taking down photos or anything that might lead one of these creepos to hunt them down and show up after school one day.

The problem with this message is that it's both fear-based and divorced from reality. When I set out to write *Totally Wired*, I wanted to write a book for parents that would be a "voice of reason" in the midst of negative headlines and sensational stories about everything teens do that's wrong or dangerous online. I didn't want to gloss over any of the negative — I talk about cyber-bullying, hooking up, pornography, and bloggings that are pro-anorexia and bulimia. The dark stuff is in there. But so is the reality: Most teens aren't talking to strangers online. They're just socializing with the same friends they see in person at school or met at summer camp.

Teens are also using technology to express themselves creatively, making their own MySpace layouts and videotaping skits to post on YouTube. They use the web to connect with other teens who share their interests, whether it's in vegetarianism or videogames. The Internet simply reflects and magnifies what teens have always done offline.

The biggest myth that has been perpetuated by well meaning law enforcement, Internet safety advocates, and the media is that the Internet is teeming with predators who are waiting for your child to post just enough information so they can find them and abduct them. In "Totally Wired," I relied on this stat: "Out of the 800,000 kids that are reported missing each year by the Justice Department, only 150 cases involve 'stereotypical kidnappings,' in which a child is taken by a stranger, held for ransom, or killed." Now there is new data from some of the lead researchers in the field that is putting online stranger-danger in even more perspective and clarifying who is really at risk.

EXPERT PANEL DISCUSSES THE FACTS

Last month, the Advisory Committee to the Congressional Internet Congress invited a group of experts to discuss *The Facts About Youth Online Victimization*. The panelists were: danah boyd, a researcher at the University of California, Berkeley and fellow at the University of Southern California Annenberg Center for Communications; Dr. David Finkelhor, the director of the Crimes Against Children Research Center (CCRC) at the University of New Hampshire; Amanda Lenhart, senior research specialist at Pew Internet & American Life Project; and Dr. Michele Ybarra, the president of Internet Solutions for Kids. As I listened to the panel, I couldn't believe it hadn't received more media attention.

Dr. Finkelhor went through several revealing stats gleaned from law enforcement over the past couple of years about who is being victimized — and it's not who you would think. The predominant victims of online

sex crimes are not young children — they are teens. He also debunked the myth that these seductions involve online predators posing as other children to stage an abduction or assault. Most of these men (80%) were pretty open about their sexual intentions talking to teens who were talking back.

Who are the teens talking to these men? They're teens who most likely have been victimized either physically or sexually and/or have a troubled home life. Only 3% of these cases involved an abduction. In 73% of these crimes, teens had met the perpetrator on multiple occasions and have had multiple sexual encounters. In half the cases teens claimed they were "in love" with the adult. In a quarter of the cases, "victims" ran away from home to be with

these adults. This is a very different picture of who is at risk than a teen who simply posts their photo and the name of their high school on a MySpace profile.

That said, I understand that a random abduction — even if the chances are slim it will happen — is still every parent's worst nightmare. I'm not advocating that it's OK for kids or teens to put their first and last names, addresses, cell phone numbers or other information online. But I think it's essential to evaluate the risk realistically and respond proportionately. In order to do this, we need to overhaul the tone and message of Internet safety education being taught at parents' nights in schools, PTA meetings and other types of community events. We must tone down the fear factor and

focus on what teens are really doing online.

Even when we discuss cyber-bullying, we must put it in perspective. It's definitely causing lots of drama at school and sometimes can be so severe that it results in lawsuits or expulsions. But most of the time, teens are pretty good at blocking, ignoring or IMing back until the harassment stops or goes away. This doesn't mean we shouldn't talk about bullying prevention or how to respond; it just means we have to understand how teens view this issue and are responding to it as well.

danah boyd made a great point on the panel, saying we should invest in virtual outreach to at-risk teens online. Just like youth workers reach out to homeless

teens in the real world, we need more mental health advocates in these virtual public spaces who can spot red flags on MySpace profiles or an alarming entry on LiveJournal and post a comment asking if that teen is OK or stage some other kind of intervention.

I also think any community site that has a large teen audience (especially MySpace and Facebook) should build and promote an online resource area with hotline numbers and links to agencies. There should also be a way to flag other teens' profiles so a counselor can review it and decide if some sort of intervention is needed. Instead of spending time and money stoking parental fears, we should be engaging in a realistic dialogue about these issues and reaching out to teens who are most at-risk.