



# The Net is a circuit of safety concerns

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If you watch TV or read the news, you know sexual predators hang out on the Internet, looking for underage victims.

*Dateline NBC's* "To Catch a Predator" features men being lured by the promise of meeting underage girls. Several state attorneys general recently have called on social-networking sites MySpace and Facebook to ban registered sex offenders and make their sites safer. Newspapers have been filled with stories about the dangers children face when they post too much personal information. And victims have testified recently at congressional hearings.

Some worry that parents are falling victim to "predator panic" and overreacting to unlikely dangers, unintentionally turning children off to safety messages altogether.

"One of the misunderstandings that we think is widespread is that what sex offenders are doing is picking out kids (online) and stalking them and deceiving them and abducting them and raping them," says David Finkelhor, director of the Crimes Against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire.

"That's not what's going on."

Abductions by strangers are so rare that many experts can't name a single case in which a predator attacked after only seeing a child's profile online.

## 'Grooming' their victims

In most cases, predators seek out vulnerable teens — those who post sexually suggestive pictures of themselves, talk about sex online or frequent places where hook-ups are made, Finkelhor says. They spend weeks, even months, forging a relationship and gaining the teens' trust.

Usually, those who become victims eventually agree to meet the perpetrator face to face; often they know that the person they're meeting is older. But by the time they meet him (usually it's a man), they often think they are in love. It's a process called "grooming," Finkelhor says.

"It's the kids who respond to somebody and start talking about sex that puts them at risk — or kids who use sites to communicate with lots of people they don't know, or put very sexualized images online," he says.

The Internet allows predators "to form supportive relationships with emotionally vulnerable teens," says Nancy Willard, author of *Cyber-Safe Kids, Cyber-Savvy Teens: Helping Young People Learn to Use the Internet Safely and Responsibly*.

Though there are no comprehensive national annual figures on Internet crimes against children, Finkelhor says, overall sex crimes against children are down, with the notable exception of child pornography. Sexual abuse cases were down 51% from 1990 to 2005 — from 22.8 per 10,000 to 11.3 per 10,000 children, he says.

## Feeling safe doesn't make it so

Studies show that most teens feel relatively safe online. A Pew Internet & American Life Project report last month showed that though children, especially girls, who posted pictures of themselves on social networks were more likely to be contacted by strangers, only 7% of online teens said they had ever had an interaction with a stranger that made them feel scared or uncomfortable.

And a report out last year by Finkelhor's center found that from 2000 through 2005, the number of children ages 10 to 17 who received unwanted solicitations online declined from 19% to 13%.

But calls to the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children's hotline have been on the rise, says president Ernie Allen. In 2005, there were 2,660 reports of online enticement of children; in 2006, there were 6,374. In the first eight months of 2007, there were 9,533. Some of the increase can be attributed to greater Internet use and increased awareness of the hotline, Allen says.

He agrees that education is a key to Internet safety. But he

says the Internet does make it easier to prey on children.

"Just like in the physical world, those people who seek to prey upon kids go to where the kids are," Allen says. "We don't think the sky is falling, but there (are) adults hiding behind the relative anonymity of the Internet to try to achieve what they either can't achieve or can only achieve with great risk in the physical world. America's moms and dads really need to catch up."

Though it's good to educate children and parents about dangers, some experts worry that the message may backfire.

"If you are petrified of predators but are not worrying about cyber-bullies, loss of reputation, spending too much time online

and the other less frightening but more likely dangers of online use, then you are misplacing your energy," says Larry Magid, co-director of ConnectSafely.org. "You're petrified of something that's probably not going to happen and failing to pay attention to the dangers that are far more likely."

Allen says messages should be balanced, but parents do need to stay aware of the problems. "The good news is that the vast majority of America's kids are much smarter and much more aware. ...

"But the bad news is, there are a lot of (predators) out there who are still seeking, overwhelmingly for grooming and seduction. This remains a significant problem."

<b>The percentage of teens within each group who have been contacted by a stranger who made them feel scared or uncomfortable.</b>	
<b>Teens, by sex</b>	
All online	7%
Online boys	4%
Online girls	11%
<b>Teens, by behavior</b>	
Teens who have created a social networking site profile	9%
Teens who have not created a social networking site profile	5%
Teens who have posted photos online	10%
Teens who have not posted photos online	4%
<i>Source: Pew Internet &amp; American Life Project, based on data from Teens and Parents survey, 2006</i>	