



Victim Assistance Newsletter

Sexual Predators, Children and the Internet by Joseph Taussi

Recently, the news has had a number of high profile stories about sexual predators who target children, the Penn State and Syracuse University sports coaches being the most obvious examples. In both cases, the coaches used traditional methods of selecting their victims.

Prior to the modern digital age, victims were targeted through various means of personal contact. Often, the predator would seek out places where children were known to gather such as school yards or parks. In these cases, the predator might use some ruse to lure the child. For example, offering the child a treat or asking for help in finding a lost pet. In the examples above, the predators operated in target rich environments. They used their positions of authority as well as a common interest in sports to pick out vulnerable children to target. Some predators use volunteer work as a cover for their activities. They become scout leaders or camp counselors. Others may just be neighbors who have a "shared common interest" with their targets. One such case involved an adult male whose preferred victims were pre-teen males. He would befriend them while working on his restored car. Afterwards, he would invite the victims to see his gun collection. Eventually, he

would provide the young boys with alcohol and show them pornography. Finally, after having "groomed" these boys, he would attempt to have them engage in sexual acts with him.

Although these traditional methods of selecting victims continue to be used by predators, the internet and related technologies have allowed these offenders to change the way they target their victims. They have adapted these technologies to suit their purposes.

Today, predators conduct surveillances, not outside schoolyards, but in chat rooms and on social media sites like Facebook. They have access to potential victims through personal computers, smart phones, gaming consoles, E-readers, and tablets. Most, if not all, of the online social sites have searchable user profiles.



The predators can find personal information about potential victims from these profiles since many children are either unaware of the danger or have no concern for their safety. These devices, and others, as well as the numerous websites have allowed predators to expand their access from where they lived

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and/or worked to a much broader area, literally, the entire world.

Once a “successful” contact has been made with a victim, the predator will then proceed to befriend them and develop a more intimate relationship. The contact may then move to text messages, emails, or other more personal methods. A recent local incident involved an adult male contacting a juvenile female through “Skype” and requesting that she perform certain acts that he could watch via the Skype video connection.

In addition to these more personal



methods of contacting victims, newer electronic devices are portable and allow users to connect remotely. Monitoring their children’s on-line activity has be-

come much more difficult for parents. As a parent, it is your responsibility to protect your children to the best of your ability. It is important therefore to determine the potential risks associated with allowing your children internet access. One of the best ways to make these assessments is to communicate early and often with



your children about the internet and internet related activities. Go online with them and explore the sites they are interested in. Help them to recognize

and avoid potential dangers. Be especially aware of social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter and what information your child provides to these sites.

There are many resources to help parents recognize and deal with these issues.

Netsmartz411 is an online service provided at no cost by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children to answer questions about computers, the internet, and on-line safety. It can be accessed at www.Netsmartz411.org.

Another excellent resource is “A Parent’s Guide to Internet Safety” available at the following link: <http://www.fbi.gov/stats-services/publications/parent-guide/parentsguide.pdf>. An on-line search using any popular search engine such as Google will also lead to a great deal helpful information for parents and guardians.