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Bullying looming problem for kids online, survey suggests

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OTTAWA - More than half of Canadian parents think the Internet is safe for kids, but nearly 20 per cent of children under 13 say they've been bullied online, a survey released today suggests.

The result should be an urgent sign to parents they have to pay attention to what their kids do while online, said Karen Robbins, an online safety expert with AOL Canada.

The majority of parents let their children use the Internet unattended, she said, an alarming statistic considering there are numerous sexual predators and bullies lurking online.

`` The Internet, unfortunately, is a place where child predators can work," she said. `` This generation of kids are the first generation that are at risk simply by being online."

A survey conducted by Leger marketing indicated 83 per cent of parents aren't present when their kids are online and most don't know what sort of Internet-safety policies are in place at their children's schools or libraries.

But 14 per cent of children surveyed admitted they've chatted with strangers while online and nearly one-quarter have been pressured by friends to visit inappropriate websites.

A total of 634 parents as well as their children, between ages eight and 12, were interviewed for the survey, which was conducted between April 12 and 20. The results are considered accurate within 3.9 percentage points, 19 times out of 20. The survey was released to coincide with AOL Canada's third annual online safety week.

While many kids are technically savvy and often have a better understanding of the Internet than their parents, that doesn't mean they know how to handle abusive comments or recognize possible predators. Strangers often seek children online because they're vulnerable and may be tricked into believing they're talking to a peer, Robbins said.

`` The Internet wasn't created with child audiences in mind," she said.

But parents need to address online safety issues, especially considering more than 30 per cent of children surveyed suggested they spent at least one hour on the Internet every day.

One of the rising problems kids face when surfing online is being tormented by bullies, Robbins said. It's an issue her son has had to deal with and has affected nearly one-fifth of Canadian children under 13, the survey indicates.

Instead of being confined to the school yard or playground, bullies use instant messaging and other online tools to harass and say `` horrible things" to their peers, Robbins said. Part of the problem is that many kids don't know how to handle online bullying and don't realize they need to speak up to an adult, she said.

`` Kids also need to understand not to talk to kids they don't know and also, if they are being bullied online, to talk to an adult right away," Robbins said. `` Kids need to know it's not acceptable."

There are numerous simple steps parents can take to help keep their kids safe online, such as keeping the computer in a living room or other open area where they can supervise easily. Parents can also invest in child-friendly Internet services, which block access to inappropriate content. Simply telling children not to talk to strangers online is a valuable lesson that many parents may not realize is important to pass on before their children use the Internet.

``You need to have an Internet relationship with your child because it's an extension of the parenting you do with them," Robbins said. ``Kids need to know that parents care."

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