

So savvy, so vulnerable

FIRST IN A THREE-PART SERIES

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A 12-year-old girl finds a "friend" online -- who turns out to be a man looking to meet her for sex.

A photograph of a partially naked girl finds its way onto social networking sites, text messages and even a pornography web page.

A teen targeted by Internet bullies, taunted and humiliated by rumours and false information on websites and e-mails, takes his own life.

A teacher finds herself the target of an online poll, complete with abusive remarks and sexually charged language.

Do we really know what our kids are doing online?

Chances are your kids know a lot more about the brave new world of online communication than you do.

While young people have embraced and rely on computers, laptops, cellphones and text messaging to plug into their world, their bewildered parents just want to know how to keep them safe.

It's true -- most parents don't know what they're talking about when it comes to the Internet. And kids, constantly connected to each other, know it and sometimes exploit it.

Predators, in turn, are also finding ways to exploit them.

"The Internet has opened a whole new arena for abuse to occur," says Maureen Reid, chairman of the London Child Abuse Prevention Council.

Facebook, MySpace, MSN, text messaging, webcams -- the problem's scope seems overwhelming.

While the web has the potential to weave us into a state of profound confusion, there are ways to fight back and keep your kids safe.

Over the summer, two University of Western Ontario students were hired by the London, Ont., Child Abuse Prevention Council to investigate Internet safety and put together a guide aimed at kids helping, not parents to make rules, but kids to understand the dangers that exist online.

Their work will be presented to the local public school board, with the hope the program could be piloted in two or three high schools.

The project grew out of a recognition that kids don't want to listen to parents, and parents don't know the risks their children face when they log on.

The solution, they warn, isn't to just unplug the computer.

Young people, says Sarah Scanlon, one of the researchers "are lost if they don't have it," and to cut off online activities would ostracize them from their key social circles.

"There's a huge fear of being left behind," says Brendan McGeagh, who also worked on the project.

Social networking has become part of normal Internet use -- kids have to be connected. On the other hand, parents are often overwhelmed by the sheer number of potential dangers, and often have trouble starting a discussion on technology that their kids know more about.

The key, the project authors say, is to have kids teach kids how to be safe.

"The idea is to reach kids where they are at," says project leader Avril Flannigan.

Connecting on that level is important, Reid says, because, "it's not going to help for adults to go around telling kids 'this is what you need to be worried about.'"

Toni Watson, a learning co-ordinator with the Thames Valley District school board in Ontario, says she's curious about the new project. But the board already has several programs, aimed at kindergarten and up, focusing on safety and cyber-bullying, and continues to develop new ones.

What's clear, Watson says, is that kids are taken by the technology, so much so they may be more liable to take part in risky Net behaviour.

"These kids are so savvy on the one hand, but still so innocent on the other. With just a press of a button, who knows where they are?"

London police Const. John Jeffries says information left in cyberspace is "like feathers in the wind."

Once it's out there, it's impossible to guarantee images and information can ever be reclaimed. But kids don't understand that, he says.

Jeffries works with elementary school kids as part of a team of community safety officers that visits schools.

Kids often tell him they're "technically superior," that they have multiple Internet accounts for gaming and chatting. They sign up for Facebook or MySpace and lie about their ages.

They have computers in their bedrooms and parents don't watch what they do. They're talking to strangers from their own rooms.

"Kids don't realize when they're talking to somebody, (that) they don't necessarily know who they are talking to," Jeffries says.

"They need to safeguard who they are -- information about their personal facts, where they live, their phone number, giving out their e-mail, giving out little bits of information about themselves."

Jeffries says kids need to know they have to include their parents in their Internet lives.

"They're there to safeguard you. They are needed in the equation because of their experience -- even though they are not technically savvy, they know about safety."

Rob Nickel brings that message home in a little less than two minutes, pulling up a Web page and showing kids how easily someone can find out their personal information.

Nickel, from Cambridge, Ont., is in demand across the continent for his presentations to youth and parents about Internet safety. He was an Ontario Provincial Police officer for 14 years and the first officer to go undercover online on the Internet.

Kids, he cautions, "aren't trying to be rebels" when they're online. "They just don't think about it. My job is to make them think."

And parents have to take a role. "Kids want rules, believe it or

not, they need some guidance," he says.

MONDAY

Building defences: Tips for parents, kids

Someusefulwebsites

* www.bewebaware.ca comprehensive site examining all aspects of Internet safety.

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www.cyber-safety.comThe website of Rob Nickel, a former OPP officer recognized as an expert in Internet safety.

*

www.cyberbullying.caAn excellent Canadian site operated by Alberta school teacher Bill Belsey, full of tips and ideas to keep kids safe.

*

www.media-awareness.caA media and information resource for youth, it includes two reports on Internet use.

Big three dangers

Internet luring:

When adults, usually men, use the Internet to find children or teenagers to sexually exploit. They might request photographs, or webcam performances or arrange to meet the child for sex. Sometimes they pose as young people and groom a child for months. They find out personal information by searching material kids leave online. Child luring on the Internet has been a crime in Canada since 2002. Child pornography:

Any sexual depiction of a person under 18. That includes written material, photos and videos. There has been an explosion of available illegal material since the development of the Internet. Cyber-bullying:

The use of electronic communications to harass, intimidate or threaten someone. The harassment can be through websites, text messages and online rumour-mongering. A cyber-bullied child is six times more likely to feel unsafe at school.

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