

Myths about Online Predators

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Since the late 1990s, when use of the Internet by young people started to flourish, the media has presented a number of stories and programs that shine a light on the Internet predator problem. The media attention highlights to some of the ways predators use the Internet to lure adolescents into sexually abusive relationships.

A recent study of Internet crimes against children has provided us with some new information about some of the issues around this crime. Dr. David Finkelhor and the team at the Crimes against Children Research Center recently completed part two of a study for the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. The study relied on telephone interviews with 10 to 17 year-old youth. The interviews were conducted in 2000 and again in 2005.

In the first part of our article series about the new research about online predators, we discussed what we learned through this research about the victims of these predators. In this article we will look at what the researchers discovered about online predators that can help us identify them and interrupt their efforts to seduce our children.

Online sexual crimes against children and young people is not a new form of child sexual abuse, it is just a new medium for approaching the young people. This is consistent with the message that the Protecting God's Children® program has delivered about this issue from the beginning. In fact, the research shows that, just as the Protecting God's Children program has emphasized all along, these are primarily adult predators who use their grooming skills online to lure children into sexual relationships using many of the same techniques used by other predators in the lives of young people.

Online victims usually know they are communicating with an adult. In fact, the research shows that only five percent of online predators pretended to be teens when they set up meetings with potential victims. The victims of these predators often express love for their offenders and say they met with the predator because of promises of romance and love. When these predators are caught, they are usually charged with statutory rape because the victims admit they went willingly to meet with someone they thought they were attracted to.

Another myth about predators that is dispelled by the research is that these offenders are pedophiles. The people who prey on young people online generally do not fit the clinical profile of a "pedophile." They are not, for the most part, seeking out young children to victimize. In fact, it would be difficult for that to happen as young children are not as Internet savvy as adolescents, and their online activity is more closely monitored by parents and other responsible adults and they primarily use the Internet for games and activities, not for communication.

Many online predators do appear to have sexual urges for or an attraction to adolescent boys and girls. Although people with this compulsion are often characterized as "ephebophiles" or "hebephiles," these attractions are not characterized the same as pedophilia by mental health professionals because of the assumed sexual maturity of adolescents. However, this failure to diagnose the behavior as a psychological disorder

does not negate the illegal, immoral, and destructive nature of the behavior or somehow make it more appropriate or less criminal.

One interesting finding is that studies have shown that adult men seeking out adolescent girls online were generally less educated, had criminal histories, were prone to feelings of inadequacy, and were more likely to have “arrested psychosocial development.” Other online predators were patient and methodical in their grooming of potential victims. They take time to develop the relationship and move it toward sexual activity. As a general rule, they are not violent, impulsive, or aggressive.

These offenders are, however, more likely to possess and use child pornography. The growth of the Internet has made child pornography readily available. Before the Internet, possession of child pornography was a fairly low incident crime. Since the advent of the Internet, possession of child pornography has become a more general crime problem with an increasingly diverse collection of offenders. Currently, there is very little research as to how the availability of child pornography online has or has not impacted the scope of the problem of child sexual abuse.

The behavioral tools for recognizing a potentially risky adult in the environment is completely transferable to the Internet. The problems begin to arise when, for example, “always wants to be alone with children” means getting a child alone in a chat room or an instant message that can’t be monitored by parents or responsible adults. The new research reinforces the need for adults to talk with their children about these issues and let them know how online predators groom adolescent children for seduction. As parents and other caring adults, we must keep the lines of communication open with young people so that they are willing to tell us when something happens online that places them at risk.

The more we learn about online predators, the more competent we can become in protecting young people from this risk. Remember, it is everyone’s job!

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