



Lepage Associates
Solution-Based Psychological Services

Internet Predators
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Wondering what your teenager is doing on the computer? Years ago, in the confines of one's own home, parents of teenagers had only the television and the family telephone to be concerned about when attempting to keep their children safe. These days, an entire world is available to your teens at the tips of their fingers through another form of technology: the Internet. In many cases, this is a good thing. Teens can complete their homework assignments using information posted on the web. Children are more worldly than ever, having the opportunity to instantly pen pal with other children in far away countries where they learn about cultural differences. While the Internet should not replace face-to-face time with one's peers, teens also have safe opportunities to do what teens do best: chat with their friends.

At the same time, the Internet opens up equal opportunities for unwanted exposure to adults and even other teens with bad intentions, including sexual predators and pornographers. One child out of every 5 is a target for online sexual solicitation. Chat rooms are a primary location for this activity because predators can easily approach your child. Teens can sign up on websites like www.myspace.com (this website is merely mentioned as an example, numerous such websites exist) and post pictures of themselves (any pictures), enter chatrooms, post blogs, and more. Any other person can sign up on these websites, listing any age, and pretending to be anyone they want to be. Your teen can easily be approached by a sexual predator. Unknowingly your teen could have conversations with these individuals and could reveal information that could lead to a face-to-face encounter, either wanted or unwanted. Child pornographers lure children in by first exposing them to pictures of other children to lower their inhibition.

Parents need to get involved long before teens reach this point. Fortunately, parents have numerous choices about how to get involved. Here are some recommendations:

1. Research tells us that teens who engage in risky Internet relationships may have poor relationships with their parents. They may seek support from individuals on the Internet because they cannot receive that support from their family. It is never too late to rebuild a positive, supportive, and healthy relationship with your teen. Remember: quality not quantity.
2. Discuss with your teen or pre-teen the dangers that exist on the Internet. Tell him or her about strangers on the Internet in the same way you discussed not talking to strangers many years ago.
3. Establish Internet rules with your teen.
 - Tell them to never provide personal information to anyone over the Internet such as one's address or last name.
 - Tell them to never arrange a personal meeting with someone they meet over the Internet.
 - Guide them to choose their user names and email addresses carefully to not reveal age or too much identifying information.
 - Remind them that information sent over the Internet is not always private.
 - Tell them that you will want to know who they are corresponding with so that you can help them be certain of who is on the other side of the chatroom.

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4. Place limits on computer time. Think of time in front of the computer in the same way you do about television. Set limits on the total amount of computer and TV time each night. That will help to limit exposure to unwanted Internet activities as well as to encourage teens to create an engaging world away from the *screen*. Set a timer and stick to your decision.
5. Consider putting your computer in a public area in the home. A computer in a teen's room provides unrestricted access and limits your ability to monitor its use.
6. Finally, keep the door of communication open to your teen. Let her or him know that s/he can tell you if they are approached by someone asking questions that are uncomfortable. Or, if your teen made a mistake and corresponded with someone she or he thought was safe but now appears unsafe, encourage your teen to come talk to you about it to work it out.

Restricting Internet use entirely is not possible due to its accessibility in schools, libraries, and coffee shops. Arming your teens with information so that they can make healthy decisions is the best weapon. Many teens, who know what to be aware of, will make appropriate choices. However, if you suspect that your teen is caught in a risky Internet situation, act on it now. Report criminal activity to the authorities. Some parents have made the decision to eliminate Internet use entirely from their homes. Others have chosen to purchase wireless cards for their computers that they hand out for limited periods of time for teens to do homework. Parents can also review the websites that teens have visited or even restrict certain websites. Not computer savvy? Visit a local computer store to learn more ways to set healthy limits on Internet use.

Other sources of helpful information:

<http://www.aap.org/healthtopics/mediause.cfm>

http://www.apa.org/releases/online_sexabuse.html

<http://www.missingkids.com/adCouncil/>

<http://www.consumersearch.com/www/software/parental-control-reviews/>

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