



Internet Safety Education for Teens: Getting It Right

A growing number of people are promoting Internet safety education in an effort to help keep youngsters safe from Internet sex offenders. But some of the information in their lectures, pamphlets, videos, and web sites does not reflect what researchers have learned about the important features of these crimes.

Here are suggestions of how to make Internet safety education materials more consistent with current research.

Don't say: 1 in 7 youth is contacted by an Internet predator.

This most commonly used statistic from the widely cited Youth Internet Safety Survey (YISS) counts, "unwanted sexual solicitations," but many such experiences are probably not encounters with true Internet sex offenders. For example, many of the youngsters thought the solicitations were from other youth or just casual rude comments¹.

Do say: 1 in 25 youth in one year received an online sexual solicitation where the solicitor tried to make offline contact.

Four percent of the youth in the YISS received solicitations in which the solicitor made or tried to make contact with the youth offline via telephone, offline mail or in person¹. These are the online encounters most likely to lead to an offline sex crime.

Don't say: Internet predators pretend to be other youth to lure victims into meetings.

In the vast majority of Internet sex crimes against young people, offenders did not actually deceive youth about the fact that they were adults who had sexual intentions. Acknowledging that they were older, the offenders seduced youth by being understanding, sympathetic, flattering, and by appealing to young people's interest in romance, sex and adventure².

Do say: Internet offenders manipulate young people into criminal sexual relationships by appealing to young people's desire to be appreciated, understood, take risks, and find out about sex.

To warn youth and parents about these crimes, we need to educate them about the real dynamics, and how naïve romantic illusions make some young people vulnerable to adult offenders who use flattery and seduction.

Don't say: Internet predators lure children to meetings where they abduct, rape or even murder.

Although cases of abduction, forcible rape and murder have occurred, they are very rare. According to research looking at crimes ending in arrest, violence occurred in only 5% of cases. In most encounters, victims meet offenders voluntarily and expect sexual activity, because they feel love or affection for the person they have been corresponding with. Typically they have sex with the adult on multiple occasions. Most of these crimes are statutory rather than forcible rapes².

Do say: Although most victims go voluntarily to meet and have sex with Internet offenders, these are nonetheless serious sex crimes that take advantage of inexperienced and vulnerable young people.

It is important that people not discount the criminality of offenses where the youth participated voluntarily in sex or in initiating or concealing a relationship. Statutory sex crime laws in every state recognize the exploitative imbalance of power and experience that makes relationships between young teens and adults inappropriate. Youth and parents need to know that most Internet sex crimes have this dynamic, so they can accurately identify situations where such crimes may be occurring.

Don't say: Your 10-year-old's "Internet friend" may be a predator.

Virtually all cases of Internet sex crimes involve youth 12 and up². Most victims are ages 13 – 15. Younger children have much less interest than teens in interacting with and going to meet unknown persons they have encountered online. Avoid implying that the typical youngster vulnerable to online offenders is a young child.

Do say: Internet offenders target teens who are willing to talk online about sex.

While we need to help parents and younger children prepare for online situations they may confront as they get older, we should not unduly frighten them about criminals who are targeting adolescents rather than young children.

Don't say: Never give out personal information online.

Research has shown that simply posting or sending some personal information online does not put youth at risk³. The reason is that most young people (like most adults) do give out personal information. It is hard to be online without doing so. A warning that is so broad and runs counter to such common practices is not likely to make young people trust the source of such advice.

Do say: Be careful about who you give personal information to and what kinds of things you share.

Research says that talking about sex online with strangers is a big risk factor for encountering problems³. So is interacting indiscriminately with a lot of unknown people online⁴. Youth should be very cautious about how they respond to people who contact them. Other things that probably increase risk are giving out very personal or sexually oriented information, looking for romantic relationships online, and inviting contact from lots of people³.

Don't say: Don't have a social networking site or a personal webpage.

Research suggests that personal web pages are not in themselves dangerous³. Rather, the danger is when young people use these vehicles to portray themselves as interested in sex, romance, risk-taking, and open to interacting with people they don't know.

Do Say: Be very careful what you do with social networking sites or personal web pages.

It is useful to remind young people that many things they post for their friends may end up being viewed by others, and can prompt contact that could become a problem.

Do say: Boys can be criminally victimized online, too.

Research suggests that one quarter of victims of online offenders are boys². Frequently these are boys with sexual orientation issues who get into trouble while looking online for help and understanding they can't get at home or at school. This is a hard topic to talk about openly and sensitively, but parents, educators, youth and law enforcement officials need to understand that youth with sexual orientation issues are a particularly vulnerable group.

Do say: Using the Internet or a cell phone to send sexual pictures of yourself or friends can get you into trouble with the law.

Most youth do not realize that sexual pictures of themselves and other minors can constitute child pornography; its production and transmission are serious crimes. They may see such photos as romantic, fun, adventuresome, or even remunerative. Four percent of youth in the YISS survey said they got requests from online solicitors to take and send sexual pictures of themselves¹. Youth need to understand why this is a crime, and that people who ask for and transmit such pictures can get arrested as child pornographers and sex offenders.

Do say: Don't let friends influence your better judgment when you are online together.

Research suggests youth take more risks when they are online together with other youth¹.

Do: Target prevention education at teenagers in particular.

Research suggests that teenagers are the primary victims of Internet sex crimes and that common teenage vulnerabilities – interest in sex, romance, adventure, independence – are what gets them in trouble³. Parents can be helpful, but the research suggests that the most vulnerable youth are ones who are having conflicts with their parents. So we need to reach teenagers directly with messages that are credible. This means not talking down to them; being familiar with their culture; acknowledging their familiarity with the Internet; and respecting their developmentally appropriate aspirations for independence, new relationships and accurate sexual information.

¹Wolak J, Mitchell K, Finkelhor D. Online victimization: 5 years later. Alexandria, VA: National Center for Missing & Exploited Children; 2006. Available at: <http://www.unh.edu/ccrc/pdf/CV138.pdf>.

²Wolak J, Finkelhor D, Mitchell KJ. Internet-initiated sex crimes against minors: Implications for prevention based on findings from a national study. *Journal of Adolescent Health* 2004;35(5):424.e11-424.e20.

³Wolak J, Finkelhor D, Mitchell K, et al. Online "predators" and their victims: Myths, realities and implications for prevention and treatment. *American Psychologist* 2008;63 (in press).

⁴Ybarra ML, Mitchell KJ, Wolak J, Finkelhor D. Internet prevention messages: Targeting the right online behaviors? *Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine* 2007; 161(2); 138-145.

Crimes Against Children Research Center

The mission of the Crimes against Children Research Center (CCRC) is to combat crimes against children by providing high quality research and statistics to the public, policy makers, law enforcement personnel, and other child welfare practitioners. CCRC is concerned with research about the nature of crimes including child abduction, homicide, rape, assault, and physical and sexual abuse as well as their impact.

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INTERNET TIPS FOR TEENS

- 1) Be smart about what you post on the Web and what you say to others. The Web is a lot more public and permanent than it seems.
- 2) Provocative and sexy names and pictures can draw attention from people you don't want in your life.
- 3) Sexy pictures can get you into trouble with the law. If you are underage, they may be considered child pornography, a serious crime.
- 4) Be careful what you download or look at, even for a laugh. Some of the images on the Internet are extreme, and you can't "unsee" something.
- 5) Going to sex chat rooms and other sex sites may connect you with people who can harass you in ways you don't anticipate.
- 6) Free downloads and file-sharing can put pornography on your computer that you may not want and can be hard to get rid of. Any pornography that shows children or teens under 18 is illegal child pornography and can get you in big trouble.
- 7) Adults who talk to you about sex online are committing a crime. So are adults who meet underage teens for sex. Some teens think it might be fun, harmless or romantic, but it means serious trouble for everyone. It's best to report it.
- 8) Don't play along with people on the Web who are acting badly, taking risks and being weird. Even if you think it's harmless and feel like you can handle it, it only encourages them and may endanger other young people.
- 9) Report it when other people are acting weird and inappropriately or harassing you or others. It's less trouble just to log off, but these people may be dangerous. Save the communication. Contact the site management, your service provider, the CyberTipline or even the police.
- 10) Don't let friends influence your better judgment. If you are surfing with other kids, don't let them pressure you to do things you ordinarily wouldn't.
- 11) Be careful if you ever go to meet someone you have gotten to know through the Internet. You may think you know them well, but they may fool you. Go with a friend. Tell your parents. Meet in a public place. Make sure you have your cell phone and an exit plan.
- 12) Don't harass others. People may retaliate in ways you don't expect.
- 13) You can overestimate your ability to handle things. It may feel like you are careful, savvy, aware of dangers, and able to manage the risks you take, but there are always unknowns. Don't risk disasters.