

Lesson 4: Cyber Safety

October is National Cyber Security Awareness month. It's a time of year that helps us focus on learning new ways on how to stay safe online. But what exactly is “cyber safety”? It means ensuring you remain safe while using the Internet. There are many kinds of cyber crimes – cyber bullying, hacking, phishing, online identity theft. This lesson focuses on how to keep yourself safe from cyber-predators.

Activity:

1. Read the USA TODAY article *The not-so-long arm of the law*.
2. As a class, discuss the following questions: What is a “cyber-predator”? Why do Cyber-predators tend to prey on teenagers? How can you protect yourself against a cyber-predator?
3. Find a partner. In the article, one parent declares, “parents are the first line of defense.” Take on the role of the parents of a teenage daughter who loves her Facebook account and spends hours online every night. From your own Internet experience and from what you’ve learned about cyber security in the USA TODAY article, create a plan for protecting your daughter against cyber- predators. Be sure to include a rationale for why the plan will work.
4. Share your plan with the class.

Discussion:

The article finishes by stating that “29% of children admitted that their parents would not approve of their Internet activities – if they knew.” Take a similar poll in your classroom. Would you willingly follow your plan, regulating your own conduct online in order to ensure your safety against predators? Why or why not?

Cyber Safety

The not-so-long arm of the law

Cyber-predators have been invading homes across the country, so legislators have met the threat with a flurry of new laws to deter them. Yet even in this high-tech world, parenting is still the best way to protect a child.

By Julian Sher

Emily Vacher has seen more of the dark side of the Internet than most people. As one of the FBI's star undercover agents who go online posing as teenagers to nab child predators lurking on the Web, she has arrested dozens of men.

But these days, Vacher spends a lot of time in high schools and community forums warning teenage girls — and their parents — about a new threat: young people tricked into producing their own porn.

Older men disguise their true identity and age on popular social networking sites such as MySpace; they pretend to be a lonely girl's online "boyfriend" and seduce her into sending sexually graphic pictures they can use for their own pleasure, for profit or for blackmail.

"It's a trend, and it's scary," says Vacher.

Indeed, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) is finding that as many as 10% of children it has identified in child pornography images are older teens who take compromising pictures of themselves.

This new twist to Web crime should give pause to anyone who takes too much comfort from a flurry

of new proposals — from Republican Sen. John McCain to Democrats in the Connecticut Legislature — that promise to crack down on online predators.

Worthy as some of these efforts may be, there is simply no quick legal or technological fix to the social problem that Internet predators have become.

A reality check

If you're a parent who doesn't know the difference between YouTube and Yahoo, here's a reality check: Two-thirds of teens have a personal profile on social networking sites such as MySpace, Friendster, or Xanga. A survey by the University of New Hampshire's Crimes Against Children Research Center showed that a third of children ages 10-17 who use the Internet regularly had posted their real name, phone numbers or home address.

If you don't know what your child is doing online, the predators do. In the past three years, the Justice Department has seen nearly a tenfold increase in what it calls "cyber enticement" — resulting in close to 2,000 arrests. During a single week last month, NCMEC received 268 reports of "online enticement of children" — four times the number of weekly incidents from a year ago.

MySpace, and the politicians, are scrambling to play catch-up.

MySpace says its staff hunts through the 7 million images and videos that are posted every day for indecent images, and it shuts down about 30,000 profiles of underage users each week. When the company discovered late last year that hundreds of registered sex offenders were brazen — and stupid — enough to post profiles using their real names, it compiled a database of known violators to weed them out.

But that won't stop predators from using fake names and emails. So McCain is pushing legislation that would oblige convicted offenders to disclose their e-mail addresses to law enforcement and make the use of a false e-mail address a violation of probation or parole.

That makes so much sense, it's surprising it's not on the books already. But let's face it: It is akin to telling convicted bank robbers out on parole that they cannot use unregistered guns in future hold-ups.

Meanwhile, if Connecticut legislators get their way, MySpace might turn into something more like MyParentsSpace.

A bill proposed in March by the state's attorney general, Richard Blumenthal, would force MySpace and similar social networking portals

to verify users' ages and get parental permission before anyone younger than 18 could post a personal profile. At least a dozen other states are considering similar legislation.

Again, a fine idea in practice. But even if MySpace could manage to contact all the parents, and they vetted their children's profiles, curious or adventurous young people – and high-tech predators – will always find a loophole.

Neither of these laws can do much about negligent parents or predators without any criminal records. In Ohio recently, a 40-year-old school bus driver was charged with having sex with a local 16-year-old student. Only then was it discovered that he apparently also had a MySpace Web page where he pretended to be a teenage boy.

In Illinois, John Wentworth – another MySpace prowler – pleaded guilty in March to sexually abusing an underage Naperville girl. Forget about getting parents to vet their child's Web page profile; this girl managed to meet her assailant in her family home.

Blumenthal, himself a father of four, is wise enough to know that, as he puts it, "parents are the first line of defense." That's why on his website (www.ct.gov/ag), he provides an easy guide showing parents how to create their own profiles on MySpace and check out what their children are doing on the Internet's playground.

Laws trailing the crimes

Everyone agrees we have to keep modernizing and adapting our laws to catch up to the new face of crimes

against children in the 21st century. But as the FBI's Vacher points out, "No one piece of technology or trick or tool is going to do it. It has to be about communication between parents and the kids."

That communication is sorely lacking. In a survey by the non-profit foundation I-SAFE, 29% of children admitted that their parents would not approve of their Internet activities – if they knew.

It's 11 p.m. Do you know where your child is on the Web tonight?

Julian Sher is the author of Caught in the Web: Inside the Police Hunt to Rescue Children from Online Predators.