



PREDATORS USE SOCIAL MEDIA

TO EXPLOIT CHILDREN: What Parents and Educators Can Do to Stop Them

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Everyday, children in your community are being targeted, snared and manipulated by a world of sexual exploitation. They are enticed and, sometimes physically coerced, into selling themselves for sex. It's called human trafficking. It's modern-day slavery without the chains and shackles of a century ago, but it's real and happening right under our noses. A community that says, "We don't have that problem" is a community that hasn't looked for it. How are these traffickers and pimps gaining access to your children? You don't see them cruising the streets of your neighborhoods. They don't need to. They are being invited into your child's life, into your homes and into your child's most private and intimate conversations, through the Internet and social media.

In my Cyber Safety Cop Parent Workshop, I ask parents where they believe the safest place for their child is. After asking thousands of parents this question, I always hear the same answer: "Their home". What is the fear of allowing their child unsupervised outside the home? The general concern among parents is the possibility of their child meeting someone the parent doesn't know – someone dangerous. Although this possibility does exist, the rate of violent crime across the country has dropped significantly in the last 20 years. The chance that a teenager will ever come into physical contact with a sexual predator in their neighborhood, let alone be snatched off the street, is very low. When we look again at the picture of a child sitting alone in the safety of his or her room,

we see something new. The child sitting on their bed now has a mobile device in their hands, with Internet and social media access. Our social media-connected teen is not only exposed to the people in their neighborhood, or even the population of the United States, but to roughly 2.5 billion people on the Internet. This translates into millions of sexual predators who have access to children in their own home.

In December 2014, the parents of a 10-year-old girl alerted Cleveland Police Department that sexual predators were contacting their daughter through her iPad. The device was intended for schoolwork, but once social media applications like Snapchat and Skype were installed, the tablet became a portal to a dangerous world. After about a month of unmonitored use, her mother checked the device and was horrified to learn that 16 men had been attempting to manipulate her daughter into sexual situations.

The 10-year-old schoolgirl was first contacted by a man on Snapchat, who after talking about things a 10-year-old would be interested in, turned the conversation to sex. Predators who try to sexually exploit children for the purpose of producing child pornography often share that pornography, or access to the child, with other predators. The number of predators who were contacting their daughter grew in a short span of time. The predator's methodology was a textbook use of social media to manipulate and exploit this young girl.

The anonymity and the global nature of the Internet make its use by sexual

predators a predictable threat, although most parents are unaware of the danger it poses to their children. The pedophiles in this case are likely based in the UK and other countries overseas, making identifying and prosecuting them difficult. Police detectives from Cleveland Police Department are working with Snapchat and Skype in the hope of tracking them down.

The young victim told many of the men that she was 10 years old, but that only encouraged them to ask for explicit images. One of the predators begged her to disrobe and send him nude images and video. He begged, "Open cam baby ... plzzzzzz I like sex. What problem r u no interest to sex." Another of the unidentified men offered to transfer money to the 10-year-old so that she might travel to meet him. (Daily Mail, December 27, 2014)

These parents believed that they took all sensible precautions to protect her. They turned on the iPad's parental settings to filter content. Unfortunately, they didn't go far enough. In this article, I will outline how online predators are using social media to exploit children and offer some truly sensible safety measures to keep your children safe.

Social media platforms are places where predators can actively stalk children, but there are other websites that are passively waiting for children to stumble onto them, like a bear trap. Pornographic website chat rooms, or classifieds websites are all places where predators are waiting for the curious child to explore. Backpage is a popular online classified ads website, second only to Craigslist. A young girl, looking to get

“discovered” as a model or musical talent, may respond to one of many ads on Backpage that claim to be a legitimate talent search. These ads are neither legitimate nor safe, and have been the source of minors being sexually assaulted and trafficked into the commercial sex industry.

To begin, we must understand who the enemy is and their capabilities. The online predator/pedophile is networked with millions of other like-minded individuals who share their techniques and experiences with one another. They know how to identify the most vulnerable victims and what techniques to use to groom children into sending nude images or videos. In some cases, an accomplished pedophile can manipulate the child, build a relationship, and have the child voluntarily meet or run away with him.

To keep your child safe from these predators, we need to have a basic understanding of how they operate:

1 Online predators look for children who are emotionally vulnerable or who do not appear to have a stable home life. The most vulnerable are children who are dealing with a broken home, runaways, or who are in the Child Welfare System. Parents must be aware that every child is potentially vulnerable, no matter their family composition or socio-economic level. Children share their thoughts, feelings, likes, and dislikes freely on social media. It does not take the predator long to discover who is having problems at home or problems with key relationships in their lives.

2 The predator listens and sympathizes with the child. These predators are skillful manipulators, and the children that they prey on do not have the maturity or life experience to counter their advances. They tell the child what the child wants to hear, not what they need to hear. When a teen laments about being grounded for a week by their parent, the predator tells them that their parent was wrong or stupid, and they should have the freedom to do what they want. The predator begins building an “us-against-them” relationship that drives a wedge between the child and their parents.

3 The predator intensifies the relationship by seducing the child. The seduction phase of the manipulation is key to the pedophile’s success. The predator further grooms the child through attention, flattery, affection, kindness, and even gifts. He will make the child feel special. Initial target selection for this phase is very important. Children who are emotionally vulnerable are looking for love and ac-



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ceptance. The pedophile knows that a properly manipulated and groomed child will not care that he is older. He does not have to coerce the child into sending him nude images or meet him. What makes this so dangerous is that the victim, the child, helps conceal the relationship from their parents.

4 The predator introduces sex into the conversation. Depending on the progression of the third phase, the introduction of sex into the conversation may occur gradually or rapidly.

Truly sensible safety precautions are not a one-dimensional. All good security systems are a multi-layered, overlapping approach. We cannot reduce the risk for our children to zero, but with the suggestions that you will find below, or in the Cyber Safety Cop Workshop, you will have gone a long way to keeping your child safe online. Think of the following suggestions as layers of armor. Depending on the type of attack, one or more layers maybe needed:

TALK TO YOUR CHILD ABOUT CYBER SAFETY

Nearly 80 percent of teens said that they did not have parental rules about Internet use, and only eleven percent told their parents about either being bullied or seeing something disturbing online. (ncpc.org, 2015) Having an open conversation with your child about potential threats, and what to do if they encounter a problem, is the key safety factor in your

child’s life. Use the Cyber Safety Cop Internet Usage Contract to set boundaries and expectations for their online activity.

BE JUDICIOUS WHEN GIVING YOUR CHILD ACCESS TO SOCIAL MEDIA

The above story about the 10-year-old girl would have never occurred if the parents followed the social media app’s minimum age requirement in the User Agreement. Although Snapchat requires users to be at least 13 years old, it is not safe at any age, and should not be allowed on a minor’s device.

TURN ON PARENTAL CONTROLS

Use the device’s parental controls to filter content and to lock out their ability to download applications without your permission.

PHYSICALLY SEARCH YOUR CHILD’S PHONE AND ALL SOCIAL MEDIA ACTIVITY

Take your child’s device from out of their hands, and while they are watching you, go through all their text messages, browser history and social media images/posts.

INSTALL PARENTAL CONTROL APPLICATIONS

There are many parental control applications available for your child’s device. I have linked a recent article that has reviewed several good choices.

CONTROL WHAT APPLICATIONS GET INSTALLED ON YOUR CHILD’S DEVICE

Parental controls should block the installation of applications on the device. Review the appropriateness of every app your child requests to be installed on their device. Read parent reviews on websites like www.common sense media.org or www.cybersafetycop.com before you download a social media app. You should have a good working understanding of what every app on your child’s device does, and what the privacy settings are.

These safety suggestions are a good start to creating a safe and enjoyable online environment for your child. Social media is a moving target. If you would like to learn more about how to keep your child safe from cyberbullying, online predators, sexting, and other online threats, I invite you to follow the Cyber Safety Cop blog and Facebook page. Cyber Safety Cop also offers an 8-hour class for law enforcement, educators and counselors. www.CyberSafetyCop.com.