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How to keep kids safe online

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Parents who think putting the computer in the family room will keep their child safe online are in for a rude awakening, said Jaemi Levine of Coral Springs, Fla.

It's a lesson she learned the hard way.

In 2004, Levine's then 12-year-old daughter was lured to a face-to-face meeting with an Internet predator and sexually assaulted. Since then, Levine has created Mothers Against Predators to educate parents about keeping their kids safe online.

"Back then, we didn't know anything about computers or about monitoring," Levine said.

Experts say parents need to be diligent about monitoring children's online activities, but they also need to make kids understand the dangers.

PREDATORS LOVE THE INTERNET

Every day, one in seven children are solicited for sex online and one in three are shown inappropriate content, said Wilfredo Hernandez, a captain with the Florida state attorney general's Child Predator Cybercrime Unit in Fort Lauderdale.

"The Internet is a great place. Kids can do homework on it, they can have access to their teachers through it, but it can be a dangerous place," Hernandez said. "Before, predators needed to go to schools and parks to find where kids congregate. Now they go to social networking sites, chat rooms and blogs to find kids ... The only way to combat that is to empower our kids."

Levine remembers that her daughter had started to withdraw, spending more and more time on the computer. The predator preyed on the girl's vulnerabilities, trading e-mails with her about a "mutual" love for puppies, and how he was lonely and needed a friend.

"The worst piece of advice is 'You're safe if the computer is in the living room,'" she said. "That is, unless you never sleep and you monitor it 24/7."

Daryl Hulce of Davie, Fla., co-founder of the FBI's Safe Online Surfing program, which educates kids about online safety, says the first step is to let kids know why they have to be

careful.

WHAT TO TELL YOUR KIDS

People you meet online are not friends. "Just because someone is nice to you on the Internet does not make them your friend," Hulce said. "Predators are going to be warm and friendly. They're not going to be obvious."

Predators take their time befriending kids. "A predator may take six months or a year to groom or lure kids," Hulce said.

Predators will try to drive a wedge between child and parents.

"They will tell kids 'Your parents don't understand, but I'm your friend,'" Hulce said. "Kids will hide and treasure that." Predators will seem warm and caring, asking about personal problems, urging kids to confide in them, even asking to exchange pictures. These are all red flags.

Giving out personal information is dangerous.

Urge kids to use a nickname online, and to never give out a real name, address or phone number. Giving out identifying information, such as where you play soccer after school or the name of your baseball team, can put the whole family in danger.

WHAT PARENTS NEED TO DO

Know where your kids are going online.

If your child joins Club Penguin, a children's networking site, open an account so you can see what they're doing, such as chatting with people they don't know, Hernandez said. Open your own account on Facebook and MySpace and learn how to use them.

Stick with the free sites.

Some sites will offer kids a limited amount of activities, with an option to pay for more privileges such as texting other members. "Stick with the free site to limit your child's availability to the outside world," Hernandez said.

Skip the bells and whistles.

If buy your child a phone, get one without a camera or Internet capabilities. "The biggest danger is kids taking pictures of themselves and sharing them with other kids," Hernandez said.

Keep up with technology.

It's not only computers that provide Internet access. Some phones and gaming stations such as the Wii, Playstation 3 and XBOX 360 also have online capabilities. Show an interest in the games your kids play, where they chat and what sites they visit. Here's a conversation starter: Ask your child for advice on where to find blogs or chat rooms for yourself. "It's a

matter of coaching and monitoring and being interactive, not just saying 'don't do this,' " Hulce said.

Listen to your child.

Make them feel comfortable enough to come to you if they are uncomfortable about any Internet communication. Look for signs of withdrawal, or if they are receiving phone calls or gifts from people you don't know.

Know your kids' usernames and passwords.

Check on their activities, to make sure there's no inappropriate contact or cyberbullying.

HELPFUL ONLINE TOOLS

Visit <http://www.netsmartz411.org/>, run by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, for reviews of online products that promote safe online surfing. Here is a breakdown of what's available:

Keystroke monitoring.

Programs like Specter Pro allow parents to view the sites their kids visit and the content of emails and instant messages they send and receive. "It enables you to read every keystroke, as if it's a diary," she said.

Filtering and blocking software.

This limits access to sites containing words related to sex, drug use and other potentially offensive content. The downside is it also can limit access to useful sites such as news providers or libraries. Some programs block outgoing content, so your child can't transmit personal information.

Router controls.

Some wireless routers can be configured to limit access to the Internet, such as when you are away from home, or to block access to certain sites. Consult your owner's manual.

Cell phone monitoring.

Programs such as My Mobile Watchdog allow you to monitor your child's incoming and outgoing cell phone calls and texts.

Site monitoring.

A product like YouDiligence monitors your kids MySpace and Facebook pages and reports any inappropriate content back to you.

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