

## *What are Internet Predators?*

An Internet “predator” is an adult who uses online communication to sexually solicit minors. There are a number of myths about predators; thus, understanding the truth can help us guard against the real dangers that are on the Internet. This document will include some practical safety precautions that can be put in place.

**Myth #1: One in seven youth is contacted by an Internet predator.** This statistic is from the Youth Internet Safety Survey. In reality, many of the “contacts” counted in this survey as “Internet sex offenders” were casual rude comments or solicitations from other youth (not adult offenders). **Fact:** On average, 1 in 25 youth received an online sexual solicitation where the solicitor tried to make contact offline (phone, mail or meeting in person).

**Myth #2: Most sexual predators pretend to be other youth to lure victims into meeting with them.** The reality is most Internet sex crimes against youth are committed by offenders who *do not hide* the fact that they are adults with sexual or “romantic” intentions. **Fact:** Predators typically seduce young people by offering sympathetic and/or flattering appeals—usually directed toward a young person's desire to be appreciated and understood. Thus, the young person is lured into taking romantic risks, or is enticed into learning more about sex.

**Myth #3: Internet predators lure children to meetings where they abduct, rape or even murder.** These cases are, in fact, uncommon (violence occurs in about 5% of the cases where the predator and the minor meet). **Fact:** Most of the time victims meet the offenders voluntarily to engage in sexual activity, typically meeting on multiple occasions. These are crimes of statutory rape, not forcible rape. These instances are, nonetheless, serious sex crimes. The young person generally believes he or she is “in love” or experience romantic feelings for the predator. The predator is taking advantage of the young person's inexperience and vulnerability.

**Myth #4: Using social networking sites (MySpace, Facebook, etc.) and giving out any personal information online is dangerous.** Studies show that posting some personal information online does not put youth at risk. Most people (young and old) who use social networking and other online communities do publish some personal information with no observable risk. When warnings about posting information are so broad to exclude practical information, kids may tend to distrust the source of such advice. **Fact:** Internet offenders generally target *teens that are willing to talk about sex online*. Teens should never release sexually oriented information, erotic pictures, or express an interest in romance. Teens should never send sexual pictures of themselves via the Internet or cell phones (distributing such photos is actually considered child pornography and is a serious crime). Girls are not the only ones at risk. Boys who are wrestling through sexual orientation issues and who are not getting their questions answered at home or in school, may also look to the Internet community for answers. This makes them a potential target for a sex offender. **Fact:** Teens should exercise caution about interacting indiscriminately with unknown people online. Teens need to remember that their personal web page or personal profile can be accessed by others outside their circle of friends.

**How can parents help their teens avoid predators?** – Nothing can replace good parenting. A Teen whose questions and emotional needs are not met and addressed at home may seek the Internet for answers. Teens can make themselves easy targets for predators if they are sexually expressive online—in chat rooms, IM (instant messaging), or on personal web pages. Young people who express curiosity about sex and romance online are common targets. Make sure teens are aware of the dangers of predators, and leery of talking to unknown persons online.

### **Helpful Resources:**

- **Internet Safety Education for Teens: Getting It Right** (from the Crimes Against Children Research Center): [http://www.unh.edu/ccrc/internet-crimes/Internet%20Factsheet\\_portrait%20version\\_2-6-08\\_khf.pdf](http://www.unh.edu/ccrc/internet-crimes/Internet%20Factsheet_portrait%20version_2-6-08_khf.pdf)
- **Growing Up Online** (a PBS documentary): <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/kidsonline/view/main.html>