

STRANGER DANGER

Cyberspace is making communication more exciting every day, but there is a dark side. Responsible parenting means putting safety measures into place to ensure your child's online life is predator-proof.

By Julie McGlone



There is a world of interaction going on in cyberspace, most of it fun and educational.

But there is a dark side – the equivalent of “stranger danger” is a threat online, and many parents don't fully understand how to identify or combat it.

David McKie and Alison Benoit from the Department of Education and Training's Student Welfare Directorate are well aware of the issues in keeping children safe.

“Our focus is on getting students to raise issues when they get uncomfortable with anything online,” Ms Benoit says.

“It's up to parents and teachers to ensure children have the skills they need to identify risk and take extra precautions against predators.”

Mr McKie says schools have very strict filtering programs installed.

“But of course, online access is provided by parents in the home as well, so kids have to feel safe in their environment and know they can let adults know when they've strayed somewhere or been contacted by someone who is

making them feel uncomfortable, without the fear that they'll be cut off from accessing online activity.”

And that's the crunch. Children today use their online world for virtually every learning and social activity. The fear of being “cut off” is often far greater than the discomfort or confusion they might be experiencing through communications from potential predators.

There are horror stories of teenagers being lured into chatting with new “friends” who, over a period of weeks or even months, build up an online relationship of trust and kindness. Eventually, they will ask for more information – phone numbers, photographs, addresses – and then will suggest a meeting.

A child may think they're off to meet another teenager but could, in fact, encounter an adult.

Law enforcement agencies all over the world, including New South Wales Police, have set up a special arm to deal with cyberstalkers and online sexual predators.

Senior Constable Sascha Lipman from the NSW Police Force Media Unit says sexual predators are

being brought to justice through the special Child Exploitation and Sex Crimes squad (CESC).

“Parents will find some good information about how to monitor and detect problems online at our website www.police.nsw.gov.au which has links to the CESC squad and gives tips and links so you can better understand who is chatting to your kids.”

Mr McKie and Ms Benoit point out that there is a collaborative program in place with NSW Police and NSW Public Schools with modules on all types of issues, and one of these is cybercrime. The modules aim to raise students' awareness of the consequences of involvement in crime and anti-social behaviour.

“Police talk to individual principals and come up with a joint program of crime prevention workshops,” Ms Benoit says.

“Police will then go into the schools and talk to kids with the teacher – there is a specific module for cybercrime and anecdotal evidence says that it's been extremely successful and well received by the kids.”

Mr McKie says that it is important that parents take an active interest in their children's online activity – especially if they provide access at home.

“They have to have knowledge of the technology, the benefits and the risks involved,” he explains.

“Trust has to be the driving force behind this interest – the child needs to understand that parental monitoring of a situation is not ‘snooping’ but supervision.”

While it might take a bit of negotiation, Mr McKie insists that some monitoring should happen in the home. “If it's just left to go unchecked, then that's not good.”

Not all doom and gloom

Parents face the real challenge of keeping a clear head when it comes to monitoring their child's use of the Internet or mobile phones, as children will react badly if their access to this vital communication tool is heavily restricted. It is up to parents to be diligent and protective without letting their child feel it is their fault that precautions are necessary.



Get involved: If your child has a Bebo, Facebook or MySpace page. Ask to see it. Without being judgemental, make sure the photographs that are posted are not in any way suggestive and don't link your child to any geographic region that can be easily identified, like a school, your home or regular sporting venue. Make suggestions to change anything you find worrisome or inappropriate, but discuss the reasons why with your child and ensure they know it is not arbitrary censorship, rather it is for their safety and your peace of mind.

Mobile phones: Sexual predators who chat to children on the Internet frequently go on to make calls to the child, but monitoring calls is becoming increasingly difficult for parents. And with the new generation of phones, Internet and email access is possible.

- Choose a mobile for your child that does not have Internet access or speak to your carrier to block Internet access and any other features not required by your child.
- Check your child's phone bill for numbers other than known family or friends and ask if you

don't recognise frequently dialled numbers.

- Stress the importance of not responding to messages from strangers. If your child receives persistent messages or calls from a stranger, note the number and report to police. Save any messages or pictures on the handset to show police.
- Remind your child about never giving out their mobile phone number to strangers.

Watch out for:

- Your child receiving phone calls from people you don't know or is calling numbers you don't recognise. (Police investigations show that most predators want to talk to the child on the phone to set up a meeting.)
- Your child spending a large amount of time on the Internet. (The longer your child is online, particularly in 'chat' rooms, the more likely they will be approached inappropriately, or be exposed to objectionable material.)
- Pornography on your child's computer. (Pornography used by predators to convince victims

that sex between adults and children is acceptable.)

- Your child changing the screen or turning the computer off when you enter the room. (If your child is engaged in inappropriate conversation or is looking at pornography they will attempt to hide this from you.)
- Your child becoming withdrawn or displaying behavioural problems. (Child sex offenders are masters at exploiting the everyday issues that trouble children.)
- Your child receiving gifts or mail from people you don't know. (Sex offenders use many strategies to gain the trust of a child. They will send letters and use gifts as part of this process, and have even sent plane tickets in order for the child to travel across the country to meet them.)

Try to save a copy of the chat log between your child and the suspected paedophile. You can do this by highlighting the text with your mouse, creating a copy, and pasting it into a document that can then be saved.

You can also install software that will record your child's conversations for chat software such as Yahoo and MSN. Note any particulars such as websites, email addresses, user nicknames and any telephone numbers.

Then go to your local police station to make a formal complaint against the suspected paedophile. If you do not have a copy of the chat log, try to provide police with as much detail as possible from the conversation, such as where the predator might live, the handle/name he used in the chat room, what chat room you were in, and their mobile phone number.

You could also report the activity of the person to the chat room provider or moderator. This may prevent the person from returning to that particular chat room and looking for their next victim.

You can also call Crime Stoppers 24-hour line 1800 333 000 or if you have information or a question for the Child Exploitation Internet Unit you can send an email to the unit: ceiu@police.nsw.gov.au ■