

Common Sense on Safe Online Talk

Stranger smarts and safety

Kids love connecting with others online. Most young people talk online with their friends and family rather than strangers. But as a parent, you might be concerned that a stranger with bad intent could contact your child.

Some facts

According to a 2006 study by the Crimes Against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire:

13% of youth ages 10 to 17 received unwanted solicitations in 2006; this decreased from 19% in 2001

Most youth handled unwanted solicitations easily and effectively by doing things like ignoring or blocking solicitors or leaving the site

According to a report by the Internet Safety Technical Task Force in 2008:

Youth report that solicitation occurs more frequently by other minors than adult strangers

Solicitations online may include flirting and sexual harassment, but 69% of solicitations have no attempt to initiate offline contact

What's the issue?

Predatory behavior is when people contact your child on the Internet (mostly through instant messaging, chat rooms, or through a social networking site) and attempt to “groom” your child for a relationship. These people try to win children’s trust by hiding their true identities.

They may try to get kids into creepy or dangerous situations by pretending to have similar interests, giving them compliments, and letting them talk about anything they want. They typically tell children to keep the friendship secret, and they may even threaten kids if they tell anybody. As the relationship develops, the predator may send pictures, ask a child to send them pictures, and ask to meet face to face.

Teaching your child to be alert about how predators groom their targets is crucial to keeping your child safe.

Why it matters

Personal safety is extremely important. Young people need to be vigilant about who is contacting them, and avoid responding to people they don’t know. As a parent, it’s probably not realistic to block your kids from talking online. And remember, children don’t need a computer to talk with others online. They can do it from their phones and other mobile devices. That’s why it’s so important for parents to be involved in their children’s online lives.

Parent tips for all kids

- » **Discuss responsible online behavior.** Talk about who it's okay to chat with and what it's okay to talk about. Establish rules for appropriate instant messaging and chatting online, and explain that you're enforcing those rules because you care about their safety. You may want to involve an older sibling who can model good online behavior and can stay involved in their younger siblings' online lives.
- » **Establish rules for who's okay to talk to.** Online talk should generally be with people your children know, like family and friends.
- » **Set boundaries for what topics are okay to discuss.** Kids shouldn't answer questions online that make them feel uncomfortable. They also shouldn't talk about adult topics with strangers.
- » **Make sure your child feels safe telling a trusted adult.** If something creepy or inappropriate happens, kids need to know they won't get in trouble if they tell an adult they trust. And avoid banning them from the computer. Kids are less likely to tell parents if they experience a problem on the computer if they think they'll be banned from using it.
- » **Remind your kids to never give strangers private information.** Kids should never give out their name, address, school, phone number, email, pictures, or anything that could identify who they are.
- » **Block, ignore, or leave.** Most kids know to brush off unwanted contact. Encourage this behavior.
- » **Watch out for strangers.** Kids should never plan a meeting with someone they met online without taking along a trusted adult.

Tips for middle school and high school kids

- » **Flirting with disaster.** Face-to-face flirting with peers is normal, but flirting with strangers online is risky. Remind kids that they don't know anything about a stranger they talk with online. Also remind them not to do things online they wouldn't do in real life.
- » **Look for warning signs.** Does your child seem withdrawn, emotionally distant, spend endless hours online, or seem to be hiding something? The kids who get sucked into inappropriate online relationships often show warning signs. They might be hiding an online relationship they don't want you to know about. If you think this might be happening, ask your child about it!