



THE FAMILY TREE

PROTECTING OUR CHILDREN FROM CYBER-PEDOPHILES

It is difficult to imagine catching the news these days without learning of a new case where a child has been sexually abused. According to the National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect, the odds that a child will be molested by the time they are 18 are one in four for girls and one in eight for boys. And in almost every case, the child will know and trust their abuser.

The sexual abuse of a child is an appalling reality. But through education and awareness, we at The Family Tree know this unthinkable crime *can* be prevented. As parents and caregivers, we need to know as much about the warning signs of sexual abuse as we do about the symptoms for the chicken pox or talking to our children about saying no to drugs.

Modern technology and access to the Internet have created a new source of danger to children. Although the World Wide Web offers many rich and entertaining educational and cultural opportunities for children of all ages, it also provides a gateway through which sexual predators may safely and secretly stalk their victims from the comfort and anonymity of their own homes. Law enforcement professionals tell us cyberspace is becoming a “virtual playground for pedophiles and child pornographers.” And unfortunately we see the tragic results of these encounters more and more frequently in the news, as well as in our own communities

With summer coming to a close and school just around the corner, our children will be spending more time on the computer, thus increasing their chances for victimization. Here are some **TIPS** to help us better safeguard our children against these dangers:

Close supervision of Internet use is the first and most important line of defense. Keep home computers in common areas and limit computer use to times when an adult is around to watch. Participate actively in what your child is doing online. Monitor all of your child’s e-mail, as well as all the sites he/she visits. Visit computer sites your child may want to visit beforehand to screen out undesirables. Inspect the computer’s history and instant messaging logs regularly, and know your child’s e-mail password at all times. Inquire about computer use safeguards and ground rules anywhere your child may spend time on the Internet - at school, in the public library, and in the homes of friends and relatives. Clearly explain that you are not invading your youngster’s privacy, but rather trying to keep him/her safe from unwanted and/or potentially dangerous cyberspace encounters.

Knowing as much about the Internet as your children will allow you, as parents and teachers, to stay one step ahead of danger online. Know the technology and how to use every aspect of it - chat rooms, e-mail, instant messaging, search engines and how to upload and download information and photographs. If you choose to install blocking software, keep in mind that it is by no means foolproof for protecting children from unwanted advances online.

Honestly and openly educating children around potential online dangers provides another important protection. SafetyED, an Internet site dedicated to safe computer use, recommends establishing a Parent-Child Internet Agreement, in which you carefully spell out - and all agree - to online safety rules, as well as consequences for non-compliance. Tell your children they should never respond to messages or bulletin boards that are, in any way, threatening, harassing, or sexually suggestive. Additionally, make it clear they should **never** give out their computer passwords, pictures, or personal information (name, age, gender, home address, telephone and fax numbers, or school) to anyone with whom they are communicating online, particularly through chat rooms or instant messaging. Encourage your children to tell you immediately about any threatening, sexually explicit, overly solicitous, or harassing communications they receive, especially offers to meet in person.

Reporting suspicious online activities to local and state law enforcement agencies, the FBI, and/or The Center for Missing and Exploited Children helps us all stop cyber-pedophiles and child pornographers in their tracks. **Immediately** turn off your computer and contact the authorities if your child or anyone in the household has received child pornography or other sexually explicit material/images online, or has been sexually solicited online. And, never attempt to copy images or text, unless directed to do so by a law enforcement agency.

What are some of the warning signs that your child may be at-risk online?

Your child spends a lot of time “Surfing the Net,” especially at night. According to the FBI, pedophiles are most likely to prowl at night or on the weekends.

Your child becomes withdrawn from friends and/or family and hides or turns the computer monitor off when you approach it. Cyber-predators go to extraordinary lengths to involve their victims in “keeping the secret.” They work very hard to gain a victim’s trust and confidence, while driving a wedge between the victim and his/her friends and family members, especially parents. Moreover, children often withdraw out of fear or shame when they have been sexually victimized. Therefore, it is **crucial** to keep the lines of communication open at all times, getting involved in your child’s activities and hobbies, and encouraging honest discussion and mutual problem-solving.

You find pornography on your child’s computer, particularly images that depict sex between children and adults as “normal.” Be aware that adolescents often download sexually explicit materials and hide them on diskettes they stash around their rooms.

Your child receives or makes calls - particularly long distance calls - to and from adults you don't know and receives mail, gifts, or packages from someone you don't know. Monitor your phone bills carefully and realize that pedophiles have been known to use the postal service as a way to lure potential online victims, some going so far as to send plane tickets through the mail.

Your child is using an online account belonging to someone else. Your child may gain access at a friend's house or at the public library. Moreover, online predators will often supply their victims with computer accounts to use in an effort to keep the relationship a secret.

To find out more about the warning signs of child sexual abuse, and how to prevent it, log onto www.stopitnow.com.