Protecting children and teens from cyber-harm

Certain patterns of behavior confer risk; here’s what the research shows.

More than four in five adolescents currently own at least one type of electronic device, such as a cell phone, BlackBerry, personal data assistant, or computer. Many young people are using these devices to play online games, surf the Internet, send e-mail and instant messages, create blogs, or visit social networking sites.

As electronic media use has grown, so too have reports of electronic harassment, or “cyber-bullying,” as well as sexual solicitation and other types of victimization. Studies use different definitions and measurement methods, but report that 9% to 34% of American adolescents are victims of online harassment (defined as bullying or insults, but not sexual solicitation), and 4% to 21% are perpetrators of online harassment. And a telephone survey of U.S. Internet users ages 10 to 17 found that 13% had received some type of sexual solicitation online in the past year, with 4% receiving aggressive solicitations in which the solicitor attempted to make contact offline.

Not surprisingly, mental health clinicians, school officials, and parents want advice about how to protect children and teens from harm. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention convened a panel of experts in 2006 to discuss how to protect adolescents from electronic bullying and other types of harassment. Their findings and recommendations were published in a December 2007 special issue of the Journal of Adolescent Health. Other researchers have focused on how to protect young people from electronic sexual solicitation.

Risky arenas and behaviors
Although Internet users are often warned not to post personal information online, the research done so far provides evidence that this practice is not as risky as other behaviors. Instead, the chances of being harassed or sexually solicited online increases when young people interact with other people electronically, such as by sending or receiving instant messages or having conversations in chat rooms.

It’s not clear why such behaviors may lead to problems, but it may be that arenas such as chat rooms or instant messaging, in which the communications take place instantly and in real time—and often away from the prying eyes of adults—may encourage more impulsive and risk-taking behavior.

Social networking sites. A 2006 survey by the Pew Internet and American Life Project found that 55% of Americans ages 12 to 17 were using online social networking sites such as Facebook or MySpace, where they can create personal profiles and communicate with other people online. Some experts fear that online predators will use such sites to stalk their victims. However, researchers who have analyzed both electronic harassment and sexual solicitation have concluded that social networking sites are not as risky as other arenas.

A national online survey of youngsters ages 10 to 15, for example, found that 33% reported electronic harassment, and 15% reported electronic sexual solicitation. However, most of the electronic harassment and sexual solicitation took place in chat rooms or through instant messaging. Social networking sites provided the venue for only 9% of online harassment and 4% of online sexual solicitation.

Researchers at the University of New Hampshire (UNH) Crimes Against Children Research Center, who analyzed data collected about victims of Internet sexual predators, found that the young people most likely to be victimized were those who interacted with strangers who had viewed a posting.

Instant messaging. This technology enables people to send text messages back and forth to each other instantaneously while using computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices. This technology, which is popular with young people, appears to put them at risk for bullying and sexual solicitation.

For example, a study of middle school students in the southeastern and northwestern United States found that instant messaging was a more common source of cyber-bullying than e-mail, chat rooms, or social networking sites. Of students reporting electronic harassment, 67% said they were victimized through instant messages. And a national survey of Internet users ages 10 to 15 found that both electronic harassment and sexual solicitation were most likely to take place during instant messaging sessions.

Chat rooms. These online forums enable people to exchange text messages with one another and engage in virtual conversations. Some venues also enable participants to have simultaneous voice conversations or post images.

In a survey of middle school students, one in four of those reporting...
About one in five Internet users ages 12 to 15 visit chat rooms. However, chat rooms pose an even greater risk for sexual solicitation and victimization. A study of online predators found that most initially met their victims in chat rooms.

Researchers think that chat rooms are risky not only because these venues enable participants to communicate directly and privately, but also because some sites encourage the use of obscene language, sexual talk, and sexual innuendo. There is also some evidence that the young people who visit chat rooms are more likely to be lonely, depressed, alienated from parents, and also more likely to suffer from sexual abuse or engage in risky behaviors, compared with those who do not visit chat rooms.

**Blogs.** Blogs are online journals or postings that share the writer’s thoughts, opinions, and personal details. Readers are able to post comments as well, which may prompt a virtual conversation as other readers and the original blogger post their own responses. About one in five Internet users ages 12 to 17 has created a blog.

Blogging increases the risk of online harassment and may increase the risk of sexual solicitation. Because bloggers tend to bare their souls online, sharing vulnerabilities and personal details (much as they might in an old-fashioned journal), they expose themselves to nasty comments and insults. One study found that bloggers ages 10 to 17 were two and a half times as likely as other Internet users the same age to experience such online harassment.

Blogging in itself does not increase the risk of experiencing online sexual solicitation, however. One study found that less than 1% of sexual solicitations of young Internet users began with a blog. But interacting with strangers who post comments in response to a blog does increase risk.

**How to protect youths**

Clinicians, school officials, and parents who want to protect young people from online harm face the daunting task of trying to keep track of multiple types of electronic forums and devices. Experts recommend focusing on the children’s online behavior rather than the technology.

With younger children, parents should try to be aware of what their children are doing online and to whom they are talking. Keep the computer out for use in a family area, rather than in a child’s bedroom. Particular patterns of behavior increase risk of harassment or sexual solicitation, and the more of these online behaviors a youngster engages in, the greater the risk (see table below).

As children enter adolescence, however, it is reasonable for them to have a degree of autonomy. At this point in development, parents will inevitably need to depend less on direct monitoring. Instead, by staying engaged, they can help their teenagers learn how to keep themselves safe.

To prevent sexual victimization, the UNH researchers recommend educating young people about the dangers of online interactions, while acknowledging that sexual feelings and curiosity are both normal during adolescence. The idea is to say that it’s all right to have sexual feelings, but not to broadcast them online.

But it’s also helpful to put the problem in perspective. Most young people who use electronic devices do so safely. Educating them about risky practices will help ensure that they remain safe.


For more references, please see www.health.harvard.edu/mentalextra.

### Risky behaviors

Researchers have identified particular patterns of Internet behavior and found that as the number and type of certain behaviors increase, so does risk for online victimization. One analysis identified nine behaviors that confer some risk of being harassed or sexually solicited online. The more such behaviors a child or adolescent engages in, the greater the risk.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behavior</th>
<th>Proportion of young Internet users who engage in this behavior</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Posting personal information on the Internet</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interacting with strangers online</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adding strangers to a buddy list</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making rude or insulting comments to someone else online</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sending personal information to strangers online</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Downloading images from file-sharing sites</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visiting pornographic sites intentionally</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embarrassing or harassing someone else online, out of anger</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talking with strangers online about sex</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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