



Parry Aftab's "Ask Parry" Special Report

Written for her "Ask Parry" column, her Internet Safety blog and podcast (<http://parryaftab.blogspot.com>) and for WiredSafety.org, the world's largest Internet safety and help group – home of the Teenangels (teenangels.org)

Ask Parry Report: Is your child a potential victim?

Probably. Few are exempt. Most Internet-related victims fall into a few general categories. They live in suburbia or rural towns. They typically are between the ages of 11 and 15 years old. They are either very sheltered and naïve, or willing to take very serious risks and are playing at being sophisticated. (Most are sheltered and naïve.) They tend to be loners, and may not have many offline friends. They are looking for love. Some are tricked or conned into a meeting. (Generally boys are either tricked or are curious about and interested in exploring homosexuality. Girls tend to believe they are in love and will marry the predator some day.) Many believe that they are communicating with someone around their own age (at least initially).

Go over each of these questions yourself. Then talk to your child. Does your child fit the profile of a typical Internet-related sexual victim? The young teen from Connecticut didn't. (She was killed by a man from Westchester County.) So, even if these don't fit your child, you still need to be vigilant.

- Does your child spend an inordinate amount of time online every day? (More than 1-1/2 hours a day of "fun" (not homework) time online is the dividing line between children who tend to engage in high risk online activities, such as meeting strangers offline, engaging in cybersex, sharing personal information online and sending photos of themselves to strangers online.)
- Do they have lots of offline friends, or are they loners? (Generally children who have been lured by sexual predators online are loners and don't have a large circle of offline friends.)
- Are they active in sports and other offline physical activities? (Typically, if they are athletic or engaged in sporting activities, they are less likely to become a victim, although being involved in cheerleading is the exception to this rule.)
- Are they between the ages of 11 and 15 years of age? (The exact age these risks begin is determined by when they are permitted to go places without accounting precisely for their time. This may include going to the Mall, the park or an amusement park unattended. Usually by the time they are 16 years old, they aren't

as susceptible to being lured. But teens 16 – 18 are now becoming more likely victims with the advent of social networks, like MySpace, Facebook and Xanga.)

- Are they sheltered, or particularly risky in their behavior? (The typical victim tends to fall into the extremes of this range of behavior. Either they are very sheltered and easy to con, when the predator will promise marriage and love ever after, generally in the guise of a cute teenage boy or girl, Or, they will use the Internet to act out their risky behavior, such as was the case with the Connecticut teenager.)
- Do they have a relatively balanced life, with lots of activities offline, including school extra-curricular activities, music, reading, etc.? (Although not the case with the Connecticut girl, who was apparently active at her school and was a cheerleader, most children who keep the Internet in perspective and have other activities are less likely to be lured by an Internet predator.)
- Are they secretive about their Internet activities? Do you find that the screen goes blank when you walk by? If so, it's not a technical problem; your child doesn't want you seeing what they are doing. That's a good time to stop and ask them what they are doing. Where do they surf? Do they have an instant messaging account (most do.) and if so, who is on their buddy or notify list that they send instant messages to? Have they set up any privacy or security settings to block strangers from instant messaging them or e-mailing them? What about text-messaging on their cell phones or away messages that list their cell numbers? What about a social networking profile, like MySpace.com? (Google your child, and learn how to do that at internetsuperheroes.org)
- If they have a buddy list or notify list or other similar frequent address list, where did they get the names from? What about a friends list on MySpace? Do they know the person offline? Do they include friends of friends they know offline? (This is how many predators make it onto their list. They think it's safe since a friend knows the person, but the friend may not be as careful in selecting "buddies" or "friends" online.) Walk through the list with your child. Have them tell you the real name of everyone on the list and how they know them. Do the same with text-messaging devices, all social networking sites and cell phones.
- Do they have a Web site, homepage, blog or personal online profile? Look them over, if they do. See what your child shares about themselves with third parties online. Do they show another side? Do they make suggestive remarks at their site or on their profile? Do they refer to a "love" or someone special you don't recognize?

Additionally, to be safe, they should not include personally identifiable information, such as real full name, addresses, phone numbers, photos, descriptive information from which this information could easily be found (like a picture of them in front of their school, with the name of the school displayed on the

Copyright 2006 Parry Aftab, all rights reserved. Contact Parry@Aftab.com for permission to duplicate

building, referring to their sports team at school by name or by wearing something with identifying information in a photo, such as your school name, team name or something else that would give away information) or permit anyone to send them an e-mail at their real account. (If you have any reason to believe that your child wouldn't tell you the truth, refer below to my suggestion for handling a troubled child, on how to search for it yourself and consider using a monitoring software, like Spectorsoft.com.)

- Are they making or receiving calls that you don't recognize? Are their phone calls you don't recognize on your phone bills? Does your child run to answer the phone, when you don't know the person they are talking to? Don't be lulled into thinking you would recognize that the person who called for your child is an adult. Many thoughtful and caring parents have been fooled. A 37-year-old can sound a lot alike a 15-year-old if they want to.
- Has your child received packages or gifts from someone you don't know? Many predators will send a disposable, Polaroid, or digital camera to your child, seeking sexually-explicit photos of your child. They also "groom" you child by sending small gifts, flowers, CD's, jewelry, etc. If your child is rushing home to access the mail before you, your antenna should be up.
- Does your child have a wireless device, such as a text-messaging cell phone or device? Whom do they write to? Do they have a Sony Playstation Network or PSP or X-Box Live 360? The newer handheld versions have Internet capability, as well. With whom do they communicate using those gaming devices? What do they talk about? Ask.
- Is your child distracted? Has their behavior changed suddenly? Have they become more secretive? (I know, it's hard telling this from normal teenager behavior.:-)) What about their friends? Have they pulled away from them recently? Have they changed friends recently?
- Has something changed that you can't put your finger on? Trust your gut!

Bottom line you're still the parent. Unplug the computer if your children aren't following your rules!



Ask Parry! is a charitable service where Parry Aftab, noted online safety and privacy expert, and Executive Director of WiredSafety.org can answer your questions about online safety, privacy and security, and help you with problems you encounter online. To reach Parry Aftab, e-mail her at parry@aftab.com.