Safety in Cyberspace - Internet Luring

The Internet has entered the lives of children and youth at a rapid rate.

At the touch of the finger, it has opened up the world for them to explore known and unknown places.

It serves not only as an exceptional educational tool but also as a means of rapid communication, allowing children to talk to their closest friends and Internet friends living in other countries. The value of the Internet is unparalleled.

Nonetheless, it has the potential for children to be victimized and on occasion, seriously harmed.

As children grow and learn, they may come in contact with predators on the Internet.

Their innocence, coupled with their trusting and fearless nature, often leads them to explore computer Internet sites they do not understand.

In doing so, they place themselves in a position of vulnerability and danger.

In essence, the stranger no longer meets them face to face but develops a relationship with them in secret.

Many parents conclude that the only way to deal with the problem is to keep the child offline or monitor them exceptionally close.

This is a drastic step. Parents can be guaranteed that their child will fall far behind the others in knowing how to enjoy one of the most powerful education and communication tools invented to date.

As well, these uninformed children will be much more vulnerable to dangerous situations when they use the Internet at school, at a friends house or in the library.

Safety in cyberspace does not differ greatly from other child protection approaches.

However, the difference lies in the fact that the average child probably knows more about the computer and Internet than their parents do.

If this situation exists consider the following:

Be Informed

Take lessons and learn to use the Internet yourself.

Set up a parent support group and learn from each other. Invite special speakers to talk to your group.

Talk to computer sales clerks and determine which software packages are available to safeguard your child and block out offensive materials.

Set up your child's accounts or have someone knowledgeable do it for you. Inquire as to the safeguards used by the school, library and friend's home where your child may have an alternative access to potentially dangerous situations.

Sit down with your child and talk about their computer interests, Internet friends and especially be aware of any communications with adults.

Watch, learn and ask questions in a non-threatening way. Monitor credit card usage to determine if your teen may be accessing a non acceptable paid site using your credit card. Be informed of the dangers of the Internet.

Be Smart

Set the rules for Internet use, including when and how long your child can go on-line.

Have your child use a code name while on-line. Change passwords frequently.

Periodically view the history of their chat line.

Check the computer hard drive for signs of the nature and scope of activities.

Always maintain access to your child's on-line accounts and regularly and randomly check the e- mail messages.

Take note of materials printed, especially pornography type photographs.

Check the diskette collection for clues of activities like pornography and other obscene materials periodically.

Always position the computer in a high traffic area where you can monitor some of the activity.

Advise children not to give their name or family names, addresses, telephone numbers, the name of the school he/she attends, parent's workplace or any other pertinent identifiers that might help a predator locate them.

Also, advise them not to discuss family vacation plans and other pertinent information over the Internet.

This might result in a house burglary or car theft while the family is away from home; or may lead to an abduction.

Be Alert

Watch for signs of behavior change, such as:
- withdrawal from conversation regarding Internet activities;
- attempts to be secretive;
- noticeable signs of embarrassment when asked certain questions about activities;
- apparent use of language uncharacteristic of the child's age group.

Also, question activities involving the scanning and sending of photographs, particularly of self .

Predators often request photographs for personal use or mass distribution.

Look for hidden photos of children and adults having sex, which are often used to break down the child's inhibitions.

Report any on-line activity to police considered potentially dangerous.

Some Internet Luring Flags for Parents and Caregivers

The child or youth:

- is obsessed with computer activity

- has none or only a few friends - seems to spend all his/her spare time on the computer
- shows noticeable changes in character and behavior
- appears secretive and non-communicative regarding computer met friends and activities
- seems unusually preoccupied with chat room communications
- appears sheepish and uncooperative when asked about computer activities
- changes the screen or shuts off the computer when an authority figure enters the room
- receives questionable mail, e-mail, gifts, packages
- receives excessive telephone calls from adults or friends not known well to the family
- requests photos to be taken of self and scanned by computer to send to friends
- changes the style of dress suddenly and uncharacteristically
- seems to dress to look older, and perhaps more seductive
- downloads offensive materials found by parent, such as: pornography

If you notice changes in your child's appearance, behavior and activities, approach them in a non-threatening way and discuss your concerns.

Your approach will determine your success in determining their activities or the nature of the way they respond.

Protecting your child and youth in cyberspace requires Team Work - you and your child, and you and your friends and neighbors.

So don't shy away!

Be Informed!

Be Smart and Be Alert!

Your child's safety is in your hands.