Teen Safety in Cyberspace[1]

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This publication is part of a series of discussions on understanding teen sexuality.

Introduction: Teens Navigating Cyberspace

If you believe e-mail, blogs, text messaging, instant messaging, social networking sites, and 3-D virtual worlds (with avatars) are a completely harmless way for teens to communicate, think again! Most teens have Internet access at home, school and most everywhere with smart phones (cell phones with texting and Internet access), netbooks, and laptops. The Internet provides opportunities for private communication in the form of text updates, blogs, and chat rooms. These online communication aids are not themselves a problem, but the threat of being sexually solicited or bullied while online is a problem for teens (accessed on 12/22/09 from http://cybersmartcurriculum.org/assets/files/activitysheets/9-12/Making_Good_Decisions.pdf).

While online, teens may be persuaded to do things that they do not want to, such as share private information, be sexually solicited, and/or experience public humiliation. Some worst-case scenarios—take, for example, Megan Meier, who committed suicide after being cyberbullied—got our attention and brought changes in the law and policy. However, adults' (youth staff and parents) skills in preventing cyberbullying and sexual solicitation are not where they need to be (Mesch 2009). This article will

- define online sexual solicitation and cyberbullying;

- explain the risk factors and negative effects of these communications; and

- outline effective ways to protect youth from harm.

Online Sexual Solicitation

Online sexual solicitation is a form of sexual harassment that occurs in cyberspace (in other words, in all electronic forms of communication such as the Internet and text messaging). Incidents of online sexual solicitation include exposure to pornography; being asked to discuss sex online and/or do something sexual; or requests to disclose personal information. This can start when an adult or peer initiates an online nonsexual relationship with a child or adolescent, builds trust, and seduces him into sexual acts.

Several studies have found that:

- 30% of teen girls who used the Internet frequently had been sexually harassed while they were in a chat room.

- 37% of teens (male and female) received links to sexually explicit content online.

- 30% of teens have talked about meeting someone they met online (Dewey 2002; Polly Klaas Foundation 2006).

Online sexual solicitation can be a traumatic experience for victims. About 25% of youth who were sexually solicited felt "extremely afraid or upset" in response to the incident. Those most affected by sexual solicitation included teens that were:

- aged 10–13,

- solicited more aggressively online,

- sexually solicited on a computer in another person's home,

- currently struggling with major symptoms of depression (Mitchell, Finkelhor, and Wolak 2001).

There are several signs—traits, life circumstances, and actions—that parents and adults should be aware of in order to keep teens from online communication with sexual predators. Studies find that teens at the greatest risk for online sexual solicitation are:

- females between the ages of 13 and 17 years—in fact, 70% of teens who are sexually solicited are girls http://www.adcouncil.org/Our-Work/Partner-Coalitions/Internet-Safety-coalition [March 2017].

- teens who behave in risky ways online, including participating in cyberbullying, posting sexy photos of themselves, and discussing sex online with strangers (accessed on March 2017 from http://cybersmartcurriculum.org/assets/files/activitysheets/9-12/Making_Good_Decisions.pdf).

- teens with major depressive symptoms and/or who have experienced negative life transitions (moving to a new neighborhood, a death or divorce in their family).

- teens that go online more frequently—four or more days a week at two or more hours a day.

Cyberbullying

Bullying, defined as aggression on a continual basis between peers where one has a power advantage over another, is common among children and adolescents. Cyberbullying involves using electronic communication for these ends:

- teach someone a lesson

- put others down

- play pranks

- share personal information publicly

- stalk someone

- commit other overt attacks upon a person

Teens who cyberbully may feel that cyberspace is an impersonal place to vent, and, therefore, consider it less harmful than face-to-face bullying. However, cyberbullying can be very destructive. Examples include middle school teens starting a poll with their classmates, casting online votes for the ugliest girl in the school or unsolicited videos or photos taken in a locker room are posted on YouTube or forwarded by media messaging. In addition, threats or

hateful words travel easily through cyberspace in e-mails or cell phone messages (voice or text) from an unrecognized phone number. Ironically, most cyberbullying takes place within a teen's immediate social circle (Mishna, Saini, and Solomon 2009) and those most likely to be victimized are highly active in social networking sites, blogs, and chat rooms (Reeckman and Cannard 2009).

About 25% of teens report being victims of cyberbullying, and over a third (35%) of teens reported feeling unaffected by it (Reeckman and Cannard 2009). Yet, the vast majority of victims reported feelings of:

- frustration,

- anger,

- sadness, and

- social anxiety (Dempsey, Sulkowski, Nichols, and Storch 2009).

In addition, as is the case with online sexual solicitation, preteens are more likely to suffer psychologically from cyberbullying than older teens (Reeckman and Cannard 2009).

Solutions: Ways to Keep Your Teens Safe

Families and communities (youth-serving organizations, schools) can provide important resources for protecting teens from cyber harm. In fact, a majority (64%) of teen students reported believing that adults in school would try to stop cyberbullying. Still, less than a third (30%) of students reported that if they knew about it happening that they would inform an adult about it (Li 2006). The following research-based tips can help encourage teens to talk with you about cyberbullying and sexual solicitation, as well as keep your teens from being victims or perpetrators.

At-Home/Personal Interaction with Youth

- Get access to "parental block" software that protects your child from exploring inappropriate websites. There are many options you can find by typing "free Internet blocking software" into a search engine (for example, Google).

- Keep computers with Internet access in a centralized location in the home, not in your child's bedroom and set limits on data access on your teen's cell phone.

- Check your child's computer and data use history. (Type in "Internet monitoring software for parents" on a search engine—some options are specifically geared toward

monitoring your child's activity on social networking sites such as Facebook and Myspace).

- Negotiate rules with your teen on cell phone use with regard to text and media messaging, and online data access.

- Set a family Internet and data use policy. Define the ground rules for Internet use, such as scheduled times, permissible websites, and limitations on cyber communication with familiar peers or close friends.

- When setting cyberspace rules, consider how vulnerable your child might be to sexual solicitation and cyberbullying. Base your decision on his or her life circumstances as well as age and stage of development. For example, rules for Internet use for children should be more restrictive than those set for teens.

- Because they value privacy, be prepared to enforce set consequences when teens fail to observe a "family Internet policy" (for example, teens can be held responsible for fixing damages from computer viruses or paying for data minutes overages) and setting appropriate limits and fair consequences.

- Teach your child what cyberbullying is and give some specific examples of what to look for; help them learn to identify and interpret information shared or comments made by the predator. Kids will often think they are the only ones experiencing this and that they should be able to handle it.

- Educate your teen about potential dangers of cyber communication and sharing information. It is very easy for a predator to learn where the child lives and goes to school from only a little bit of information.

- Help teens to role-play effective ways to respond to sexual solicitation and cyberbullying.

- If an incident involving victimization of your teen occurs, reassure him or her that Internet access will not be forever discontinued, nor will their cell phone be confiscated, unless such measures are deemed temporarily necessary for their immediate safety.

In the Community

- Promote awareness campaigns in schools to influence policy, acceptable online "netiquette," and support programs for prevention of online sexual solicitation and cyberbullying.

- Collaborate with your local law enforcement agencies. Many police and sheriff departments have officers dedicated to monitoring the Internet for cyber predators and bullies. They can educate your children or group

about what constitutes cyberbullying, what their rights are, and how to respond. Taking action will tell your child you care and you know how to help them resolve the situation. Children are likely to think that parents don't understand and therefore can't be of help.

- As adults, get educated on options available to teens in cyberspace and learn how to use them, too (see resources section that follows). Often, an older teen can serve as a resource to educate adults as well as younger teens and preteens on cyber use and safety. Encourage your teen to report incidents of online sexual solicitation or cyberbullying to adults, and reinforce their beliefs that appropriate action will be taken in response to the event.

- Encourage your teen to get involved in face-to-face activities as alternatives to interaction on the Internet. Youth who are vulnerable, lonely, and low on social skills are most likely candidates for excessive Internet use, increasing the risk for exposure to cyberbullying and online sexual solicitation.

Parents must be alert to the way their children use electronic communications. Talk to your children about the risks involved. Although there is a big, scary cyberworld out there, the family and home can and needs to be a safe haven for children and teens.

Resources on Internet Safety for Parents & Teachers

- **CyberSmart!**—http://www.cybersmartcurriculum.org
- **CyberTipline**—http://www.cybertipline.com/
- **Family Computing**—http://familyinternet.about.com/
- **i-SAFE**—http://www.isafe.org/
- **WiredSafety.org**—http://www.wiredsafety.org/

Popular Social-Networking Sites for Teens (for parents and teens to look at together)

- MySpace.com
- Facebook.com
- Twitter.com
- Secondlife.com
- HI5.com
- Tagged.com
- Imbee.com
- LiveJournal.com

- Bebo.com
- MyYearbook.com
- Friendster.com
- Spaces.MSN.com
- Xanga.com

Resources on Internet Safety for Teens

- CyberTipline's Don't Believe the Type: Know the Dangers, Situations to Avoid, Surf Safer. http://cybertipline.com
- KidsHealth from Nemours: Teaching Kids to be Smart About Social Media for Parents, Kids and Teens http://kidshealth.org/en/parents/social-media-smarts.html
- SafeTeens.com. Internet Safety for Teens. http://www.safeteens.org
- SafeKids.com. Online Safety &Civility. http://www.safeteens.org
- National Center for Missing and Exploited Teens. Internet-Related Safety Tips for Teens. http://www.missingkids.com/missingkids/servlet/PageServlet?LanguageCountry=en_US&PageId=207

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