

# Predators make Web risky for teens

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**By George Henson**

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DALLAS—Most teenagers don't need a warning about the predators waiting on the Internet. That thrill is what drives some riskier behaviors, a Dallas assistant district attorney said. And that makes parents' role in keeping children safe even more important.

Some teens may think flirting and sexual innuendo on the Internet is a safe risk, like riding a thrill ride at an amusement park, but that is a false assumption, said Brooke Robb, an assistant district attorney who specializes in prosecuting Internet crimes against children. She spoke to a group of youth ministers from [Dallas Baptist Association](#) churches.

"If they are at home, they feel safe," Robb said. "But we have to educate our kids to know that if you are online, you might as well open your door and shout it to the world."

About 30 million children use the Internet. Of those, one in four children has had unwanted exposure to sexual pictures on the Internet. One in five has experienced sexual solicitation. One in 17 has been threatened or harassed, and one in 33 has been the subject of aggressive sexual solicitation, Robb reported.

Of children who receive an invitation to engage in sexual activity, 70 percent are at home, and 22 percent are at someone else's home. Sixty-five percent of those sexual solicitations come while in Internet chat rooms and 24 percent through instant messaging.

[Social networking](#) websites like [MySpace](#) are too new a phenomenon to have been factored into the research and are new areas for concern, she added.

While the easy solution seems to be to keep children totally off the Internet, school assignments and peer pressure make that increasingly difficult.

Parents need to be aware, however, that it is hard to be on the Internet and not be open to some level of risk, she said. Robb, using a scenario available for viewing at [www.netsmartz.org](http://www.netsmartz.org), demonstrated how easy it is to gather information on children and teens—even those who try to remain anonymous.

The girl in the online demonstration does not include her real name, location or gender. But in a matter of minutes, an Internet savvy individual still could find a lot of information about her including the names of parents and sibling, where she went to school, telephone number and address.

“For even a kid who is relatively careful, the Internet can be a dangerous place,” Robb said. “Kids who are going to be on the Internet are going to be at risk, because they will be giving some personal information.”

In general, online victims share a set of common characteristics—low self-esteem, lack of parental oversight and isolation from a peer group, she said.

Children and youth are the “ideal victims” for predators, Robb said, because they are naturally curious, are led easily by adults, have a need for attention and affection, feel a need to defy parents, have low self-esteem

and are not likely to report to parents or law enforcement. “If they say, ‘Someone sexually solicited me on the Internet,’ what is the reaction of most parents? No more Internet. So, they don’t tell,” she said.

Statistics show that only 25 percent of children and teens who are sexually solicited tell a parent and only 10 percent of cases are reported to law enforcement, she noted.

“And not reporting puts them in an even more vulnerable position emotionally,” she said.

About 99 percent of Internet predators are male, 97 percent act alone and 86 percent are 25 years old or older, Robb reported. And only 10 percent have a prior arrest for a sexual offense against minors.

“If law enforcement does not know they are predators, how can we expect our kids to?” she asked.

The most important thing for parents to do is establish ground rules for Internet use, she said. Sit down with your child and establish what sites can be visited, what online activities are allowed, who they can talk to, how long they will be online and where they can use the computer, she suggested.

Most youth who become victims spend hours online each day with little or no supervision. For that reason, she recommends the computer only be used in a common room where the child knows someone probably will pass by.

Also, parents should let their child know they want to discuss anything that happens that makes them feel scared or uncomfortable.

For some parents, they may want to prepare themselves beforehand for that type of conversation. Stay calm, and encourage them to confide in you,

Robb suggested.

One of the key things a parent can do is to stay informed about the Internet. Know about filters, blockers and rating applications, and monitoring software. Go into a chat room and learn the terminology used. Ask your children to show you where they go on the Internet.

Also, be aware children are quick to find ways around filtering and monitoring software, and there is no substitute for a physical presence, Robb stressed.

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