

Protecting God's Children for Adults

Camera Phones: Unseen Dangers

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As hand-held communication companies produce more and more devices, with advanced features that are standard, the camera enhanced cell phone or the PDA (Personal Digital Assistant) will surely become a favorite tool for the voyeur or the molester in the exploitation of children.



The camera phone first arrived in the United States in 2002. Today, virtually every new cell phone or PDA comes with a built-in digital camera. Some of the newer devices have a built-in flash, while others have a night-mode system that allows photos to be taken in extremely low light situations. Each of these hand-held communication devices have become so commonplace, it is not surprising to learn that some of the earliest images shown to millions on the nightly news of the New Orleans disaster or even the Asian tsunami, had been photographed by survivors who were using cell phone or PDA camera devices.

Unfortunately, law enforcement has found that in many cases, child molesters will also utilize hand-held camera or video enhanced communication devices to surreptitiously photograph images of children. With just the push of a button the child molester can send these images, which were just photographed, to computer screens or to other hand-held communication devices anywhere around the world.

History

Since the 1850s the process of taking a photograph consisted of a professional or a relative who was “quite visibly” holding a large camera, pointing the camera at a subject, and then shooting. The subject of the photograph most often was posing and in many cases wore a big smile. Usually the subject of the photo was aware that his or her photograph was being taken. With the exception of Polaroid® photos, once the photos were taken the photographer would take the film somewhere to have it processed and printed. Once the processed photos were retrieved, they would be examined by the photographer or by family members and put in an album, a picture frame, or simply stuck in a drawer.

Today’s digital technology has changed the entire process of photography. The technology that both photo professionals and amateurs use is almost identical. Digital cameras and inexpensive computer photo software will allow any photographer, even an amateur, to take a photograph and then correct any mistakes, add colors, modify the landscape, and insert objects or even people. An inexpensive home printer and photo paper means that one no longer has to take the film to a store or lab to have the photos processed.

The concept of the camera phone is to provide the consumer with an entertaining feature wherein a user could send friends or family a quick look of his or her life, via a photo. Of course, the mobile communication companies knew that consumer use of their camera phones would boost the data traffic on the networks that the carriers had invested large sums of money to build. Unfortunately, as with any new technology, it didn't take long before unscrupulous people, including child molesters, put their own spin on this device.

While many parents or caretakers of children may be suspicious of an adult aiming a large camera toward children at a zoo, park, or community swimming pool, no one may notice a person holding a PDA or talking on a cell phone. Particularly when the distinctive camera shutter click sound of some of these hand-held devices has been disabled to further cloak the fact the molester is inappropriately taking photographs of children.

Camera-inclusive mobile devices not only allow a child molester to surreptitiously “snap” pictures of children and teens but also to transmit the pictures easily to other people who have the same sexual interest in

children. Outside the telecommunications network, the images can readily be shared online with other molesters using email or instant messaging. The photos can even be posted, within minutes of capturing them, on hundreds of child molester or child-erotica-oriented internet web sites that are more than willing to host “grainy” camera-phone-captured images of children and teens.

Other Dangers for Children

When parents purchase a cell phone or PDA for their child, most do it for safety reasons. Some single working parents purchase the phones so that they can stay “instantly connected” to a son or daughter. Unfortunately, many young people today see these devices only as a direct link to their social lives. With a cell phone young people can call, text, or even send photos to friends, thus quickly establishing a network of their own.

Today, camera phones are making photos an integral part of some teen cell phone or text messaging conversations. Teens are taking photos of themselves and then showing them to friends and relatives immediately after they're taken. Teens at another school or in another city can see photos of their friends nearly in real-time on a portable device, in e-mail, or by viewing one of the many online photo albums.

In some cases children or teens will post their camera photos on random blogs or more frequently on the popular teen social networking sites such as LiveJournal.com, Facebook.com, MySpace.com, and Xanga.com. Most children or teens who post their photos, along with the online diaries, naively believe that these sites are restricted only to their “friends.” This is far from the truth as nearly anyone with a technology background or even just a little tenacity can view almost any of these online diaries. Many teenage subjects of the camera photos do not consider that anyone could observe photos of them drinking alcohol, using drugs, or in some cases even having sex.

Most molesters are capable of viewing any of these online diaries. Once the molester has viewed an online diary with photos attached, he or she can easily right click on the photos and copy them. The molester can then send the photos to others who have a sexual interest in children or teens. In some cases, the molester may also send the photos to his computer where he or she can easily use inexpensive software to digitally modify the photos. For instance, a molester can insert an adult, sexually abusing the subject of the photo.

Protection

As a result of these and other problems, camera and video-phones have already been banned at many swimming pools and sports facilities in England, Australia, and Saudi Arabia.

In the United States, most of the rules regarding camera phones are less formal. Government offices (primarily courtrooms), health clubs, recreation centers, and some businesses have instituted their own bans. Because of other dangers, some in the technology industry predict that eventually camera phones may be automatically disabled when the owners enter sensitive places, like hospitals or banks.

Prior to mobile phones becoming very affordable; many school districts banned them, fearing that gang members and drug dealers were using them to commit crimes within and around the schools. In recent years, that concern has largely diminished, and many parents routinely purchase cell phones for their children, in order to stay in touch at any time. Unfortunately as more and more teenagers bring camera phones to school, photos and videos of students taken surreptitiously by others, in school locker rooms, showers, or restrooms, have forced many school districts to address the privacy issues raised by camera phones.

Communication technology and electronic devices are rapidly evolving. Adults must be aware of the new technology and understand the features that are available on the devices. Unfortunately, gaining such knowledge will require time and effort. It's important to remember that prior to a parent purchasing any type of electronic communication device for a child or teen, there should be a frank discussion of the many unseen dangers involved with today's electronic communication.