

Monitoring Computer Usage

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The Internet is fantastic, but it can also be dangerous for children and young people. Millions of children are now going online to exchange electronic mail and instant messages, participate in Internet social networking groups, post and read messages in newsgroups, "surf" the web, and engage in many other on-line activities. In many cases, young people can be more knowledgeable about technology trends than many adults.

Over the past year social networking sites have come under attack after some of their young members fell prey to adult predators posing as minors. Recently, one such site reported that it detected and deleted over 29,000 convicted sex offenders from its service.

According to a page of another site, a 41-year-old San Bruno, California, resident is single, a Sagittarius, a nonsmoker and nondrinker, and counts an online stripper among his six friends. But California's online database of registered sex offenders offers a different profile of the same man: he has been convicted of forced sodomy, oral sex, and "lewd and lascivious acts"—all with a person under the age of 14.



On another social networking site page a 22-year-old man in San Francisco comes off as a typical college student, professing a love for beat poetry, nature, and obscure coffee house bands. His profile fails to mention that he is a convicted child molester.

Assuming the profiles are authentic, the easily verified presence of registered sex offenders in the on-line community highlights the difficulties social networking sites face as they seek to clean up their content and public images, while maintaining the flexibility and privacy that has drawn in millions of users.

Currently, there is a push to require children to receive parental permission before creating social networking profiles and to require the web sites to verify the parents' identity and age. For example, social networking sites would have to compare information provided by a parent with commercial databases. In other words, such networks are being pressured to use age and identity verification methods voluntarily. However, it isn't likely that this measure would stop sex offenders from using the sites. Additionally, there is the issue of unregistered sexual offenders and other sexual predators. All of their online profiles, which obviously make no mention of their former crimes or their true intent, can make such social networking sites a dangerous place for young people who naively post personal information.

It is also important to remember that, in some cases, a registered sex offender is not breaking the law just by participating on a social networking site. While a judge may on occasion require a convicted sex offender stay out of Internet chat rooms or avoid playgrounds, that order ends once a sentence has been served. Afterward, under some state laws, the perpetrator's only requirement is to register with law enforcement agencies annually, and upon changing residences, for the rest of his or her life, although this often varies from state to state.

Nor are convicted sex offenders violating social networking sites' rules by merely using the service. In fact, the only people not allowed on these websites are those under the age of 14, those who provide false information or fail to maintain the accuracy of their profile, or people who use the service unlawfully.

In any event, such a crackdown would amount to little more than a public relations move, because it would only expel sex offenders who, in keeping with website's terms, provide their real name, location, and other accurate personal information. Users can easily register and start using networking sites with a completely fake name, address, age, and even e-mail address; thus one who wishes to use the site for ill purposes is allowed to do just that.

Often teens use the Internet to keep connected with friends, make new friends, to have conversation, and perhaps to have romances. However, there are people out there that wish to do children harm and adults who put their needs and pleasures before that of a child. It is important to know that there are things that can be done to reduce the risk to children and young people.

By taking responsibility for children's on-line computer use, parents and other caring adults can greatly minimize any potential on-line risks. Setting reasonable guidelines for computer usage, discussing the rules, and posting them near the computer as a reminder can be helpful—and monitoring your children's compliance with these rules is vital. Some simple protective measures include:

- Becoming familiar with your children's computer usage; check the websites they have visited
- Limiting the amount of time your children spend on the computer just like you do their television consumption
- Keeping the computer in an open area where you can monitor its use
- Knowing with whom your children are chatting and asking about their online "friends"
- Remembering that people online may not be who they seem; it is easy for a person to misrepresent him or herself.
- Knowing which web sites your children are visiting and what they are posting about themselves.
- Most Internet providers offer parental controls with their service. Use them to keep children away from undesirable sites.
- Learning all you can about blocking and filtering software, and implement it
- Having open family conversations with your children regarding both the benefits and dangers of modern technology. Advise them that, while the Internet *can* provide a wide range of positive experiences, it can also be a way by which predators attempt to gain access to potential victims.

It may be easier to create a safe environment for children and monitor their activities than to control the risk behaviors of a potential offender. While we may not know the names and locations of all offenders, we *do* know the names and faces of our children and the children entrusted to us.

The horrific reality of child sexual abuse may never be eliminated from our society. However, by creating a safe environment for children, monitoring their activities, and by discussing appropriate boundaries with them, we can raise the awareness and perhaps stop abuse before it happens; thus, enabling children to keep their age-appropriate innocence and naiveté.

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