



The term “online predator” often conjures up the image of a creepy older man at a computer screen waiting to lure an unsuspecting child. The media reinforces this depiction, which is problematic because it does not fit with the kinds of risky relationships that are more common for teens. In reality, when online sexual solicitation does occur, it’s more likely to be between two teens, or between a teen and a young adult.

The following background information serves to clear up these misconceptions, providing information for teachers about the myths and realities of online sexual solicitation, as well as guidance on how to approach this sensitive topic.

Thinking Beyond “Online Predators”

Many adults fear that teens use the Internet to connect with strangers. In reality, most teens use the Internet to keep in touch with people they already know offline, or to explore topics that interest them. Studies show that it is most often teens who are psychologically or socially vulnerable that tend to take more risks online (Subrahmanyam and Šmahel, 2011; Ybarra et al., 2007). These at-risk teens might seek reassurance, friendship, or acceptance through relationships that they develop online. Given the disconnect between the “online predator” myth and the more realistic types of solicitation outlined above, it is important to strike the right tone when discussing the issue with teens.

We recommend that adults avoid fear-based messages with teens, as research indicates that teens are less responsive to this approach (Lanning, 2010). Teens are not likely to buy into the idea that they should avoid all contact with anyone they do not know online. After all, it is nearly impossible to connect with others online without talking to some people who are strangers. Rather than telling teens to never talk with strangers, it is more effective to have conversations about why certain online relationships are risky, and about how to avoid them.

The Truth About Risky Online Relationships

The information below is meant to clear up misconceptions about the common risks that kids face when they meet people online. It is based on research from the Crimes Against Children Research Center, the Internet Safety Technical Task Force, and Internet Solutions for Kids, Inc.

1. Teens, not children, are most likely to receive online sexual solicitations.

Online solicitors rarely target younger kids. This happens more frequently to younger teens (ages 14 to 17). People who solicit online are often upfront about their intentions. They may ask teens to talk about sex, to give out personal sexual information, to send sexy photos online, or to meet offline for a possible sexual encounter.

2. A teen is more likely to be solicited online by another teen or a young adult.

Contrary to popular belief, teens are more likely to be solicited online by similarly aged peers. It is true, however, that a very high majority of sexual solicitations online come from boys or men. Guiding teens to think more generally about avoiding risky online relationships, rather than telling them to fear predators, prepares them for the wider breadth of situations they may have to deal with online – not only the extreme cases.



2. The “predator-prey” label gives the wrong impression.

There is a range of behaviors that are not made clear by the predator-prey label. The behaviors can range from “not as risky” to “very risky,” as reflected in the chart below:

<p>Not As Risky</p>  <p>Very Risky</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Receive inappropriate spam through email and immediately send it to their junk mail • Accept a friend request online from a stranger and receive a sexually explicit online message thereafter, or joke around on a virtual world site and flirt with other avatars • Seek companionship or friendship on an online chat room, and develop an ongoing, risky relationship with a stranger
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In the most extreme cases of online solicitation – those involving older adults and teens – targets are usually aware of their solicitor’s true age and intentions. For the small percentage of teens who find themselves in this kind of situation, simply warning them against “unwanted contact” is not an effective strategy because they have likely grown to be comfortable with, and perhaps even dependent upon, their solicitor. Instead, we need to help teens understand why it is risky to flirt with people they meet online, how to recognize warning signs, and more broadly, why romantic relationships between teens and adults are unhealthy.

What Should Teens Know if Online Strangers Contact Them?

The term “grooming” is sometimes used to describe the process of an older adult coaxing a young person into sexual situations. For cases involving children, grooming may involve befriending the child, showing interest in his or her hobbies, exposing the child to sexually explicit material, and manipulating a child into a sexual encounter (Lanning, 2010).

The term is less commonly used for cases between teens, or between a teen and a young adult. Research also shows that teens who flirt and engage in online sexual talk with strangers – especially in chat rooms – are more likely to be solicited for sex (Ybarra et al., 2007).

The number one thing for teens to remember is that they should avoid flirting with or regularly talking to online strangers or online acquaintances, especially – but not only – if the person they are chatting with is older than they are.

Teens should also reflect on these questions if they communicate with someone they meet online:

- **Has this person asked to keep anything about our relationship a secret?**
- **Has this person hinted at or asked about anything sexual?**
- **Have I felt pressured or manipulated by this person?**
- **Do I feel true to myself – sticking to my values – when I communicate with this person?**

If teens feel uncomfortable during a conversation with an online stranger, they should:

- **Change it up.** If something feels like it might be getting risky, it probably is. But if teens are not sure, they should try changing the subject, making a joke, or saying they want to talk about something else. If they still feel pressured or uncomfortable, they need to take further action.



- **Log off or quit.** Teens need to remember that at any time they can just stop typing and log off if a conversation gets uncomfortable online. They can also take action to block or report another user, or create a new account – whether for email, IM, or virtual world – to avoid contact with that person again.
- **Know that it's okay to feel embarrassed or confused.** It's not always easy to make sense of situations that make teens uncomfortable online. Nor is it easy for them to ask for help if they feel embarrassed about what they've experienced. They should know these feelings are normal.
- **Talk to a friend or trusted adult.** Teens should know that it's okay to reach out. Even if they feel they can handle a tricky situation alone, it's always a good idea for teens to turn to friends, parents, teachers, coaches, and counselors for support.

Teaching Strategies for Sensitive Topics

Setting Ground Rules

It can be very difficult to talk to teens about risky online relationships. Creating a safe space for open discussion is particularly important for lessons that deal with sensitive topics. Consider doing an activity with your class that builds trust among them, and then spend five to ten minutes with them developing some ground rules before teaching the **Risky Online Relationships** lesson. Invite students to suggest some discussion guidelines for themselves. Encourage them to consider the following:

- **Active Listening.** Show your classmates that you not only hear what they have to say, but that you also care.
- **Confidentiality.** Agree not to share personally identifying information from the group discussion with people outside the class.
- **Step Up, Step Back.** Be self-aware of your class participation, and make sure that everyone has an opportunity to share his or her opinions.
- **Respect.** Strive to be non-judgmental and open minded regarding different points of view.
- **Use "I" Statements.** Own one's statements and avoid using generalizing comments with "we," "they," or "you," which can communicate blame.

Provide Supportive Resources

Teens may react to conversations about emotional manipulation and risky relationships in different ways. Consider concluding the lesson by mentioning a few resources available to students at your school, such as guidance counseling, health services, and talking to other teachers. These resources may help kids practice safe behavior online long after your lesson on **Risky Online Relationships** is over.

You may wish to share the following Web resource with teens:

- That's Not Cool (www.thatnotcool.com)

Talking to Parents

Send parents the **Risky Online Relationships Parent Tip Sheet**

The following parent tips and websites may also be helpful:

- **Digital Relationships Parent Tip Sheet – High School**



- **Internet Safety Parent Tip Sheet – High School**

- Internet Solutions for Kids, Inc. (www.is4k.com)
- Scarleteen (http://www.scarleteen.com/for_parents). Note: When it comes to talking about relationships, sexuality, and intimacy with their teens, parents can take many different approaches. Though this website may not be right for all families, some parents may find it a helpful online resource about sexual health and healthy relationships to share with their teens.

Research

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