



Protecting Youth on the Internet

By Kate Blain

One of the biggest threats to children using the Internet today, says Kenneth Lanning, is their parents' outdated understanding of technology.

Just as problematic is the fact that the "children" who are meeting sexual offenders online are often teenagers, willing victims who believe they have developed a relationship with the offender.

"The use of the word 'predator' is a waste of time, because these kids almost never perceive the person as a sexual predator, but as a 'BFF' [Best Friend Forever]," asserts Lanning, a retired FBI agent now heading CAC Consultants, a Virginia-based consulting firm specializing in crimes against children.

The acronym "BFF" is just one example of the ways technology has passed many parents by, according to both Lanning and Robert Farley of RHF Consultants in Chicago.

Farley is a consultant for INTERPOL and other agencies on child abuse investigative techniques, as well as the author of the Virtus programs used in many U.S. Catholic dioceses to protect children from sexual predators. He notes that "the biggest problem right now is that you have a technology gap."

Lanning gives further examples: "PAW" and "PIR," used by children and teens in text-messaging, respectively mean "Parents Are Watching" and "Parents in Room." The



Kenneth Lanning,
CAC Consultants



Robert Farley,
RHF Consultants



United States Conference of Catholic Bishops
Office of Child and Youth Protection | www.usccb.org/ocyp

acronyms are quick ways to end conversations so that parents don't catch on to inappropriate exchanges.

Text-messaging, Farley explains, "is a completely different language. People are contacting kids [via cell phones and other handheld devices] with a text message claiming to be a friend, then encouraging the kid to move to a computer so they can do real-time instant-messaging."

The experts say that, while most parents know enough to keep computers in common areas at home so they can be monitored, children know how to send messages their parents will not understand – and technology has moved beyond the need to use home computers to make contacts.

"Cell phones are the big problem now," Farley states.

While the experts agree that parental monitoring of computer use has its place, as does software limiting access to Web sites, they note that the keys to protecting children from sexual offenders are love and communication.

"It's about personal relationships, being involved in your child's life," Lanning states. "It increases the odds" against being lured by a sexual offender.

Farley refers to the common claim children make that "everyone's doing" some activity. In the case of social networking, he says, "Everybody is really doing it, so sit down and say, 'What's the most popular social networking site in your school? Let me see one of your friends' sites.'"

Then a parent can talk about what information the child's friends might be posting that's inappropriate, set boundaries around what a child can post and explain how to beware of offenders.

Above all, say Lanning and Farley, parents should not demand that children have no access to the Internet or ban social networking sites, since that makes kids more likely to go online at friends' houses or other unmonitored locations.

Farley also advises that parents learn how to use today's technology themselves.

"Parents have to learn how to text-message," he states – and the best teachers are their children.



If parents discover that their children are involved in risky Internet behavior, Lanning stresses they should not react with anger: “A typical parent is going to say, ‘What are you doing, going to those sites?’ But if that’s your attitude, is your son going to come to you?”

Instead, he said, parents should talk about the risks of sharing information online or looking at pornographic Web sites: encountering predators, cyber-bullying, compromising one’s computer and identity theft.

To go further in stopping Internet contacts, the experts offer several options: changing email addresses, taking the child to a therapist to work through the issues that caused them to be victimized, or making a police report.

However, Farley cautions that many local police departments are not equipped to pursue online predators. He suggests that parents with serious concerns call the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children’s cyber tipline at 1-800-843-5678.

