

## Tips from the School Counselor



It's 2008 and our kids are more computer savvy than many of us will ever be. They have so many tech gadgets at their fingertips, it's almost overwhelming- to us. For them, it's a large part of how this generation communicates with each other. Texting, E-mailing, and Instant Messaging are becoming our kids' choice way to connect.

Unfortunately, sometimes they get *too* comfortable at home behind the computer. Accountability no longer seems to be an issue. Feeling a false sense of safety, they can send out e-mails, instant messages, blog, create websites, and use social networking sites. They can be whoever they wish to be. They can use fake pictures and names; moreover, anyone who they encounter can do so as well. This often leads to the student further lowering his or her guard. They often feel safe about giving out personal information to someone they don't know if they think that person is located far away from where they live.

Predators often "groom" their victims over a period of time, building rapport. This is often referred to as "Emotional Grooming". The perpetrator must establish a false sense of trust and a sense of secrecy. They often target students that are hungry for attention and/or affection. These students often want to keep this "special friendship" to themselves, which aids the perpetrator. This relationship develops over a period of time. The groomer extracts information from the student little by little. They may disclose their own personal information- which may or may not be true. They use sympathy tactics, flattery, self-disclosure, bribery, and sometimes, intimidation.

Sadly, we know how many of these stories play out. As a parent, what can you do to keep your child safe?

1. Discuss boundaries with your child. The simple fact is that everyone you first "meet" online is a stranger. Kids learn stranger danger when they are younger. They need to know that this still applies when they are older and on the net. It "seems" like you are becoming friends. Don't chat with anyone you don't know personally.
2. Talk to your child about uncomfortable feelings they may experience while on the net. Do they get upset, embarrassed, depressed, and/or afraid? Teach them to trust their instincts. People have the "Gift of Fear" as author Dr. Gavin DeGraw coined and titled a book on the subject. We need to listen to that. If it doesn't feel right somehow- most likely it's not. It's better to be safe than sorry.
3. Discuss what information is not appropriate for the net. (Personal.) Remind them that once they send something out, everyone can read it and don't write things when you are angry that you may regret later. People only see the words and can misconstrue the meaning behind them. We can not observe body language, see expressions, or hear the tone of voice.
4. Know what sites your child visits, and ask them to show you themselves.
5. Keep the computer in a common area. If they can't share what they are doing out in the open, they shouldn't be doing it!
6. Communicate! Communicate! Communicate! Keep talking to your child. You may not think they're listening- but they hear. Don't give up on a good open communication line between parent and child.

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