

What you should know about the dangers of the internet

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The problem in brief

Through the internet we can access a bewildering amount of useful information and make contact with people around the world. But this freedom has a dark side. If your child has access to the internet then they are just a mouse-click away from thousands of adult pornographic websites.

Whether they access these sites intentionally or unintentionally, children can see anything from 'soft' pornography to material that is prosecutable as obscenity. This might include pictures of women having sex with animals, men engaged in sexual acts with children, and the rape, torture, and mutilation of women.

How children are targeted

Children are lured to pornographic websites through innocent or imprecise searches using key words or phrases that are 'hijacked' by pornographers. Such words include 'toys', 'boys', 'Britney Spears' and 'dogs'. Pornographers will also misuse brand names to promote their websites. In a UK study (Envisional 2000) 26 popular children's characters, such as Pokemon, My Little Pony and Action Man, revealed thousands of links to porn sites. 30% of these sites showed hard-core pornography.

Children can also receive unsolicited pornographic e-mails or 'spam' and pornographic content through private, real-time communication with sexual predators - the 'instant messaging' service being a prime example.

Of course, children will also deliberately visit pornographic sites. They have access to computers and the internet not only at home, but also at school, libraries, or the home of a friend. According to The Kaiser Family Foundation report (www.kff.org), 70% of teenagers (ages 15-17 "have accidentally come across pornography on the Web."

This item is based on the article Kids Online: Protecting Your Children In Cyberspace

How pornography can harm your children

- Distorted attitudes and values

As caring, responsible parents we want to instil in our children our own personal values about relationships, sex, intimacy, love, and marriage. Unfortunately, the powerful irresponsible messages of pornography have a subtle corrupting effect on our children on these very important life issues. Just as thirty-second commercials can influence whether or not we choose one popular soft drink over another, exposure to pornography shapes our attitudes and values and, often, our behaviour.

- Sexual illnesses, unplanned pregnancies, and sexual addiction

As more and more children are exposed to soft-core pornography and to explicit deviant sexual material they are learning an extremely dangerous message from pornographers - sex without responsibility is acceptable and desirable. They will be tempted to experiment sexually, and the results may be sexual violence, sexual illnesses, unplanned pregnancies, sexual addiction and perversion.

- Sexual violence

According to one study, early exposure (under fourteen years of age) to pornography is related to greater involvement in deviant sexual practice. In a study of convicted child molesters, 77 % of those who molested boys and 87 % of those who molested girls admitted to the habitual use of pornography in the commission of their crimes.

This item is based on Kids Online: Protecting Your Children In Cyberspace by Donna Rice Hughes (Revell, September 1998)

What can be done

As a parent you can take simple, practical steps to ensure that the risk of your children seeing or visiting inappropriate

websites is minimised:

- Establish online rules and an agreement with your child about internet use at home and elsewhere (such as at a friend's house, at school, at the library)
- Spend time online alongside your child and establish an atmosphere of trust regarding computer usage and online activities.
- Place your computer in an area of your home where you can easily supervise your child's internet activity.
- Implement software tools to protect your family from the intrusion of inappropriate content and sexual predators.
- Recognize that chat rooms are the playground of today's sexual predator
- Block instant/personal messages from people you and your child don't know.
- Do not permit your child to have an online profile. With this restriction, he or she will not be listed in directories and is less likely to be approached in chat rooms where paedophiles often search for prey.
- Check with your child's school to see if student projects are being put on school home pages.
- Watch for changes in your child's behaviour (mention of adults you don't know, secretiveness, inappropriate sexual knowledge, sleeping problems).
- Report any content or activity that you suspect as illegal or criminal to local law enforcement and to cybercrime hotlines.
- Download an internet content filter - free - from the Internet Content Rating Association at <http://www.icra.org/>

This text is based on an article by Donna Rice Hughes

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