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PROTECT YOUR CHILD FROM ONLINE PREDATORS

BY: RUDY WARTELLA & MAJ JP LEARY

Okinawa is a safe place to raise children, but with the internet in almost every home, there are no longer any “safe neighborhoods.” Easy access to the internet is a big concern for parents – for good reason.

The internet is a wonderful and useful tool, but 77% of children have been contacted by online predators by the age of 14¹. One out over every five U.S. teens has received a sexual solicitation over the internet.

Blogs and social networking sites have given children a place online where children can meet and talk with others who share their same interest. The problem is that the large amount of personal information available on these networking sites gives online predators the information they need to identify potential victims and gain their trust. For example an online predator can look through an account for pictures of children, as well as a great deal of other personal information. Online predators use this information to gain trust in order to convince them to meet in real life.

The internet has given online predators a means of meeting with other predators to discuss and improve their tactics. As a result predators have become more dangerous and effective. Online predators have also found more and more ways to keep children from telling someone when they do feel threatened.

Despite the dangers, there are ways that you can help keep your child safe from online predators:

- 1) **Learn about the internet.** Familiarize yourself with the programs your children are using including online games, blogs, instant messaging, and social networking websites.
- 2) **Participate with your child online.** Visit Social Networking websites with your kids. Ask them to show you their favorite websites, if they have a social networking website like Myspace or Facebook ask them to see it, and to see some of the websites of their friends as well. Or have your child help you to set up a Myspace account so that you can learn how the website works.
- 3) **Keep Profiles Private:** Most Social Networking sites give users the option to restrict access to a person’s internet profile. This assures that personal web pages can only be viewed by your child’s friends and family.
- 4) **Plan ahead.** Talk to your children about the things that they may encounter online. Teach them that the same values that they hold offline apply online as well.
- 5) **Make a Promise and Keep It.** Online predators are smart; they often begin conversations online in an innocuous manner and then make children feel that they have done something wrong when conversations become aggressive in nature. They then use this to prevent children from telling a trusted adult when they become uncomfortable. Promise your kids that you won’t get angry if they tell you about something that happened while they were online and stick to your promise.
- 6) **Photos.** Tell your child not to post a photograph with any online profile. Remind them that posting pictures significantly increases the chances of predators approaching them online.
- 7) **Security Passwords and Account information.** Be sure that your children give you a list of their online accounts and passwords in case there is an emergency and these accounts need to be checked.

8) **Filters.** Consider getting an online filter which may be able to reduce adult material which your child has the ability to view. But remember that such programs are a safety precaution which are easy for users to find a way around. Filters are a tool, not a substitute for parental guidance.

More information on this subject along with learning activities for your child can be found at the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children's website, www.netismartz.org.

¹ According to Cyberangle, a well- known nonprofit Internet safety organization.

