

Boys' Life[®]

Danger in Cyberspace

By Lawrence J. Magid

Think you're lonely? Think you've found a friend? Think again.

Justin, 15, recently moved to a new town. He hasn't made many friends yet. So he visits Internet chat rooms, where he can communicate with kids from around the world. They talk about sports, movies, dating, the usual stuff.

Justin chimes in occasionally but tends to back off when others start typing. Once there were about 12 people in the room when "Spyman" sent an instant message, asking Justin if he wanted to join him in a private chat room.

Spyman seems nice enough. He's 17 and shares with Justin a passion for video games and basketball.

The next time Justin logs in, Spyman again invites him for a private chat. This time the conversation gets a bit more personal.

"Do you have a girlfriend?" "How do you get along with your parents?" "Do you ever feel lonely?" Justin confides in Spyman that he's new in town. Over the next several weeks there are more chat sessions and e-mails. Justin thinks of Spyman as a friend.

The friends start exchanging other information, such as where they go to school, where they like to hang out and where they live. Finally, Spyman asks Justin if he would like to get together. "I'm hanging out at my Uncle Jim's house," he told Justin. "He's a cool guy who has lots of video games." Spyman arranges for Jim to pick Justin up after school.

Sure enough, "Jim" showed up in front of Justin's school, but Justin got nervous and decided not to get in the car. Good thing. A few weeks later, "Spyman"—actually a 34-year-old man—was arrested for molesting a teenage boy in another state.

The names and some of the details have been changed. But this story is typical of the hundreds of cases investigated each year by the Exploited Child Unit of the National Center for Missing

and Exploited Children (NCMEC) along with the F.B.I. and local police departments. Sadly, not all end happily. Of the more than 5,100 cases reported to the Center since 1998, some have had tragic—sometimes fatal—consequences.

Most online enticement cases start in a chat room, according to Ruben Rodriguez, director of the Exploited Child Unit. The predator hangs out in a public chat room looking for a young person he thinks is vulnerable. When a predator finds someone, he invites him or her into a private chat room. That's followed by more chats, e-mail and, in some cases, phone calls. Finally, the predator tries to arrange a face-to-face meeting.

It can take several months to turn an initial chat room contact into a meeting, but that doesn't stop these predators, Mr. Rodriguez says. "They know how to manipulate children," he says. "They know their likes and dislikes and they know what buttons to push."

Tactics often include giving the young person emotional support. It might start with the predator "confiding" something such as difficulty with parents, problems at school or problems in a relationship. In some cases, the predator will e-mail photos, possibly including pornographic images. It's all part of an effort to lower the victim's resistance to whatever the predator has in mind.

You don't have to be forcibly snatched from your home to be a victim. Most of the time, kids are lured into a dangerous situation. Sometimes they go along willingly. Trouble is, what might start out as a seemingly positive relationship can degenerate into something horrific.

Cyber-danger isn't always tragic. But it's often unpleasant and potentially dangerous. In most cases, it's a result of giving out information online.

Be thoughtful of which Web sites you visit. What you see on some sites can not only make you uncomfortable but could get you into trouble if others find out you've been there. Be especially careful at school or when there are other people around. Even if the site doesn't bother you, it could disturb others.

Some people forget their manners when they're online just as some drivers can be rude when they're behind the wheel of a car. Be respectful of people you're communicating with and don't do anything online that you wouldn't do in the "real world."

In the "real world," you would never arrange to get in a car with a total stranger. Justin, the new kid in town, almost did. He's around today to tell his story because he thought twice.

Rules for Online Safety

Take this pledge to be safe online. Copy this pledge and post it near the computer.

- I will not give out personal information such as my address, telephone number, parents' work address/telephone number or the name and location of my school without my parents' permission.
- I will tell my parents right away if I come across any information that makes me feel uncomfortable.
- I will never agree to get together with someone I "meet" online without first checking with my parents. If my parents agree to the meeting, I will be sure that it is in a public place and bring my mother or father along.
- I will never send a person my picture or anything else without first checking with my parents.
- I will not respond to any messages that are mean or in any way make me feel uncomfortable. It is not my fault if I get a message like that. If I do I will tell my parents right away so that they can contact the service provider.
- I will talk with my parents so that we can set up rules for going online. We will decide upon the time of day that I can be online, the length of time I can be online, and appropriate areas for me to visit. I will not access other areas or break these rules without their permission.
- I will not give out my Internet password to anyone (even my best friends) other than my parents.
- I will be a good online citizen and not do anything that hurts other people or is against the law.

Beware

The predator hangs out in a public chat room looking for a young person, he then invites them into a private chat room. That's followed by more chats, e-mail and phone calls. Finally, the predator will try to arrange a face-to-face meeting.

Safety Sites

Check out these resources for more information:

- NetSmartz.org: Uses games and characters to drive home the message of Internet safety.
- SafeTeens.com: Devoted to helping teens stay safe in cyberspace.
- SafeKids.com: Advice for keeping younger kids safe.
- Cybertipline.com: A place to report online sexual exploitation of children.
- GetNetWise.org: An online industry sponsored site.
- "Teen Safety on the Information Highway," from the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. Call 1-800-THE LOST for a free copy or visit www.missingkids.com.

The Boy Scouts of America  <http://www.scouting.org>