



Kidshield Online Safety - Dealing with the Facts

“Because they’re upstairs and they’re quiet doesn’t mean they’re safe. They’re no more safe upstairs on the Internet than they are out in the park at 2 O’clock in the morning” MA State Police Internet Crimes Task Force

As a parent, carer or educator of children it is easy to let the facts overwhelm us. Children are extremely vulnerable and sometimes even thinking about something bad happening to them is more than some people can take. That’s why most responsible adults tend to turn to the ‘idealist’ in themselves and think that this will never happen to them, so it’s easier to ignore.

A reply from the Microsoft organisation to the EU Commission for Safer Internet – 2007 asked the question why only 10% of parents felt the need to ensure their child was viewing an Internet page with parental guidance safety filters.

“Microsoft appreciates that many parents and guardians feel the need to be more informed about Internet safety and agrees that it is important to provide consumers with both safety information and easy to use tools. We take the view that research should be undertaken to gather additional insight into what consumers believe about Internet content, about Web filters, what their preferences are and — above all — why the adoption rate of Internet filters remains alarmingly low...concerns about potentially harmful content remain significant whilst the use of the existing tools — which are widely available, generally effective at filtering, and are relatively easy to configure — remains very low (some estimates are as low as 10% of households with parents)”.

With current figures estimating that 9 out of 10 children are surfing the internet without any form of parental filters installed, and parents often having no clear idea what their children are viewing, it is a frightening reminder that parents need to do more to protect their children.

A recent Kidshield survey found that most children who are active online, have a computer located in their bedroom and many have webcams. Kids love sending and receiving email, instant messaging and the interaction in chat rooms, in fact it is often cited as the first thing they do when getting home from school!

Chatting to your friends is a great social interaction and online is just a natural transition for our children. As a parent Kidshield would recommend getting to know who your children are sending emails to and who they're getting emails from, if chat rooms are part of the interaction - which ones and what goes on in these chat rooms? As a parent you need to know.

There is not a chat room online where you won't find at least one adult sexual predator. They masquerade as kids and teenagers, often grooming and luring young children and teenagers to meet them.

Read more about [Parental Guidance Safety Filters](http://www.kidshield.eu/kidshield_online_safety_filtering.htm) at
www.kidshield.eu/kidshield_online_safety_filtering.htm

In January 2008 a volunteer researcher at Kidshield Europe created a Bebo Account which clearly stated in their online profile that they were 13 years old, despite giving the date of birth during sign-up as 18 years old. Our volunteer then created a Yahoo Profile and within minutes of signing on and giving the Bebo persona as a personal web page, our researcher was sent personal messages by a large number of users initiating contact. Examples include Chris, 50 who wanted some fun with a younger female, and another who wanted our young Bebo user to view them on web cam whilst they engaged in a sexual action. Remember that our young user was 13 years old but these online "friends" were extremely keen to make contact – and continued bombarding our "13 year old" until she logged off.

Often children as young as 5 years old know more than their parents about do about instant messaging, chat rooms and social networking sites like My Space and Bebo. That's why the education of parents is just as important as teaching the children.

Research shows up to one in 12 of the eight million British children with internet access have gone on to meet someone in reality after they first made contact on the internet.

A spokeswoman for the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre said:

'There is phenomenal growth in social networking sites, and young people have been putting personal information there which could easily identify them.'

'We don't want them to put that kind of information online - because where young people go online, so do paedophiles. We will be seeking new safety features from the website operators. It's not a question of closing them down, we're just trying to stay one step ahead of those who are going online to exploit children.'

Source: CEOP

What are social networking sites?

Social networking sites, sometimes referred to as "friend-of-a-friend" sites, build upon the concept of traditional social networks where you are connected to new people through people you already know. The purpose of some networking sites may be purely social, allowing users to establish friendships or romantic relationships, while others may focus on establishing business connections.

Although the features of social networking sites differ, they all allow you to provide information about yourself and offer some type of communication mechanism (forums, chat rooms, email, instant messenger) that enables you to connect with other users. On some sites, you can browse for people based on certain criteria, while other sites require that you be "introduced" to new people through a connection you share. Many of the sites have communities or subgroups that may be based on a particular interest.

What security implications do these sites present?

Social networking sites rely on connections and communication, so they encourage you to provide a certain amount of personal information. When deciding how much information to reveal, young children and teens may not exercise the same amount of caution as they would when meeting someone in person because:

- the internet provides a sense of anonymity
- the lack of physical interaction provides a false sense of security
- they tailor the information for their friends to read, forgetting that others may see it
- they want to offer insights to impress potential friends

While the majority of people using these sites do not pose a threat, predators are drawn to them because of the accessibility and amount of personal information available to them. Predators may form relationships online and then convince young persons to meet them. The personal information can also be used to conduct cyber bullying.

How can you protect your children who use Social Networking sites?

- **Limit the amount of personal information posted** - Educate your children to limit the amount of information they post that could make them vulnerable (e.g., full name, address, information about routines). If their friends or connections post information about them, make sure the combined information is not more than they would be comfortable with strangers knowing.
- **Remember that the internet is a public resource** - Educate your children to only post information they are comfortable with anyone seeing. This includes information in their profile and in blogs and other forums.
- **Be wary of strangers** - The internet makes it easy for people to misrepresent their identities and motives. Educate your children to consider limiting the people who are allowed to contact them on these sites.
- **Be aware** - Educate your children to be aware of potential online predators. People may post false or misleading information about various topics, including their own identities.
- **Check privacy policies** - As a parent, educator or carer be aware that some sites may share information such as email addresses or user preferences with other companies; your children should be alerted to this potential hazard. Try to locate the policy for handling referrals to make sure that your children do not unintentionally sign up their friends for spam emails. Some sites will continue to send email messages to anyone you refer until they join.

Children are especially susceptible to the threats that social networking sites present. Although many of these sites have age restrictions, children may misrepresent their ages so that they can join. By teaching children about internet safety, being aware of their online habits, and guiding them to appropriate sites, parents can make sure that the children become safe and responsible users.

What is online grooming?

Online solicitation and 'grooming' are the most common forms of online child sexual abuse. Grooming is a process whereby an adult with a sexual interest in children seeks to prepare or 'groom' a child for sexual abuse.

Grooming Behaviour

Commonly online predators will follow a path of behaviour which will include:

Causing a child to watch a sexual act, for example sending sexually themed adult content or images and videos featuring child sexual abuse to a young person;

Inciting a child to perform a sexual act, for example, by threatening to show sexual images of a child to their peers or parents;

Suspicious online contact with a child, for example by asking a young user sexual questions, to meet in person etc;

Disguising or misrepresenting themselves as a child or using school or hobby sites to gather information about particular children, their locations or future events where the child may be present.

Online predators will follow a pathway from friend to bully in order to establish a degree of control over our children. They will most often start out as 'buddys' or 'friends' and then start to attempt to gain influence and control over the relationship. Grooming behaviour has been the most commonly reported behavioural activity since April 2006, and equates to almost 16% of inappropriate reported behaviour.

Exposure to Sexual Content

The risk to children and young people covers 3 basic scenarios where a young person is deliberately or unwittingly exposed to:

adult content online

content depicting the sexual abuse of children

other sexually themed content that may cause harm to the child (e.g. sexualised pseudo-image of themselves)

If you believe that your child may have been exposed to any of the content described above please report it in the first instance to your local police authority. You can report inappropriate online content to the Internet Watch Foundation or CEOP (Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre)

Keep track of your children's 'friends' and remember if your child is leaving the house to go out with 'friends', what are the questions you would ask? Where are you going? What time will you be back? Who are you going with? Those are the type of questions you've got to ask when they go online. Don't let the silent nature of the Internet derail you from your normal parental curiosity".

www.kidshield.eu

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