



SAFETY MESSAGE FOR FAMILIES FROM POLICE CHIEF SHAFER



One of the most important discussions you can have with your child is about online predators. With the presence of more and more children and teenagers logging onto social networking sites nowadays and the increase of children and teenagers with smart phones, predators are finding information easier and quicker about potential victims. With low to no privacy settings, predators can easily find out the school a child attends, what they look like, who they're friends are and even their plans the next few days. It's important for parents to understand the truth about predators so you know how to help your child avoid them.

There are many myths about online predators, but some of the big ones include:

- They're all old men
- They're pedophiles
- They pretend to be younger to trick kids
- They find out where kids live and abduct them from their homes.

However, this is who they really are:

- Mostly men, age 26 or older - Studies show that 99% of predators are male. Female predators exist, but they are rare.
- Generally not pedophiles - Pedophiles are interested in young children, but online predators typically target teens.
- Rarely lie about being an adult - Studies show that only 5% of offenders pretend to be teens.
- Usually don't abduct - Predators and victims discuss their plans online to meet up and have sex. The teens are typically aware of who they're meeting and why.

This is what law enforcement professionals know about the victims:

- Mostly girls, but 25% of victims are boys
- Ages 13-15 years - This is an especially vulnerable time for teens who are exploring their sexuality and looking for attention online.
- Engage in patterns of risky behavior - Certain behaviors make teens more vulnerable to predators, like friending unknown people online and talking to them about sex.

The important thing to remember about victims is ***it's never their fault***. Predators target vulnerable teens and exploit their natural desires for attention and affection. They understand how to manipulate minors using a tactic calling ***grooming***. Signs that a child may be a victim of this tactic can include, but is not limited to, receiving gifts through the mail (such as bus tickets, cell phones and webcams), calling unknown numbers, rejecting family and friends in favor of spending time online, getting upset when he or she cannot get online, and minimizing the screen or turning off the monitor when others come into the room.

Teach your children the right information they should disclose on online sites. Too often children share more information than is necessary. A picture taken of a new car that a child wants to show off to friends on Facebook or Twitter suddenly tells an online predator the type of car they drive, the license plate number, and possibly even the home address. Youth should not be sharing their passwords, location (from a GPS locator on smart phones), school, address or home/cell phone number.

Sharing personal information online is not only a risk to online predators, but also a security risk because it leaves your children open to other targeting such as **identity theft, online scams and**

hacking. Many identity thieves target children (e.g. steal their SSN, use their name and birth date) because parents are less likely to notice until the child is older, for example when they apply for their first credit card. Likewise, many children, especially young children, fall for tricks such as promises of money or prizes, emails that ask for passwords or other information, and links that take them to inappropriate websites. Sharing passwords and other account details can result in someone hacking into their accounts and pretending to be them, or stealing files and other information you store on the computer.

Adults might think it's safer for children to lie about their name and age online, but that's not always true. For example, it's actually against Facebook's Terms of Service to use a fake name or age. All accounts of anyone under the age of 18 are not open to the public, so make sure they are using their real birthday. If they pretend to be older, their account has less default security restrictions.

If you see any of these signs, don't ignore them. Talk to your children. Check out what they're doing online and who they're talking to. Get help immediately if you suspect something is wrong.

Here are just some **tips** and ways to help your child stay away from online predators:

- Talk to your child about sex and relationships and specifically, what makes a healthy relationship. Have an open-door policy so they will not seek answers or inappropriate relationships online.
- Set a policy about meeting offline for older teens - If you think it's okay for older teens to meet friends offline, then establish rules to make it safer. Suggested rules include:
 - You have to get my permission before agreeing to meet.
 - You have to go with me or another adult.
- Know your child's online friends - Encourage them not to accept friend requests from anyone they don't already know.
- Teach your child the warning signs - Talk to them about grooming and ways that predators try to manipulate their victims.
- Above all, call the police if you suspect your child is talking to an online predator to prevent them from finding another victim.

There are also **technical ways** in which you can monitor your child's online experience. Some options you may want to look into include:

- *Filtering and monitoring software* - These can help protect your children from seeing sexually explicit content online and even notify you if they're receiving inappropriate messages.
- *Consult your cell phone provider* - They may offer monitoring options for your child's cell phone.
- *Research options for mobile devices* - Laptops, tablets, handheld games and MP3 players may have built-in monitoring options or software for purchase.
- *Look at the individual apps they're using* - Many apps have the option to turn off chat features or limit who can see what your child posts within the app.
- *Explore built-in security features for programs and websites* - These often have their own privacy or filtering services. For example, Google has a free SafeSearch option.

But remember, the most important thing is to **communicate** with your children about what they're doing online and **become engaged** in their online presence. Start the conversation by asking about

their interests or any number of topics. And maintain the conversation throughout the years of their adolescence.

If you have questions about what you can do to help educate children on online safety, please call the Highland Park Police Department at (847) 432-7730. For more tips on online safety for children, parents can go to <http://www.netismartz.org/Parents> which provides a great resource for parents and adults to teach children.

Thank you and Be Safe.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Paul Shafer". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Paul" being more prominent than the last name "Shafer".

Paul Shafer
Police Chief