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## The role of the school counselor and Internet predators

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## The role of the school counselor and Internet predators

### Abstract

Children and adolescents are vulnerable in person and now have become vulnerable through technology. The Internet is becoming larger, and so are the opportunities for predators to contact children. Using the Internet and online chat rooms, sexual predators begin to groom their victims and move the relationship forward. Children become involved in sexual photographs, videos, and telephone conversations. Eventually, a meeting is set up between the child and the predator.

Many people need to be provided information to keep children safe, and the issue needs to be addressed at all governmental and educational levels. School counselors can take charge and provide children and adolescents with individual, group, and classroom counseling for students in dealing with Internet safety issues.

# THE ROLE OF THE SCHOOL COUNSELOR AND INTERNET PREDATORS

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## Abstract

Children and adolescents are vulnerable in person and now have become vulnerable through technology. The internet is becoming larger, so are the opportunities for predators to contact children. Using the internet and online chat rooms, sexual predators begin to groom their victims and move the relationship forward. Children become involved in sexual photographs, videos, and telephone conversations. Eventually, a meeting is set up between the child and the predator. Many people need to be provided information to keep children safe and the issues needs to be addressed at all governmental and educational levels. School counselors can take charge and provide children and adolescents with individual, group, and classroom counseling for students in dealing with internet safety issues.

## The Role of the School Counselor and Internet Predators

Child safety has been an issue of increasing importance. Throughout time children have become less safe on playgrounds, in schools, and at home (Rupley, 2004). Sexual predators are one of the current concerns threatening the safety of children. Children are vulnerable in person and now through technology. Using the internet and online chat rooms, sexual predators begin to groom their victims. The predator cons the child into trusting them and moves the relationship forward. Children become involved in sexual photographs, videos, and telephone conversations. Once the predator has worked the relationship to his or her advantage, a meeting is set up between the child and the predator. Predators will travel amazing distances to meet up with their young victim or will spend mass amounts of money to have the child come to them (Crisis Connection, 2007).

If child use of the internet is to be safe it is an issue that will need to be addressed at all governmental and educational levels. Laws will need to be updated and law enforcement officials will need to be properly trained in order to handle the rising need of the safety of today's children. Families will need to take a stand on trust and open communication when it comes to the use of the internet by adults and children in the home. Schools will need to implement safety education at all grade levels, including parent education, which may fall in the hands of the school counselor. School counselors will need to make themselves available for students to share information regarding communication made or speculation relating to internet predators.

This paper will address sexual predators and online child sexual predators. It will define sexual predation. It will inform the reader of current dangerous websites due to

the continual traffic created by sexual predators. This paper will also include information that could be presented to parents in an attempt to keep their children safe from the dangers of the internet. Finally, this paper will outline responsibilities of schools and the role of the school counselor in protecting children from online predators.

The internet is becoming larger, so are the opportunities for predators to contact children. Many people need to be provided information to keep children safe. School counselors can serve as an important resource for parents, students, and staff when it comes to social and emotional issues regarding the health and safety of the students. In order for school counselors to pass on information they must first have the needed background knowledge to inform the specified audience of their need. This paper will provide a school counselor with background information in regards to helping students, informing parents, and assisting staff in dealing with the online safety of children.

### Sexual Predators

The issue of child safety is not a new issue for children, adolescents, or adults. Child predators, people that prey upon children, have been a long-standing cause of concern when it comes to child safety (World Book, 1991). When child predators advance on their prey to fulfill sexual desires, they are then termed as sexual predators (Wired Kids, Inc., 2007). According to state and federal laws, the definition of a sexual predator is very long and inclusive. The state of Florida, for example, claims an individual is a sexual predator once they have been convicted of sexual crimes dealing with advances on adolescents and children in person and through other forms of communication (Florida Department of Law Enforcement, 2006).

### Internet Sexual Predators

Communication made through the use of the internet is one way in which sexual predators are making sexual advances on children and adolescents (Bower, 2007).

Whereas in the past sexual predators had to go into the community or beyond and search for their prey, today's technological availability offers sexual predators the luxury of searching for their prey right in their own living room. Sexual predators that use the internet as a form of meeting and grooming children and adolescents are called internet or online predators.

There are many similarities of the in-person child predator advances and the online child predator advances. The most important process is the relationship. The grooming process, in which trust between the predator and child is fostered is very much the same. However, the internet allows the predator to be more efficient in the search and communication process (Dombrowski, LeMasney, Ahia, & Dickson, 2004). According to Texas Attorney General, Greg Abbott, "the internet is being used as a playground for child predators" (2006, ¶ 2). Gifts, advice, and isolated meetings are all a part of both types of child predator relationships (Magid & Collier, 2007). There are various types of internet predators, based on their sexual intents.

#### *Collectors*

Collectors are new offenders. They have no prior child or adult sexual offender allegations. Their main intent is to collect pictures, Web Cam footage, and videos of children without clothing, and/or performing sexual acts. This type of online predator does not typically make sexual advances beyond the initial contact with the child in which the picture or video request has been made. Collectors may have never become



involved with child pornography had it not been for the internet (Crisis Connection, 2007).

### *Chatters*

Chatters do not take part in child pornography. This type of online predator holds conversations with children, often giving sexual advice in chat rooms or on social-networking sites. Chatters may make phone contact with the child with the intent of having phone sex. They do not pursue a person-to-person meeting with the child (Crisis Connection, 2007).

### *Travelers*

Travelers engage in online chatting with the child. They work very hard during the grooming process to build a trusting relationship with the child. They generally collect child pornography, typically from the children that they are pursuing. As part of the grooming process, travelers send cameras or Web Cams to their prey in hopes of receiving footage of the child performing sexual acts for the online predator. Travelers may go great distances to meet with the child or send money and develop a travel plan for the child to run away and meet with the online predator (Crisis Connection, 2007).

### *Manufacturers*

Manufacturers are child pornography experts. They distribute child pornography through videos or CD ROMS. Almost all sales are done via the internet. Manufacturers are very dangerous in that they may belong to a ring, in which they may kidnap and keep the child in order to make child pornography videos (Crisis Connection, 2007).

## Online Predator Access to Children

### *Technology Availability*

According to the Iowa Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force, two-thirds of Iowa families have a computer in their home and over half of Iowa homes are connected to the internet (Iowa Internet Crimes Against Children, 2005). Overall, more than 90% of teenagers log on to the internet (Zoe, 2006). With more access to the internet, more children are available to online predators. In fact, one in five children and adolescents report that they have received unwanted sexual solicitations while on the internet (Juris, 2002; Bower, 2007). Even more frightening, “one in three children reported having online friends who they had never met in person,” (Bower, 2007, p. 85).

### *Need For Socialization*

With the availability of technology, children and adolescents are able to foster friendships beyond their classroom peers. Children and adolescents who may not have a plethora of friends in their school or community may turn to the internet as a source of social acceptance. This is particularly true for adolescents because of their need for social support and sense of belonging (Vernon, 2004). Social networking sites and chat rooms may be a place for children and adolescents to log on and find others with similar interests (Magid & Collier, 2007).

### *Types of Online Communication*

The predator is able to go online and solicit a variety of children with the intent of finding some with whom the predator can begin forming a sexual relationship (Dombrowski et al., 2004). The initial contact between the online predator and child or adolescent is almost always made by the predator. Predators cannot simply reach out and

grab their prey through the computer screen. They must have access to these children and adolescents through some sort of online connection. Due to the presence of personal information and availability of interactive communication, social networking sites and online chat rooms are the most popular places that online predators rely on when searching for their prey (Mastalio, 2007). Predators are not new to this game. They know where willing kids or experimental kids hang out on the internet.

*Chat rooms.* Chat rooms are of great concern when it comes to the online safety of children. In fact, "Microsoft's MSN service shut down its chat rooms in 28 countries partly because of concerns about sexual predators preying on minors" (Rupley, 2004, p. 101). Chat rooms are web based conversations which allow comments to be made by both parties in a back and forth manner. These are live conversations and generally do not contain a filter for inappropriate content. There are a number of different kinds of chat rooms and many are available to both adults and children.

Chat rooms can offer a place for online predators to begin the grooming process. The predator may begin with simple and harmless questions and comments, but as the conversation continues the predator may begin to ask or make comments to the child in regards to sexual experiences. In most cases the two will "chat" on more than one occasion. By building a relationship with the child the predator is hoping to create a sense of trust in hopes of getting to meet with the child for a face-to-face visit, possibly moving on to sexual encounters.

*Myspace.* Myspace is a "social networking website with more than 67 million registered users" (Carter, 2006, p. 122). In addition, more than 230,000 new profiles are being added each day (Andrews, 2006). Beyond personal information, it offers features

that allow the user to add photos, video, comments, customized backgrounds, and add their choice of friends to their site (Magid & Collier, 2007). The site also offers its own email and instant messaging service. These services allow men and women to contact each other.

Due to a recent lawsuit, Myspace is trying to take steps in making their networking site safer for younger users (Lehman, 2007). In December of 2006, Myspace began to restrict users to those over the age of 14 (Magid & Collier, 2007). Of course, children under the age of 14 could simply enter an older date of birth and still subscribe to a profile. Limiting the age of users to older than 14 years of age does not limit the contact between adults and children however. This is where the danger begins.

Online predators are able to see photos of the child or adolescent and then email their new young friend to begin an online conversation. If both parties agree, they can even add each other to their “friends” list. Information and photos can be viewed by both parties and the relationship grows. In using sites such as Myspace, “experts are concerned that kids do not realize the dangers they can face when personal information is this easy for strangers to access” (Smart Surfing, 2006, p. 2).

*Facebook.* Facebook is a social networking site much like that of Myspace. It is second in line to Myspace in regards to the number of profile members. It “allows people to connect with others by posting photos, blog entries, and personal profiles” (Smart Surfing, 2006, p. 2). Facebook was originally developed for college students to make social and academic connections with other college students (Magid & Collier, 2007). Although Facebook has fewer members and the members tend to be college-age, the same dangers arise in using Facebook as outlined in using Myspace.

*Grooming questions.* Online predators want to advance beyond everyday questions with their prey. Each question they ask has a purpose. According to the authors of *Myspace Unraveled*, the following questions are popular tactics used by predators to gain the trust and acceptance of their prey (Magid & Collier, 2007). Questions that ask for personal information such as mailing address or phone numbers are requests for further contacts or possibly to send gifts. They may ask where the computer in the house is to figure out if the child is under parental supervision. Predators may ask about favorite bands, songs, shows, or movies in order to tailor their gifts to the particular child or adolescent. If a predator feels that they have found a child who is in need of someone who understands them, they may focus on questions such as tell me how you are feeling, you seem upset, or how can I help you feel better ( Magid & Collier, 2007).

The groomer has the child or adolescent under his or her command once they can hold information or photos as a reason to not tell an adult. They may say such things as, if you tell, you will be in trouble, or I will go after your family. From this point on the child or adolescent may agree to additional phone calls, giving up sexual footage, or meeting the online predator in person (Dombrowski et al., 2004).

### Parent Involvement in Protecting Children

#### *Communication*

Parents and children alike would benefit from communicating boundaries and concerns regarding the use of the internet at home, especially if they are using social networking sites or chat rooms (Andrews, 2006). A behavioral contract may also be a way for parents and children to agree on set expectations and consequences of

inappropriate use (Frazier, 1995). If nothing else, it serves as a focal point to open up communication in regards to internet safety.

*Discuss safety tips.* As soon as a child is able to surf the internet independently, it is time for the child to learn internet precautions. It is most important for a child or adolescent to take action if they receive inappropriate material or messages from another person by telling an adult (Leon, 2006). Some children may need support in dealing with an incident such as this so that they understand that they are not at fault.

Parents to discuss with their children may be to never give or display personal information about themselves, their family, or their school. Parents should always stress the importance of never meeting with a person that they have encountered online (Leon, 2006). Children should be informed to keep passwords private and not to email or file share pictures with online strangers or online “buddies” (Smart Surfing, 2006). Children need to be encouraged to involve their parents in online activities or school assignments is a good way to keep parents educated and informed on the use of technology.

*Approve websites and profiles.* Parents should visit with their children about what photos and information is contained on their child’s profiles or webpages. If a parent is concerned, it should be shared with the children. Let the children know that parents will be checking their profiles and pages periodically (Andrews, 2006). Experts suggest being honest with children and openly discussing any concerns parents may have about their child’s internet safety (Babbitt, 2006).

### *Warning Signs*

Some warning signs for parents that their children may be involved in inappropriate internet usage include the following. Do they have many online friends and

few friends with which they have actual face-to-face contact? Do they spend many hours a night on the internet chatting or blogging, using the internet only during the late night hours, blocking the screen when an adult is in the room, or reacting sensitively when an adult asks them what they are doing. The biggest clue as to inappropriate internet use is if a person enters the room, the child immediately closes or minimizes the screen (Wired Kids, Inc., 2007).

### *Emergency Contacts*

If a child or adolescent receives unwanted sexual advances online it is important to notify authorities. Children and adolescents need to be reassured that they are not at fault for receiving the messages and should feel comfortable going to a trusting adult to handle the situation. Adults should contact the local police, [iowaicac.org](http://iowaicac.org) (Iowa Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force), or [cybertipline.com](http://cybertipline.com) (National Center for Missing and Exploited Children) and report the online predator's advance on the child or adolescent (Carter, 2006).

## Safety in Schools

### *Monitoring*

It is important that schools have supervision in rooms where the internet is being used. Students should be monitored when downloading pictures and other images. An appropriate use policy should be signed by the student and parent so that expectations and repercussions of inappropriate use of all parties involved are clearly laid out. Just because of the dangers involved in using technology, it should not be limited or taken away (Van Horn, 1998). "Schools should teach responsible use of tools, rather than just blocking the use of them by students" (Borja, 2006).

*Filters*

Many schools are already set up with firewalls, virus-ware, and spyware that do not allow most inappropriate phrases and photos to be displayed on school computers. Because these services do not block all inappropriate material, it may be wise to have the school internet system run through an internet filter. Filters provide a block for computer systems. A filter can be set up to not allow certain websites to be visited. Filters can be set to eliminate specific websites and/or inappropriate material (Magid & Collier, 2007).

*Legal Expectations*

As issues dealing with internet safety arise, so do the concerns of state and federal agencies. In 2006, the “Department of Homeland Security announced a national education round table intended to raise public awareness about the need for k-12 internet safety, information security, and cyber-ethics instruction” (McQuade III, 2007, p. B30). Also in 2006, a proposal was also brought forth by a federal subcommittee titled, *Deleting Online Predators*, which included many steps to keep children and adolescents safe from online predators (Abbott, 2006). One requirement of the proposal was to eliminate the use of social networking websites in libraries and public schools (Magid & Collier, 2007). Although some of the laws being brought to the table are not agreed upon by all parties, the fact that agencies at the national, state, and local levels are discussing the issues is important.

*School Counselor Involvement in Protecting Children from Online Predators*

In many instances of child safety where parents are not doing the parenting, school officials are left to instill values and integrity in their students. In some cases, parents are not available to their children to discuss internet safety. In other cases,



parents simply do not understand technology and its impact on their child's well-being (Frazier, 1995). When schools are left to teach students safety measures in regards to the internet, it can be left up to the school counselor to include it in the comprehensive school counseling and guidance curriculum.

### *Responsibilities as a Professional Counselor*

As a professional school counselor, according to the American School Counselor Association National Model, "information is kept confidential unless disclosure is required to prevent clear and imminent danger to the student or others or when legal requirements demand that confidential information be revealed" (2005, p. 143). In relation to online predators, if a student would disclose information in regards to being sexually solicited while chatting online, or in person for that matter, in the best interest of the student confidentiality would be broken. This situation also falls under the Mandatory Child and Dependent Adult Reporting legal guidelines (Dombrowski et al., 2004). Involving the student in the disclosure to police or other law officials would be most beneficial to the student and the case against the online predator.

Also according to the ASCA National Model, in regards to ethical standards for school counselors, "while working with students on a computer... counselors should take reasonable and appropriate measures to protect students from objectionable and/or harmful material online" (2005, p. 145). This standard would most likely be put into practice while counselors are working with students on career searches. It is important that the students are taught appropriate query words and are using computers that have extensive firewalls and filters. However, if a student falls upon objectionable material the counselor would be able to use the moment as a teaching moment as opposed to

overreacting to the situation. Talking through the situation would help eliminate any feelings of guilt felt by the student and encourage other students to report their own encounters with inappropriate internet material or conversations.

There are limited resources when it comes to recommendations for implementation of internet safety and child predators for school counselors. The following suggestions have been compiled by the author, which are attributed to personal experiences as an educator and counselor in training.

### *Information Nights*

Holding an information night for parents and/or students to learn more about internet safety may become the responsibility of the school counselor. Teaching parents safety tips as a preventative measure and warning signs as a reactive measure would be an appropriate beginning to an information night. Giving parents contact numbers to report unwanted sexual solicitations toward their child is important. A local detective dealing with online predators may be a good guest speaker for such an event.

### *Local Sex Offender Registry*

It is important for the school counselor to be aware of the names on the local sex offender registry list. If a convicted sex offender is allowed to have unlimited internet access, there is a chance that he or she would turn to the internet to find new prey (Dombrowski et al., 2004). After all, it is much safer than walking to the nearest playground. If a sexual offender's name comes up in conversation with a child during an individual counseling session, a group meeting, or during classroom guidance, there should be a high level of concern as to the relationship between the sexual offender and the child or adolescent.

### *Counseling*

*Individual.* A student may be referred to the school counselor by a teacher, coach, or parent in regards to inappropriate online activity. The counselor may need to develop interventions that deal with how the student's behavior is helping or hurting his or her overall well-being. The student may self-refer to the school counselor due to an unwanted sexual solicitation on the internet. The counselor may be the only person this student trusts, so when handling the disclosure to police, be open with the student in regards to the report and involve them if possible.

*Group.* Some students become involved with online relationship because of their lack of relationships at home, school, or in the community. Fostering healthy relationships in social skills groups or friendship groups would be a preventative measure for a student that may seem at risk to be taken advantage of online. Groups could also be formed to discuss the importance of good character in relation to internet safety and responsibilities.

*Classroom.* School counselors may find themselves in the teaching role when it comes to online safety. It is important to point out to students that they wouldn't talk to strangers in the mall, so they shouldn't talk to strangers online. As part of classroom guidance in middle schools and high schools, it may be appropriate to discuss the proper use of social networking websites and chat rooms. Informing them of the dangers of chatting with strangers online and how a relationship can be formed without them feeling like they have lost control is important. Bringing in local law enforcement who investigate online predators may be able to bring perspective to students who are taking part in risky online behavior.

There are many websites that offer educational supplements and materials to use with students when teaching the topic of internet safety. *i-SAFE* offers educational curriculum to work with schools across the United States and connects them with schools on the other side of the globe to initiate student awareness to internet safety (Greifner, 2007). CyberSmart is for parents and educators. It offers lessons and professional development opportunities dealing with acceptable use, copyright, and ethics in regards to internet use (Joseph, 2007). iKeepSafe, NetSmartz, and Surf Swell Island all contain internet safety online activities and lessons that are easy to use and ready to implement into any internet safety unit (Joseph, 2007).

### Conclusion

With the growing number of children and adolescents using the internet on a daily basis, there is a high level of concern when it comes to internet safety. Social networking websites and chat rooms offer sexual predators an open playing field when it comes to searching for willing and vulnerable children and adolescents. Also, the anonymity of the person making the sexual solicitations makes being a sexual predator easy. It is important that parents, schools, and school counselors begin to work together to help children and adolescents understand the danger involved in giving up their identity when using sites such as Myspace and Facebook. Interventions need to be implemented when children are young and then built upon as they grow older to be made aware of ways to keep themselves and their friends using these sites safe. The role of the school counselor in implementing skills can be determined per school district, but it will be an ever increasing topic that will need to be addressed at some point in a school counselor's career with individuals, groups, and classrooms.

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