

May 2006

Well, Spring has finally "sprung" and as we look forward to welcoming Summer and all the fun it brings to families everywhere, your kids will now have a ton of unsupervised time on their hands so we thought we would share with you a couple of studies we recently read and hopefully make you aware of some surprising and sobering statistics. The studies concerned Internet usage by children and were conducted by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children and the Crimes Against Children Research Center, involving approximately 1,500 children aged 10-17. These children were classified as "regular users," which meant that the children used the Internet at least once per month for the past 6 months, either on a computer at home, school or a library.

The studies related the following statistics: 20% of the respondents received a sexual solicitation or approach via Internet, with 77% of the targeted kids being aged 14 or older; 25% had an unwanted exposure to photos of either naked people or people engaged in sexual acts; only 25% of those solicited online for a sex act reported it to a parent, although 40% receiving "unwanted exposure" to sexual photo or other content reported telling their parents. Most respondents reported that they were "not very disturbed" by either the sexual photos or the sexual solicitations, but 23% reported feeling "very or extremely upset." Although actual cases of what the studies refer to as "Traveler Cases," in which sexual predators actually travel to meet with children and have sex with them, are not as great in number as the amount of advances and solicitations, they do occur and should be considered very real risks. We say that because over 50% of people surveyed in other separate studies admitted to have willingly made phone calls to someone they have chatted with online, someone who is essentially a rank stranger prior to the chat session. Very disturbing to us!

Apparently, only 17% of youth and 11% of parents could name a specific and appropriate agency such as the FBI or an Internet provider to report such offenses to! One good statistic was that 33% of parents reported that they had currently installed on their home computers some sort of filtering or blocking software, but clearly that is far too few. Please, if you know that your child is constantly online and participating in online chat sessions, monitor their activity closely. Some of you may feel that by physically monitoring your children or constantly asking them who they are chatting with or what they are doing online will cause your children to lie to you, not visit the sites they normally do until you aren't present, etc, which is possibly and more likely true. What we would suggest is installing software that will run invisibly in the background and record all their Internet activity and save it to files which you can then review when your child is not present.

If your child proves trustworthy and you learn that you have nothing to worry about, then great! Consider yourself lucky to have raised a good kid and your child never has to know that you have been “spying” on their activities! If you do identify trouble in the making, then you can intervene immediately before your child unwittingly gets him- or herself into either an expensive or possibly dangerous mess that they may not be able to easily get themselves out of. This affordable software comes in a wide variety of capabilities (based on cost, of course) and is readily available via download from numerous reputable websites or from many electronic stores which sell software.

Again, please don't be ashamed of yourself as not being able to trust your children or what would happen if your children found out you have been “spying” them. Remember, your job as a parent is to protect your children and get them safely to adulthood prepared to make their own way through life, not to be their friends. They have enough friends in their lives, and often those friends are who get them into trouble in the first place! Heck, we remember when our Moms used to call the parents of our friends, with whom we were supposed to be staying overnight, prior to the night in question just to be sure the friend's parents were aware of it, if they would be home that night, etc, *especially* if Mom hadn't met the parents before. No monkey-business with our Moms back in the day! If Mom couldn't get a hold of our friend's mom, then we just didn't stay there overnight, remember? Protect your children but don't coddle them—talk to them about the dangers in life before they happen, don't just assume it could never happen to your kids.

As always, if you have any questions or comments regarding this or any other issue, please don't hesitate to contact us either in person on our website at fallriverpd.com. Have a safe and happy Summer, everyone!

The Fall River Police Department