

BEWARE *of* E-STRANGERS

How Katy Parents Can Help Keep Internet Predators at Bay

Written by Katrina Katsarelis and Gabrielle Browne

With Katy students home for the summer, internet use is up and often times parents' guards are down. As kids have more free time to surf the web, predators are swarming the internet like sharks at a feeding frenzy. Federal authorities believe there are 500,000 to 750,000 predators on the internet on any given day, many of whom are extremely skilled at luring bored teens to secret meeting places. Instead of the face-to-face communication of their parents' generation, teens and kids today are often interacting online, chatting with faceless individuals, where identities may be obscured and chat room personas are easily falsified.

Cyber Danger Hits Home

Last spring, Spenser Vogt, a senior at Cinco Ranch high school, turned up missing after making arrangements to meet a 19-year-old man he met in an Internet chat room. Days later, Vogt's body was found; he had been shot twice in the head and was dumped on Houston's south side. Lee Carl Banks was caught driving Vogt's car and subsequently confessed to the murder.

What Can Parents Do?

It's important for parents to establish and enforce house rules about computer use and hours, and have open dialogue about predators and online safety. Experts also recommend putting computers in common areas of the home instead of in a child's

room. Teens are night owls during the summer, and much of the activity is likely going on after-hours when parents are fast asleep. Experts also suggest removing cords or disabling computers after certain hours if that's what it takes to curb kids' nocturnal computer creeping habits.

Education is a Must

Most importantly, parents need to be aware of what goes on online. Former Sugar Land Mayor and co-chairman of the Homeland Security Task Force, David Wallace, strongly encourages parents to educate themselves and their kids about how to stay safe on the Internet. During his tenure as Mayor, Wallace launched an internet awareness campaign called NetSmartz that is being hailed as an innovative cross-sector collaboration involving all levels of government, non-profit organizations and the community. Wallace launched the program in Fort Bend ISD and it has since been expanded into 1,200 other cities. Prior to launching NetSmartz, Wallace conducted his own research. With the help of the Attorney General's office and local law enforcement, Wallace put together a local sting operation similar to the sexual predator stings viewers see regularly on Dateline NBC. "Six people who got into their cars and drove to Sugar Land are now in prison," he says.

Online chatting late at night is common for many Katy area teens

Criminal Seduction Online

Even if you have warned your child repeatedly and set up house rules about computer use, your teens are still at risk. The sad fact is that predators are more experienced at approaching and enticing kids than kids are at resisting their advances. Also, kids and teens are frequently more knowledgeable about computers and internet chat rooms than their parents. Teens may be venturing into sites and posting information and photos their parents are unaware of.

How Predators Seduce Kids

Some Internet pedophiles will spend weeks listening to and empathizing with a teen who may be struggling with problems or issues at home to gain their trust. Or a predator may have weeks of conversations with teens, playing on their desires for excitement, romance, or adventure, and then lure them to encounters or meetings. According to the FBI, about 2,200 children are reported missing each day; some of them are found and some are not. How many of these are teens that have voluntarily left the safety of their homes to meet up with internet predators? The statistics are not clear and neither are many law enforcement agencies--many of which don't even have Cyber Crimes Units in place at all.

Warning Signs for Parents

If parents notice a child is receiving or making odd or secretive phone calls, parents need to step in. Parents should regularly check the home phone bills and cell phone bills for any unusual activity, noting the times the calls are made.



Keep the computer in a busy room of the house

WHO'S AT RISK?

77% of the targets for online predators were age 14 or older. Another 22% were users ages 10 to 13.

- Crimes Against Children Research Center

Tips for Parents

- * Communicate and talk openly with your child about predators online.
- * Display internet usage rules and enforce them.
- * Check their internet profiles and sites they visit.
- * Keep their computer in a common room in the house.
- * Ban and disable computer use late at night or when you're not home.
- * Set the house alarm at night to prevent kids from sneaking out to meet people.
- * Use parental controls and/or blocking/safety software.
- * Ban or actively monitor all chat room activity and internet profile sites.
- * Maintain access to your child computer, email, and social sites.
- * Find out what computer safeguards are utilized at their friends' houses.
- * Ban web-cams and other gadgets that may jeopardize your child's privacy.



Parents and kids should come up with a set of internet rules and abide by them

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Although kids are very computer savvy, they still need to be monitored for safety

Another red flag is when children quickly click off what they were viewing when a parent enters the room. It's important to find out why and start investigating. If a child suddenly starts talking about a friend you've never met, ask questions and find out how the child knows this new friend.

When used correctly, the worldwide web can be an educational and social-networking goldmine. Like any tool, the Internet offers potential dangers, too. Parents who keep informed are better prepared to equip their children with the knowledge they need to be safer online. KM

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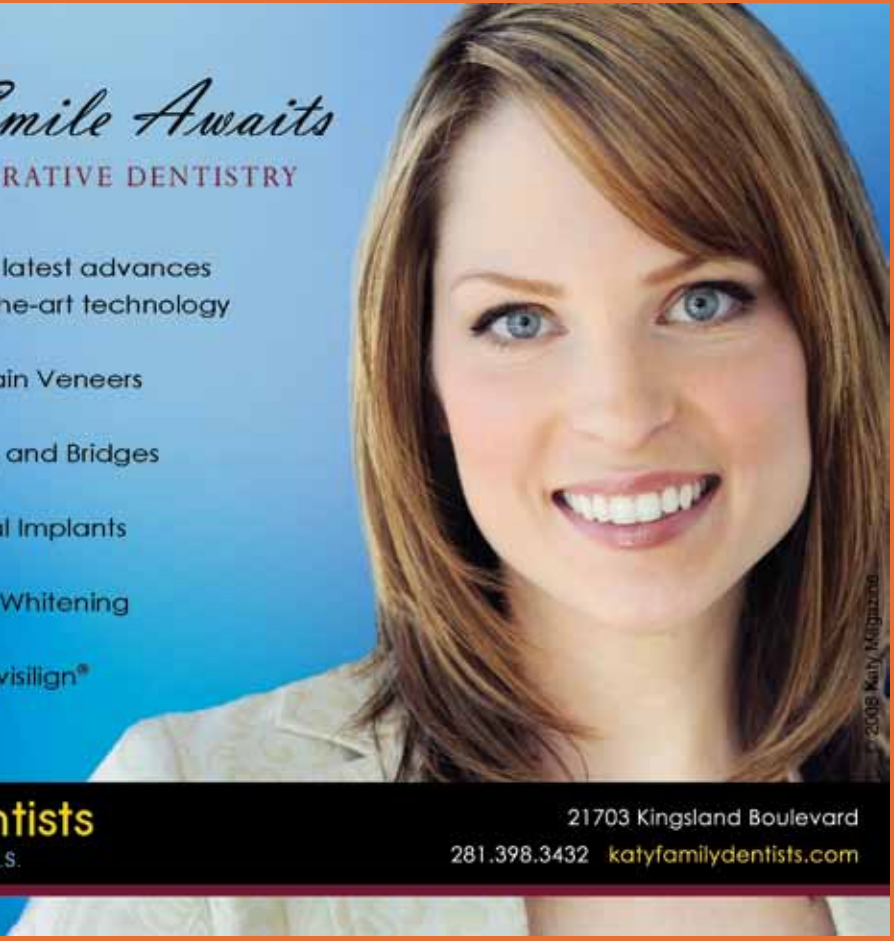
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