
February 28, 2008

FROM THE DESK OF DAVID POGUE

How Dangerous Is the Internet for Children?

By DAVID POGUE

A few years ago, a parenting magazine asked me to write an article about the dangers that children face when they go online. As it turns out, I was the wrong author for the article they had in mind.

The editor was deeply disappointed by my initial draft. Its chief message was this: “Sure, there are dangers. But they’re hugely overhyped by the media. The tales of pedophiles luring children out of their homes are like plane crashes: they happen extremely rarely, but when they do, they make headlines everywhere. The Internet is just another facet of socialization for the new generation; as always, common sense and a level head are the best safeguards.”

My editor, however, was looking for something more sensational. He asked, for example, if I could dig up an opening anecdote about, say, an eight-year-old getting killed by a chat-room stalker. But after days of research—and yes, I actually looked at the Google results past the first page—I could not find a single example of a preteen getting abducted and murdered by an Internet predator.

So the editor sent me the contact information for several parents of young children with Internet horror stories, and suggested that I interview them. One woman, for example, told me that she became hysterical when her eight-year-old stumbled onto a pornographic photo. She told me that she literally dove for the computer, crashing over a chair, yanking out the power cord and then rushing her daughter outside.

You know what? I think that far more damage was done to that child by her mother’s reaction than by the dirty picture.

See, almost the same thing happened at our house. When my son was 7 years old, he was Googling “The Incredibles” on the computer that we keep in the kitchen. At some point, he pulled up a doctored picture of the Incredibles family, showing them naked.

“What...on... earth?” he said in surprise.

I walked over, saw what was going on, and closed the window. “Yeah, I know,” I told him. “Some people like pictures of naked people. The Internet is full of all kinds of things.” And life went on.

My thinking was this: a seven-year-old is so far from puberty, naked pictures don’t yet have any of the baggage that we adults associate with them. Sex has no meaning yet; the concept produces no emotional charge one way or another.

Today, not only is my son utterly unscarred by the event, I’m quite sure he has no memory of it whatsoever.

Now, I realize that not everybody shares my nonchalance. And again, it's not hard to find scattered anecdotes about terrible things that happen online.

But if you live in terror of what the Internet will do to your children, I encourage you to watch this excellent [hour long PBS "Frontline" documentary](#). (I learned about it in a [recent column by Times media critic Virginia Heffernan](#)).

It's free, and it's online in its entirety. The show surveys the current kids-online situation—thoroughly, open-mindedly and frankly.

Turns out I had it relatively easy writing about the dangers to children under age 12; this documentary focuses on teenagers, 90 percent of whom are online every single day. They are absolutely immersed in chat, Facebook, MySpace and the rest of the Web; it's part of their ordinary social fabric to an extent that previous generations can't even imagine.

The show carefully examines each danger of the Net. And as presented by the show, the sexual-predator thing is way, way overblown, just as I had suspected. Several interesting interview transcripts accompany the show online; the one with producer Rachel Dretzin goes like this:

"One of the biggest surprises in making this film was the discovery that the threat of online predators is misunderstood and overblown. The data shows that giving out personal information over the Internet makes absolutely no difference when it comes to a child's vulnerability to predation." (That one blew my mind, because every single Internet-safety Web site and pamphlet hammers repeatedly on this point: never, ever give out your personal information online.)

"Also, the vast majority of kids who do end up having contact with a stranger they meet over the Internet are seeking out that contact," Ms. Dretzin goes on. "Most importantly, all the kids we met, without exception, told us the same thing: They would never dream of meeting someone in person they'd met online."

Several teenagers interviewed in the story make it clear that only an idiot would be lured unwittingly into a relationship with an online sicko: "If someone asks me where I live, I'll delete the 'friend.' I mean, why do you want to know where I live at?" says one girl.

Fearmongers often cite the statistic, from a 2005 study by the Crimes Against Children Research Center, that 1 in 7 children have received sexual propositions while online. But David Finkelhor, author of that report, notes that many of these propositions don't come from Internet predators at all. "Considerable numbers of them are undoubtedly coming from other kids, or just people who are acting weird online," he says.

"Most of the sexual solicitations, they're not that big a deal," says another interview subject, Danah Boyd of Harvard's Berkman Center for Internet and Society. "Most of it is the 19-year-old saying to the 17-year old, 'Hey, baby.' Is that really the image that we come to when we think about sexual solicitations? No. We have found kids who engage in risky behavior online. The fact is, they've engaged in a lot more risky behavior offline."

As my own children approach middle school, my own fears align with the documentary's findings in another way: that cyber-bullying is a far more realistic threat. Kids online experiment with different personas, and can be a lot nastier in the anonymous atmosphere of the Internet than they would ever be in person (just like grown-ups).

And their mockery can be far more painful when it's public, permanent and written than if they were just muttered in passing in the hallway.

In any case, watch the show. You'll learn that some fears are overplayed, others are underplayed, and above all, that the Internet plays a huge part in adolescence now. Pining for simpler times is a waste of time; like it or not, this particular genie is out of the bottle.

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