Common Sense on Safe Online Talk

What's the Issue?

Kids love connecting with others online. Most young people talk online with their friends and family rather than strangers. But as a parent, you might be concerned that a stranger with bad intent could contact your child.

"Online predatory behavior," as it is commonly known, is when adults contact kids or teens over the Internet in an attempt to "groom" them for inappropriate sexual relationships. Many experts, however, have found that the more realistic threat for teens online is actually "online sexual solicitation." This means encouraging someone to talk about sex, give personal sexual information, or send sexual photos or video. (It does not always mean asking for sex.) For instance, teens might receive inappropriate requests or messages from strangers or acquaintances. However, contrary to popular belief:

- Teens (ages 13 to 17) are more at risk for online solicitations than "tweens" or children
- The majority of online solicitations come from teens themselves, or from young adults (ages 18 to 25)
- Adults that solicit teens are usually up-front about their true age and intentions (Subrahmanyam and Smahel, 2011).

Why Does It Matter?

When teens are led astray about what to look out for online, they can find themselves in unhealthy situations without realizing it. The allure of these kinds of relationships is not surprising, particularly for teens who are already vulnerable. Solicitors can provide teens with a boost of self-esteem with compliments and attention. And once teens engage in these relationships, they might agree to do things they would not normally do because of the imbalance in power between them and the solicitor. It is often not until much later that they realize that they were being manipulated.

common sense says

Discuss responsible online behavior. Talk about who it's okay to chat with and what is okay to talk about. Remember that many young teens are beginning to experiment with flirting and relationships. This is normal. But online flirting with strangers or acquaintances is always risky. Flirting can quickly lead to inappropriate conversations or requests. It may also lead young teens to believe they are in a serious, romantic relationship with someone they don't really know. Both situations can make teens feel uncomfortable or manipulated.

Block, ignore, or leave. Most young teens know how to brush off unwanted contact. Encourage this behavior.

Make sure your child feels safe telling a trusted adult. If something creepy or inappropriate happens, young teens need to know they will not get in trouble if they tell you or another trusted adult about it.

Talk to your child about healthy relationships. It can be difficult for some young teens to recognize when others are manipulating them, especially those young teens that want to experiment or prove that they are mature. Discuss which factors make relationships healthy, and why young teens should not compromise on these values.

Look for warning signs. Does your child seem withdrawn, spend endless hours online, or appear to be hiding something? Young teens who wind up in inappropriate online relationships often show these warning signs. If you think this might be happening, ask your child about it.

Sources

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