

Common Sense on Risky Online Relationships

What's the Issue?

“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.

What Families Can Do

You seem down. What's going on at school? Is anything upsetting happening online?

I'm here for you and so are your friends. Talk to me anytime.

Are there any teachers at school who have dealt with these kinds of situations before? I think you should tell one of them about what's been happening.

Bullies want attention, power, and status, which explains why they need to cause drama.

I saw a news story about a teen who was bullied online. What would you do in that situation?

common sense says

Teach your teen not to flirt with people they don't know. Your teen should understand that face-to-face flirting with peers is normal, but flirting with strangers or acquaintances online is risky – no matter how old they are – because the exchange can move from harmless to unhealthy very quickly. Flirting may seem like an invitation to solicitors, and lead to unwanted exposure to sexual topics or requests. It may also lead a teen to believe that they are in a serious, romantic relationship with someone they don't really know. Both situations can make a teen feel harassed, manipulated, or uncomfortable.

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

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

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 Does your teen seem withdrawn, spend endless hours online, or appear to be hiding something?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