

Study says cyberspace not so dangerous, but authorities urge caution, vigilance

18 January 2009, By Laura Bauer

Maybe the Internet isn't just one massive predator playground after all. Maybe our children are much safer in cyberspace than we thought.

A study out of Harvard University last week found that young people were unlikely to be propositioned by adults online. In fact, it said the risks on the Internet weren't much different than those in real life.

But before you deem cyberspace a safe haven, know this: As teenagers get older they can get into more trouble online, and youths having problems at home or involved in risky behaviors like drug or alcohol use are most likely to become victims of Internet predators, the study also found.

For that reason, retired FBI agent Jeff Lanza said parents can't let their guard down - regardless of what parts of the report say.

"These solicitations occur every day," said Lanza, an Internet safety expert. "Just because the kids are high-risk anyway doesn't make it not a problem."

The report, led by Harvard's Berkman Center for Internet and Society, sparked national headlines that many child advocates said were misleading.

"Report calls online threats to children overblown," said one newspaper.

Ernie Allen, president of the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, said his group was involved in the study, and admitted he was worried about some interpretations.

"The message of this shouldn't be, 'All is well, I shouldn't pay attention, I shouldn't monitor what my kids are doing,'" Allen said. "I think what the report attempts to say is the nature of this problem is different than the general public perception."

The nation's attorneys general initially asked the Internet Safety Technical Task Force to determine how technology could help make the Internet safer for young people, especially in social networking sites like MySpace and Facebook. But before they could do that, members said they needed to determine the risks. That meant research beyond just what is shown on TV.

For the past several years, countless police agencies have set up sting operations to try to catch preying adults. Deputies masqueraded as children, mostly girls, and interacted in chat rooms. Meetings were set up. Suspects were arrested.

NBC made a show of it - "To Catch a Predator" - videotaping men as they showed up to meet a youth, only to find a TV crew instead.

"What I think is, the 'Catch a Predator' phenomenon, that was pure showbiz," Lanza said. "And to a certain extent, maybe that caused the pendulum to swing too far in one direction about the nature of the problem."

"The danger of this report is they're minimizing the problem and causing it to fall in the other direction," Lanza said.

Since 1998, more than 41,000 incidents of suspected sexual solicitation over the Internet have been reported to the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children. In that time, the center has twice released study figures on how many youths were solicited online. In 2000, that number was 1 in 5. Six years later, it was 1 in 7.

"We've made real progress," Allen said. "But parental awareness and education remains important."

Teens like Olathe Northwest High School sophomore Kaitlin Rippberger feel safe online. But part of that is because her parents set up

guidelines. Before she could have a Facebook page, they had to review it. And she had to have a "closed" page, meaning only her friends could see it.

"I kind of thought they were just being too cautious, but it makes sense that they don't want people to try and find you," she said.

Olathe Northwest junior Brian Will knows not to include phone numbers or addresses in anything he posts online.

"You just have to be careful of what you do," he said.

As part of the report, the task force said parents and caregivers should study the Internet more and understand the ways their children use it.

Other than solicitation, the report addressed pornography and bullying online, which the task force said was the most frequent threat to minors online.

Unwanted exposure to pornography occurs while youths are online, the task force found.

"But the most likely to be exposed are those seeking it out, such as older male minors," the report said.

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