The Parental Authority to Be Involved

- A 12-year-old girl, posing as 19, meets a 31-year-old ex-Marine in an Internet chat room, and runs away with him.
- A couple of teenagers steal credit card numbers and set up false eBay accounts to "sell" non-existent products. When they're caught, the teens and their parents are held responsible to repay the victims, as well as all the fines and penalties.
- Two teenage girls were seduced by a pair of teachers at their school. The incident began when the male and female teachers – who were dating each other – began exchanging sexually explicit e-mails and instant messages with the girls.

These are a few of the literally thousands of shocking stories where innocent kids, looking for a new friend and some fun or, yes, being mischievous, got themselves into more trouble than they counted on.

Computers and the World Wide Web have literally changed the world by giving us access to myriad types of information, opening foreign and novel places for our perusal and letting us meet all kinds of people, almost instantly. Most of the information is useful and interesting, or at least trivial and harmless. Most of the people in chat rooms are ordinary kids simply looking for a new friend or exchanging information with old ones. Most, but not all.

That's the problem – and it's a growing one.

Chat rooms and e-mails can be a virtual fantasyland. You can pretend to be anybody or anything you want. Unseen and anonymous, you can be "cool" in a chat room. That's awfully appealing to an awkward, isolated and "misunderstood" youth. And it's also appealing to predators looking for children to exploit: lonely children, children looking for excitement, children looking for affection, children susceptible to a fantasy.

Insidiously, this threat most often strikes when our children are at home, in their rooms, "safe." We parents are doing the usual: talking, watching TV, or carrying out household chores. Our kids are in their rooms, and besides the irritation we might feel about the phone line being tied up, we're pretty satisfied that they're okay. It's quiet, isn't it?

The truth is that someone else could have entered our home and trying to lure our child into harm's way.

The truth is that our child could be seeing things he shouldn't be seeing, or reading material he shouldn't be reading, or even planning with his "friends" to do something he shouldn't do.

And we are clueless.

We've rationalized. While our kids can whiz from one website to another, can master all kinds of software and know all the latest details about computer hardware and jargon, it all looks so complicated to us adults. It's just an electronic box, after all, no more harmful to our kids than their CD players or TV. Let them have at it. It's the computer age, isn't it? Who knows? It might eventually help them make a living.

Well, it might. If it doesn't get them into trouble first.

Can't happen to your kid? That's what every parent says - until it does.

It's almost a cliché, but parenting is harder now. It's harder and more time-consuming, and it certainly demands more awareness - but it's not impossible. Our number one priority as parents is the security of our kids. There are unscrupulous people out there. But are we any better ethically if we choose to ignore them or refuse to protect our children from them? We warn our kids when they leave the house not to talk to strangers or get into a stranger's car. We have to be as vigilant about the strangers speaking to them over the Internet.

Since our children may face temptations they shouldn't have to, we have to be reasonable or prudent enough to teach them how to avoid them? If we knew someone was enticing our child into an exploitive sexual relationship, or learned that our child was stealing software from a department store, we'd do everything possible to discourage it. We have to be as concerned and diligent about what they hear in a chat room, or which hacker site they're visiting to learn how to steal the latest game software by downloading it off the Web.

Like it or not, we parents have to get involved with what our kids are viewing online. We have to find out how the Web and Its accessories works. We have to see what websites our kids are visiting, what files they're downloading, what's their Instant Messaging jargon, shorthand and slang means. We have to take control of how the Web is being used in our own homes. We have to, because we're parents, and because it's the right thing to do.

Ten Things Parents Can Do

1. Talk with your children about their online activities and the risks and ethical responsibilities of surfing the Web. Tell them you have a responsibility to monitor their Internet use and that you will.
2. Keep the computer in a common room in your home and set time limits for its use.
3. Make sure your child knows never to divulge personal information as they surf the Internet.
4. Set rules as to what sites your children are allowed to visit and which ones they are not.
5. Tell your children to let you know immediately if a stranger tries to make contact with them on the Web.
6. Install an operating system that makes you the administrator of the family computer, enabling you to control Web browser settings, content that can be viewed online, and software that can be installed. Consider installing third-party filtering software.
7. Insist your children give you their e-mail and chat room passwords. Prohibit them from having multiple e-mail accounts.
8. Make sure your children know what online activities are against the law. Illegal activities include making threats against someone else online, hacking, downloading pirated software, creating bootlegged software, sharing music files online and (for children under 18) making purchases over the Internet.
9. Go online with your kids and find out who they send Instant Messages to and/or chat with. Do not allow your children to send Instant Messages during homework-related computer time.
10. Regularly scan the files on your family computer to see what kind of material your children have downloaded and whether it was obtained legally.

Instant Messaging, Chat Rooms, ICQ –
# Do You Know Who Your Kid's Talking To?

Instant Messaging (IM) is a popular way for young people to communicate both on the computer and on the cell phone. IM combines the instant gratification of the telephone with the anonymity of the Internet. A mixture of e-mail and pager, telephone and real-time chat, Instant Messaging has become the preferred form of communication for teens and tweens.

Young people often find IM easier than talking face to face. A girl who normally gets tongue-tied around boys can easily carry on a conversation using typed words and "emoticons" or "smileys" to convey messages. This eliminates awkward conversational pauses, embarrassing fumbles for the right words, and the more intimidating aspects of face-to-face encounters.

IM code language allows for quick, precise communication. For example, rather than typing out the words, Just Kidding!, "IMers" use the shorthand J/K. This clipped chat code has facilitated the spread of IM messages from the computer to the cell phone and pager. Both America Online and MSN Instant Messenger allow for communication over a cell phone that is equipped for IM. Cellular service providers such as Verizon Wireless and Cingular Wireless support the feature and have Web sites that help smooth the process of upgrading a phone to get Instant Messages. These messages can be retrieved and sent anywhere.

Typical Instant Message screens look like this:
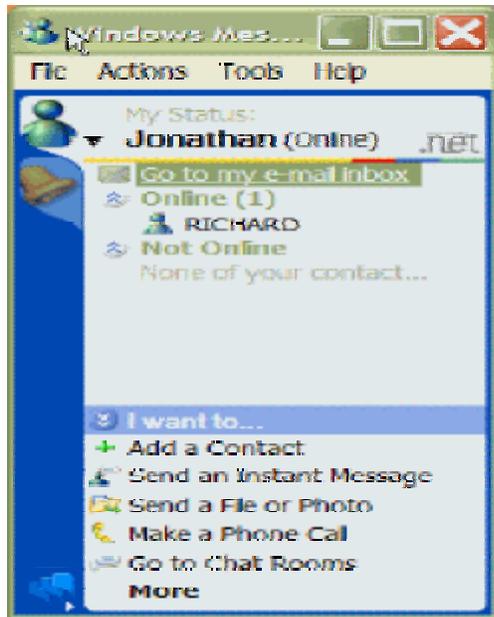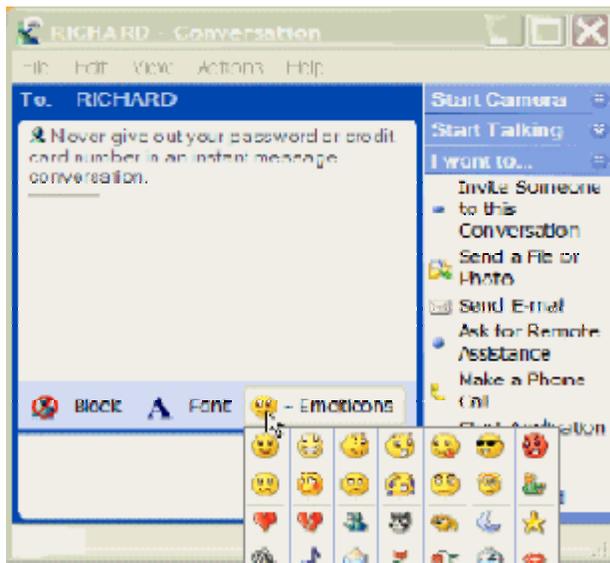
Dangers and Risks Posed by IM
Private Conversations – With Anyone – Are Easy

Used properly, Instant Messaging can be very helpful and practical. Your kids can let you know they got home from school okay without disturbing you at the office. If the phone line is tied up and your child wants to know more about a homework assignment, he or she can IM a classmate to clarify the teacher's instructions. However, if your kids are unaware of the dangers posed by IM, they may not be as cautious about their IM communications as they should be. For all its appeal to young people, IM also poses a number of risks. An IM-equipped child can communicate anywhere, with anyone, at any time on the IM network – all without a parent's knowledge.

The Profile Problem

Besides offering real-time contact with strangers or others who may seek to harm your child, Instant Messaging allows for the immediate dissemination of significant personal information. When your child signs up for an IM account, he or she is asked to fill out a personal profile that asks for key identifying information on the account holder. This personal profile is then placed in an Internet directory that can be viewed by all. The directory can be searched by name, date of birth, gender, and interests. Consequently, an unsuspecting child can effectively place himself or herself in a position to receive unsolicited offers of sex, pornography, and other dubious material.

Protecting Your Child in an IM World

Children must know the potential dangers of Instant Messaging to understand why they need to be cautious about how they use it. Set up rules for Instant Messaging and explain the reason for each rule to your child. Remember, while you can monitor the family computer's use at home, keep in mind that kids have access to the Internet in a variety of other places – at the homes of friends, at school, at public libraries, etc. You can protect your child by:

- Setting limits for the use of IM.
    - No IM during homework time – IM can have a negative effect on grades and facilitates cheating.
    - No late-night IMs. Fewer children are online late at night.
    - Place a time limit on the use of IM.

- Reviewing his or her IM profile.
  - The profile should contain no personal information. That means no real names, no age, no photos, no telephone numbers, no address – nothing that can identify your child for an Internet predator.
  - The profile should not link to a Web site.
  - The IM screen name should not be the child's real name.
- Monitoring cellular IM links. To further limit your child's exposure to predators and other inappropriate individuals, you may want to set rules for your child's use of Instant Messages on his or her cellular phone. Your child's friends can make contact by phone, or leave voice mail.
  - If your child already has an IM link to his or her cell phone and it was obtained without your permission, the Internet Service Provider (ISP) or cellular service provider may be in violation of the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA). You can request that the provider stop collecting data on your child. You can also stop the IM service.
- Discussing IM safety issues with your child.
  - Teach your child to follow good "Netiquette," such as not using or responding to sexually explicit, foul, or hateful language.
  - Tell your child not to respond to "flames." A flame is a strongly worded, sometimes-obscene message sent to a public forum, such as a newsgroup, or to a personal e-mail address. Responding only encourages the other party to become more aggressive or crude.

- Knowing your child's IM member number, screen name, and password.
  - Make sure your children do not give out their screen names or IM member numbers to people they do not personally know.
  - Warn your children not to add individuals to their IM list that they only know from Internet interactions. The ten-year-old "boy" your child converses with in a chat room may really be a 38-year-old man.
- Knowing your child's online friends, just as you would know their real-world friends.
  - Remember, your children should not make online friends without your knowledge and consent. Your children should never meet in person with anyone they become acquainted with online without your permission.

- Warning your child to be wary of anyone he or she meets in a chat room.
  - IM programs include adult-oriented chat rooms that should not be accessed by children. Though chat rooms are monitored, keep in mind that no one will ask your child for an ID before he or she enters a chat room. Once a child adds a stranger from a chat room to his or her IM buddy list, their IM conversations are private. In addition, as long as they remain on each other's buddy lists, the stranger will be automatically notified whenever your child goes online.

Chat Room Controls

If your child engages in inappropriate conversations in chat rooms or in private Instant Message conversations, you may consider changing the preferences in your IM program to discontinue chats when certain words come up.

To learn how you can protect your child from potential Internet predators or from receiving inappropriate IMs:

- ICQ users click here.
- MSN Messenger users click here.
- AOL Instant Messenger users click here.

A Visual Guide to Instant Messaging
## MSN Messenger or Windows Messenger
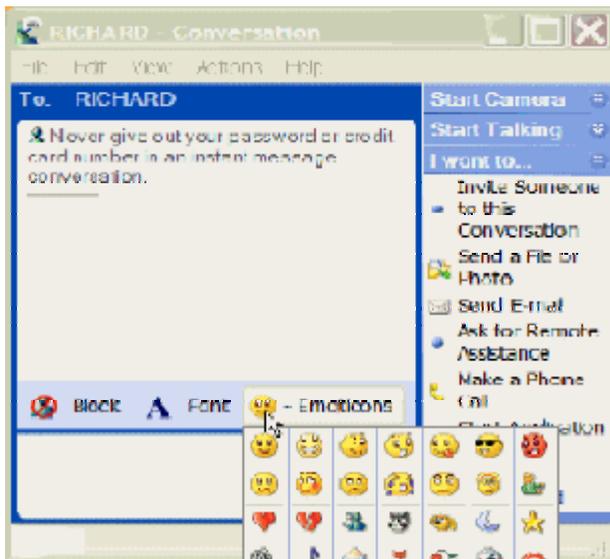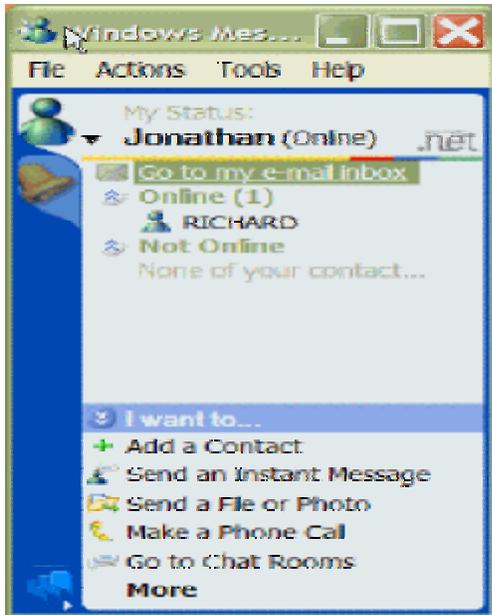
MSN Messenger is an IM program imbedded in most recent versions of Microsoft Windows and is also available for downloading online. The screen above on the left is the MSN Messenger window. If you child is on the buddy list of an Internet predator, as soon as your child logs on to Instant Messenger, the predator will be alerted. Have your child identify IM buddies on his or her list and explain the nature of his or her relationship with each (classmates, sports teammate, etc.).

The screen above on the right is the screen the system uses to send messages. This program allows users to instantly communicate via typed messages. They can also exchange files, make phone calls from the computer, and communicate via video, depending on their computer type and software.

ICQ/AOL Instant Messenger

Internet surfers use a variety of IM programs including MSN Messenger, ICQ (short for "I Seek You"), or AOL Instant Messenger (AIM) to send Instant Messages to one another. The image on the left below is the ICQ message window that appears to let a user know when an IM is received and who is online. This screen also allows access to chat rooms where people can engage in real-time conversations. The images on the right below are emoticons and what ICQ refers to as "smileys."
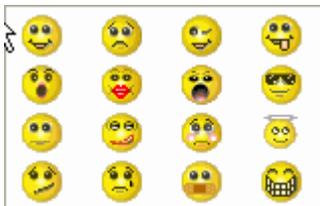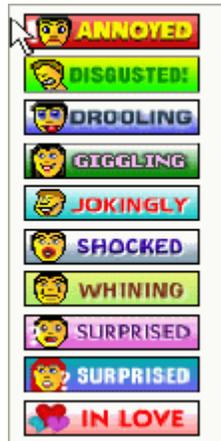
Emoticons

Emoticons are symbols used in IMs to communicate an emotion or a message. Colors and coded language can also be used. It is a good idea to become familiar with the symbols, which are easily available on the Internet. The following are standard emoticons provided by MSN Messenger:

Blogs

Web logs – "blogs" for short – are very popular among young people. Blogs are used to post thoughts, opinions, photos, and other material on the Web for the online community to read. Some bloggers have their own Web site; others post their blogs on one of many blog-hosting sites. These hosting sites are very popular with young people, who often post their journals, photos, and other personal information. Blogs, however, are not fixed communications. Postings can be added and replied to on a continuing basis.

While children may enjoy "blogging," it can be dangerous. Unlike a bedside journal or diary, blogs are accessible to strangers. That means online predators – who search blog-hosting sites for potential targets – can learn personal information about the children who post blogs. Furthermore, predators are almost always able to contact the child who posted the blog by sending a message through the Web site.

Tips to keep your children safe from the dangers associated with blogging:

- Don't allow your children to post a blog or online profile. Explain to them that blogs can often be viewed by anyone – even people that they should not trust.
- If your child has posted a Web site, profile, or blog on the Internet, check the content regularly for appropriateness.
- Make sure your children know never to divulge personal information on the Internet, whether through a blog, profile, chat room, e-mail, or Instant Message. Personal information can include their name, phone number, address, or birthday. Even seemingly innocuous information – such as the mascot at their school – can help strangers determine where they live.
- Don't allow your child to post his or her photo online.
- Consider installing monitoring software that will enable you to monitor how the computer is being used and what your child is doing on it.
- Remind your children that they should not contact anyone online whom they don't know in person, even if the person has a blog that looks interesting to them.
- Always get to know your children's online friends and with whom they are communicating.

Newsgroups, Forums, & Bulletin Boards

Newsgroups – sometimes called online bulletin boards – are Web sites that serve as forums for groups of people with shared interests. Participants in a newsgroup can read and display messages and post and download files and photos. Unlike chat rooms, newsgroups are not "real-time" or live discussions. Material posted on the sites remains there for the newsgroup's members to view at their convenience. Depending on the newsgroup, postings can remain on the site indefinitely.

Newsgroups exist on every topic and interest imaginable, from golf to travel to computers. But many newsgroups focus on subject matters that are inappropriate for children. Some are dedicated to violence, pornography, hate activity, drug use, and other objectionable topics.

Newsgroups pose several dangers to children:

- Some deal with inappropriate and illicit subject matters. Content and images posted on these sites can be disturbing and otherwise emotionally harmful to children.
- Because people can post messages to each other on a newsgroup's Web site, children in newsgroups can be easily contacted by strangers, including Internet predators.
- Because they are often unmonitored, even newsgroups dealing with harmless subject matters are very likely to be polluted with objectionable postings.
- The topic of a newsgroup gives strangers insight into subjects that interest participating children. Knowing that information can help child predators gain their trust.
- A child's postings – such as writings, photos, or other material of a personal nature – are available for anyone in the newsgroup to see.
- It is difficult to know the true identities of members of a newsgroup. This means parents will not know who is actually viewing their children's postings on a newsgroup and what their motivations may be.

Tips for Parents

- Restrict your children's participation in newsgroups. If your child is a newsgroup member, ensure the subject matter is appropriate and monitor the newsgroup's postings regularly.
- Explain to your children that they should never post identifying photos or personal information about themselves or their family on a newsgroup's Web site.

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