

Playing it Safe Online

In recent years, the digital age has grown exponentially. From smart phones to tablets to laptops, the opportunities for an enhanced online presence are endless. The year 2020 has increased this online usage, especially among children and teens. In fact, the National Cyber Security Alliance (NCSA) found that 98% of children currently live in a home with one or more mobile devices. Furthermore, 59% of teens say they use social media frequently.

With this increased online presence comes the need for extra safety precautions pertaining to “stranger danger” and online predators, particularly among this young age bracket.

“If someone asks (children) information like where they live, what town they live in, what’s your mommy’s name or your daddy’s name – they will just give out that information not realizing they shouldn’t. Even identity theft can be a problem. It doesn’t take much information to steal someone’s identity,” explained Dr. Channing Petrak, medical director of the pediatric resource center, affiliated with OSF HealthCare Children’s Hospital of Illinois in Peoria.

Dr. Petrak continued, “They need to know what’s okay to give out and what’s not okay, and that the person they’re talking to maybe isn’t another child.”

Not only are social media platforms easily accessible to online predators, but virtual meeting platforms that may even be used for [virtual learning](#) also may be an area of concern. In fact earlier this year, both the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) warned about the increase in online predators during the COVID-19 pandemic.

“We know that a really large percentage of teens have been contacted by someone who is a predator. We know that probably 70% have been contacted at some point in their lifetime. We need to just be aware of that and if they are contacted, then you can contact the authorities,” said Dr. Petrak.

Furthermore, while there is a stigma that females are the primary targets for online predators, Dr. Petrak reminds parents and guardians that males can be targeted as well.

“Girls will report more often than boys. There’s some stigma to boys reporting any sort of any sexual harassment, sexual assault, sexual abuse, anything. They just don’t like to report. But they are victimized as well,” Dr. Petrak warned.

The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends implementing technology “fixes” to protect your child or teen online, including setting up parental controls, turning on SafeSearch on your web browser, activating privacy settings on online apps and games, and covering up webcams when not in use. Additionally, the FBI's [Safe Online Surfing \(SOS\) program](#) teaches students in grades three through eight how to navigate the web safely.

While the digital world can be frightening for parents, it is important to have open communication with your child. Most importantly, Dr. Petrak advises to make sure your child or teen knows to speak up and talk to a trusted adult if they ever feel they are in an uncomfortable situation online.

Dr. Petrak continues, “Maybe that trusted adult isn’t mom or dad because you’re a little worried about that. It might be an aunt or uncle. It might be a teacher. It might be somebody else. But tell a trusted adult.”