

THE POTENTIAL DANGERS OF CHAT ROOMS

The Internet brings the world into our living rooms - the good and the not so good. How then should parents and carers best protect their children and ensure that they are using the Internet and chat rooms safely?

When your children are in a Chat area they are in a very public "place". They don't necessarily know the true identity of anyone they are talking to in the Chat room. Those who would wish to harm children can prey on those in Chat rooms who appear to be left out or lonely. They can pretend to be supportive and sympathetic and gain the trust of the young person by being willing to "listen" to their problems and provide friendship. People on-line may not be who they seem. Because you can't see or even hear the person it would be easy for someone to misrepresent him- or herself. Thus, someone indicating that "she" is a "12-year-old girl" could in reality be a 40-year-old man.

WHAT ARE THE RISKS OF INTERNET CHAT?:

Important Note: With any discussion of risks, it's important to realise that the most horrendous (ie. the child turning up missing or molested) is also the least likely. As with all aspects of life, the risk should be put in context. Apart from the danger of young people become addicted and immersed in Chat and losing out on developing their social skills, finishing their homework or playing face-to-face with other children, the real danger of young people using Chat rooms is in being in-touch with someone who would wish to cultivate a relationship with them in order to contact them offline. Other potential risks include:

Exposure to Inappropriate Material - One risk is that a child may be exposed to inappropriate material that is sexual, hateful, and violent or encourages activities that are dangerous or illegal.

Physical Molestation - Although not very likely, there is a slight risk that, while on-line, a child might provide information or arrange an encounter that could risk his or her safety or the safety of other family members. In a few cases, paedophiles have used e-mail, bulletin boards and chat areas to gain a child's confidence and then arrange a face-to-face meeting.

Harassment - A child might encounter E-mail, chat or bulletin board messages that are harassing, demeaning, or belligerent. This risk may not be life threatening, but it could affect a child's self esteem and, frankly, it's pretty likely to occur for any child who engages in chat rooms or exchanges messages on bulletin boards.

Legal and Financial - There is also the risk that a child could do something that has negative legal or has financial consequences such as giving out a parent's credit card or doing something that violates another person's rights. Legal issues aside, children should be taught good "netiquette" and to behave on-line as they would in public and to avoid being rude, mean or inconsiderate.

Privacy - Children have a right to privacy. Everything about them: their name, age, what school they go, is their business and the business of their families. No one, including reputable companies, have a right to extract this information from children without first checking with the child's parents.

Drugs, Alcohol, Tobacco and other Dangers - Some web sites and newsgroups contain information that advocates the use of drugs, tobacco or alcohol. It's even possible to find places on the Internet where you can learn to make bombs or obtain weapons. We don't know of any cases where a child has committed an act of violence or used a substance as a result of going on-line. If that happens, it's most likely related to something else going on in the child's life. Yet, with a rescue as vast and as uncontrolled as the Internet, you're bound to find all sorts of information.

Gambling and Other Inappropriate Behaviours - There are sites that allow people to gamble with real money or just "for fun." In some cases these sites may be operating legally in the jurisdiction where they are physically located but it is generally illegal (and inappropriate) for minors to gamble regardless of where they are. Most on-line gambling sites require a person to use a credit card or write a check to transfer funds. Speaking of gambling, it's also possible to

buy and sell stocks and securities over the Internet. If your child has access to your web browser or AOL account and your brokerage password, it is possible that he or she might be able to conduct such a transaction.

BUT MY KIDS KNOW MORE THAN I DO!

Many adults can feel intimidated in using the Internet and are baffled by some of the terms and technology, especially about Internet Chat. While it is true that many children take to the Internet quicker than adults, children still need parental advice and protection. It is vital that you understand the issues and the simple safety steps you can take to help keep children safe. Spend time surfing together with your children and learn from them how the Internet works.

PARENTS AND CARERS NEED TO:

- 1) Take computers out of children's rooms and put them into public areas such as the family room or living room. Parents are right in thinking that a computer will help children with their homework, but when the computer is in the bedroom there is opportunity for children to take advantage and become distracted.
- 2) Just in the same way as you are wary of a stranger knocking on your door make sure your children remember "stranger danger" in Chat rooms and that they never reveal any personal details about themselves, school or family, (address, telephone numbers, photographs etc).
- 3) Don't allow your children to meet anyone they have contacted via the Internet without you going with them. Be especially careful about your children using Chat rooms unsupervised - especially those that are not moderated. You are the best person to know whether your child is mature enough to use un-moderated chat rooms.
- 4) Take an interest in the way your kids are using the Internet and encourage them to visit sites that reflect their interest. Just as you look out for good TV programs for children, take the time to find the best and most useful websites and chat rooms for you and your family.
- 5) You can buy software, which can help you block sites you may not wish your children to be exposed to eg. sexually explicit material, hate and violence sites, alcohol and gambling. Software can also help you monitor the time your child spends on the computer and material they have been viewing as well as block outgoing and incoming information.
- 6) If your child tells you that they are being harassed by someone they think is an adult in a chat room and wants to meet them off line; you should discuss this fully with your child and contact your local police immediately.
- 7) Consider installing a filter that prevents your child from entering his or her name, address, phone number, or other material.
- 8) Consider limiting chat only to people your child knows or requiring that he/she chat only in moderated chat areas run by reputable companies or organisations.
- 9) Parents should take an interest in a child's "e-pals" just as they do with friends that kids bring home.
- 10) Consider checking the browser history to see where kids have been and having a "talk" if they are visiting inappropriate sites.
- 11) Communicate regularly (not just once) with your children about WHAT they do on-line and to WHOM they talk on-line.
- 12) Help your child choose their 'screen name', e-mail address or instant messaging name wisely. Don't reveal ages, sex, hobbies and most definitely do not create suggestive or 'sexy' names – they are beacons to the paedophile or other undesirable predator.
- 13) Teach your kids not to respond to comments that are mean and provocative.