



Women's Center Update: To catch a predator

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As the outreach coordinator for the South Lake Tahoe Women's Center, I attend a number of trainings each year. In May of 2006 I attended a training on Internet Child Abuse and was shocked to see, first-hand, how easy it was to catch a predator. Law officials took us online, posing as a young girl. Within five minutes, we had three different men displaying their genitals, live and in-person, on the web cam. Each man believed that he was chatting with a 13-year-old girl.

Dateline's To Catch A Predator television show shocks the public every week with their live sting operations. Since the show has aired Dateline has exposed more than 200 potential sexual offenders. These highly organized sting operations have successfully exposed men from an array of professions, including doctors, truck drivers, religious leaders, computer technicians, and military personnel. The men are from a variety of ethnic backgrounds and range in ages.

The sting operations that take place on To Catch a Predator involve adult decoys posing as 12, 13, or 14-year-olds in online chat rooms. In every scenario it is the child who is approached, and in each situation the predator expresses his sexual fantasies with this child. The predator makes plans to meet a young teen girl or boy and the set-up is so easy that it seems almost unreal. When they are faced with law enforcement instead of teen boys or girls, many of the men ultimately admit their intentions, but most deny that they had any intentions to engage in sexual activities with a minor.

Perpetrators using the Internet as a tool to commit crimes against children have increased. In some cases the crimes have involved suspects and victims who met each other on social networking or blogging sites such as MySpace, Friendster, Xanga, and Facebook. While it may be tempting for many parents to simply ban their children from visiting or signing up on these sites, that may not be the most effective intervention.

Here is some advice for parents and teens about maintaining personal safety (while also having fun) online:

For parents: Talk with your teens about what they can and cannot do online. Do your best to be reasonable and set reasonable expectations; educate your children about perpetrators and the tricks they may use online; try to understand their needs, interests, and curiosities and try to remember what it was like when you were their age; be open with your teens, and encourage them to come to you if they encounter a problem or even a potentially disturbing situation online; keep the computer in a central location rather than the child's bedroom; learn everything you can about the Internet, check out blogging, filtering, and ratings applications. A family contract for online safety can be found at www.SafeKids.com

For teens: keep your identity private, never give out your name, phone number, or address; never agree to meet someone you met online in person, and remember that the person may not be who they say they are; respond wisely without giving too much information; if someone makes you feel uncomfortable, don't respond at all and notify your parents. A smart way to avoid harassment online is to choose a screen name or e-mail that doesn't identify your gender. For example: jenny92, girlygrl91, vikingstud90. All or these

dangerous examples give a perpetrator just enough information to know your age, gender, and even what school you attend.

If you would like more information about maintaining the online safety of you and your children, please contact the South Lake Tahoe Women's Center at (530) 544-2118 or stop by our office at 2941 Lake Tahoe Blvd., across from the Middle School. For additional resources check out: Don't Believe The Type at <http://tcs.cybertipline.com> or The Cyber Tip Line at <http://www.cybertipline.com/>. The Women's Center business office was financed through a low-cost loan from the Rural Community Assistance Corporation.

- Lisa Michele Utzig is outreach coordinator at the South Lake Tahoe Women's Center.

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